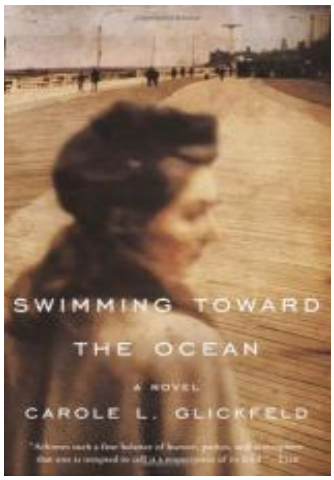
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Swimming Toward the Ocean

by Carole L. Glickfeld



About the Book

From the author of the Flannery O?Connor Award-winning collection **Useful Gifts**, a sharp and tender debut novel chronicling the boisterous life and loves of a Russian Jewish immigrant family in 1950s New York City.

Chenia is a Betty Grable look-alike, passionate, sharp-witted, in many ways still Old-World. Her husband Ruben is a handsome philanderer; they have three children. No one expects the devoted Chenia to fall under the spell of a lover of her own, but the Arnows? lives unfold in many surprises. In tart and seductive storytelling, **Swimming Toward the Ocean** follows husbands and wives and children through an often comical kaleidoscope of shifting and misguided connections, ever sympathetic to their restless?if stumbling?quests for love.

Discussion Guide

1. In reconstructing her parents' lives, Devorah describes feelings and events of which she has no direct knowledge. Do her assumptions and interpretations undermine her reliability as a narrator? Are life stories, whether fictional, biographical, or autobiographical, ever completely "objective"?

2. Images of and references to water recur throughout **Swimming Toward the Ocean**. Does water serve as a metaphor in the novel? If so, for what?

3. In what ways do the Arnows represent the universal experience of immigrants in this country? How do their individual expectations affect their behavior toward one another? What goals, if any, do Chenia and Ruben share?

4. How do Chenia's superstitions and traditional beliefs influence the way she rears her children? What is the significance of the statement, "My mother's heart is bursting with affection for her son, but this she doesn't say" [p. 31]? In what ways are Mimi and Sheldon shaped by their mother's remoteness and lack of outward affection? Does Chenia

treat Devorah differently, and if so, why?

5. Does Chenia provide Devorah and her siblings with the moral or ethical guidance we normally expect from parents? What values does she teach them? What role does Ruben play in the children's lives? How do the choices Devorah and Mimi make as grown, married women reflect their reactions to their parents' marriage and their own childhood experiences?

6. Despite her old-fashioned upbringing and her strong notions of sin and punishment, Chenia is irresistibly drawn to Harry. What makes her so vulnerable to him? How do the emotions and feelings he elicits transform the way she thinks about herself?

7. How would Chenia's life have been different if she had not met Harry? To what extent did the affair rescue her? In what ways did it make her life more difficult?

8. How do Devorah's descriptions of her mother's affair with Harry differ from her accounts of Ruben's infidelities with Trudy and Bertha? How do the specific events she recounts, as well as her tone, influence your impressions of their motivations and the depth of their feelings? Does she judge one parent more harshly than the other? Do you think she recognizes and understands her father's need to be with other women?

9. The setting plays an important role in **Swimming Toward the Ocean**. What physical details does Glickfeld use to evoke the period? Which cultural, social, and political references are most effective in illuminating the particular milieu of the Arnows, their friends, and extended family?

10. From Devorah's birth to Chenia's first encounter with Harry and Mimi's unlikely friendship with Sofie, the concepts of fate and coincidence are integral to the plot development of the novel. Does the author make these events credible? To what extent are the characters responsible for their own destinies and to what extent are their lives shaped by chance?

11. How does the life the Arnows have constructed for themselves differ from the other lives depicted in the novel? What do Glickfeld's portraits of Harry, Chenia's sister Ruchel and her husband, Trudy and Barney Fleisch, and Bertha Landau reveal about the process of assimilation? What factors, both practical and psychological, influence the various characters' ability to make a place for themselves in American society?

12. Does Chenia's story represent an experience that is typical of women of her generation? In what ways does she conform to society's rules and expectations? Other than her affair with Harry, what examples are there of her refusal to follow the rules? Do Ruben's behavior and attitude, as well as the limited options available to Chenia, justify acts which might otherwise seem selfish or immoral?

13. In imagining Chenia's reaction to seeing Harry at the theater years after she has made another life for herself, Devorah writes, "What is she thinking, that Harry will call her up and it will be as before? Even if she could love this man again, she thinks, she can never stop hating him" [p. 332]. In light of this, why does Chenia agree to meet with him? What does she hope will happen?

14. Chenia has three very different relationships in the course of the novel: her marriage to Ruben, her affair with Harry, and her marriage to Sol. How do each of these relationships illuminate Chenia's personality and her needs at different

times in her life? Which relationship do you think best reflects the woman Chenia really is? The woman she wants to be?

15. Is the ending consistent with the spirit of the novel? Does it bring the relationship between Devorah and Chenia to an appropriate close? Does Devorah see similarities between her mother and herself? Does she fully forgive Chenia for the hurt she has caused?

16. What literary traditions (or genres) might you use to classify **Swimming Toward the Ocean**? Would you characterize it as a family saga? A love story? A coming-of-age novel?

Author Bio

Born in the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn, Carole Glickfeld grew up in the Inwood section of Manhattan, not far from the Cloisters, the museum of medieval treasures that expands the horizons of Chenia Arnow, the main character in **Swimming Toward the Ocean**. In sixth grade at PS 152, Carole began her literary career, writing a short story about a boy and his dog, two subjects that, at age ten, she knew nothing about but chose to imagine. Already she had been inspired by Jo March in **Little Women**.

In high school, she took a creative writing class--not a happy experience. Her teacher shamed her for writing about a teenage boy and girl who differed over how sexually intimate they wished to be. From then on, Carole was mostly a closet writer. Between high school and college, she worked as a salad girl in the Catskill Mountains. That summer, she wrote a story about a woman and her still-born child, which, uncharacteristically, she read to her three roommates. They cried. This was heady reinforcement for a fifteen-year-old writer-to-be.

At the City College of New York, Carole studied Latin and French, minoring in English literature. She enrolled in the Ph.D. program in English literature at Hunter College. Realizing she was too shy ever to teach, she dropped out. Before becoming a full-time writer, she worked in politics and government and lost her shyness. For the past ten years, she has taught creative writing classes at the University of Washington, mostly to adults.

Her first book, **Useful Gifts**, which won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, is about a family with deaf parents and hearing children. While the stories are not autobiographical, Carole drew on her own background as a CODA (child of deaf adults). American Sign Language was practically her first language. Although her two books are set in New York City, she has written fiction that is set in other places (e.g., Michigan, because she was writer-in-residence at Interlochen Arts Academy; Seattle, where she currently resides). She has written a one-act play, "The Challenge," that has been performed by hundreds of senior citizen groups in the U.S. and Canada.

The recipient of a Literary Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, she was a Fellow at Bread Loaf, MacDowell Colony and Virginia Arts Center. Since residing in the Northwest, she has won some local grants and the Washington State Governor's Arts Award.

Carole is a night writer, beginning around midnight and working till around 4 a.m. She rises around noon and goes to her local Starbucks in Seattle (actually the second store established) to edit what she wrote the night before. One day, sipping coffee, she had an image of a woman going up to the roof in an apartment building. Suddenly she knew why the woman was going up to the roof. Though she writes on a computer, on this day, she wrote long-hand, surprised to see a

story tumble out that begins with a fetus in her mother's womb. This became the opening of **Swimming Toward the Ocean**.

Writing is an act of discovery, Carole says. She writes out of the subconscious, without consciously controlling her characters or their actions. One of the joys of writing for her is finding out WHAT HAPPENS. Nevertheless, she is a relentless reviser. Once the draft is written, she pores over every word, paring and polishing. Mostly I re-write," she says.

Kirkus Reviews calls **Swimming Toward the Ocean**, published in hardcover by Knopf in 2001, "luminous with clear-sighted compassion for its imperfect characters, alive to life's bitter disappointments and transcendent possibilities; very exciting fiction indeed."

Critical Praise

"The story-telling is engaging, full of the quotidian joys and sorrows of a winning and indomitable woman."

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