The Swimmer

Roma Tearne

Directory reviewer Clare Donaldson found this a rewarding read.

“Ria lives alone trying to write her latest poetry book and avoid her xenophobic brother. Who is the swimmer she sees at night at the bottom of her garden?

Beautifully written, this book is part love story, part thriller. It is narrated from the points of view of three main protagonists each touched personally by love and loss.

Ms Tearne’s poignant novel explores many big issues including family relationships, bereavement, grief and life as an illegal immigrant. Because of the nature of these issues it is not always a comfortable read, but it is never a chore.

The book makes for an equally rewarding personal and reading-group read.”

Someone had placed the calves at the entrance to Unthank Farm. The farmer, arriving at his usual early hour, discovered them. All three, pushed up against a barrel of hay, with their throats slit, in the way animals were butchered by the Halal butcher in Ipswich. It was August, hot and with the promise of a golden month ahead. Shocked, the farmer called the vet, who in turn reported the matter to the police, but the calves were already dead. A small item in the local newspaper recorded the incident which otherwise went unnoticed.

Unthank Farm spreads out towards the edge of the city of Ipswich. It is the largest farm in the area. A few days later, a rambler out walking some thirty-two miles away on Dunwich Heath, came across a dog with its throat slit. The dog was a German shepherd and it lay on the edge of the road that runs in a straight line down to Dunwich beach. It was still alive. The rambler bent and examined it. The animal had a collar but no name disc. The nearest house was some distance away, its rooftop just visible. Assuming it must belong there, he picked up the feebly struggling animal and staggered back along the road. But the house, when he reached it, looked empty. It was large, built in red brick and with an abundance of Scotch pines and thick undergrowth in the small copse behind. There were no cars in the drive, no signs of activity, no radio playing. The man hesitated. The dog was obviously cared for, its collar looked new, but the rambler was on his way to meet a group of other walkers and was already late. Placing the animal on the front doorstep, he rang the bell. There was a long pause. Then he rang the bell again, listening out for the sound of footsteps. Still nothing. Moving back, he was about to call out when he noticed one of the windows had been smashed. Clearly someone had broken in. The rambler peered through the jagged glass. He saw a room lined with bookcases and a few pieces of what looked like 1950s furniture. He saw some paintings on the walls but they were too far away and the room was too dark to make them out properly. He stepped back. The place was probably alarmed. It wouldn’t do to be caught like a thief, he thought. Just at that moment the dog made a rattling noise in its throat. Blood gushed out. It struggled, moaning softly. Then it was still. The rambler saw that it had died. Suddenly he did not want to be in this place another second. He had a mobile phone deep in his rucksack, he would call the local police about the break-in and the dog. But first he would get the hell out of here, he thought, his feet crunching hastily on
the gravel driveway.

Twenty minutes later the vet from Orford arrived with the police. He was the same one who had examined the calves at Unthank Farm. The marks on the dead dog were similar to those on the calves. A slit across the throat. It was also clear that the house had been broken into. But although the rooms had been ransacked, at first glance nothing appeared to have been taken. The police began the process of lifting fingerprints and contacting the owner, William Letsby. Letsby had left his dog alone in the house for only a few hours while visiting friends in the Ipswich area. When asked his occupation he told the police he worked for the Home Office. The officer, glancing at Letsby’s ID, realised he was fairly high up in the Department of Immigration. He could also see that the man was very distressed about his dog and trying to hide this fact. Apologising, glad that nothing had been stolen, he left as soon as possible. He would be in touch, he said, in the event they caught any suspects. Meanwhile he was sorry about the dog.

Orford is a sleepy village of some beauty abutting the marshlands on one side and the estuary on the other. There are mighty tides that sweep in from the sea. Banks of sludge and silt laid down over the ages by all the marsh rivers lie unnoticed on the riverbed. The wading birds do nicely, as do the eels. Occasionally, when the tide is out and the water in the surrounding inlets appears to drop to almost nothing, you see them: eels, the length of matchstick forests is steeped in history. It is perfect wildlife. This flat land with its extraordinary skies and matchstick forests is steeped in history. It is perfect country for painters, perfect crow country. But it is almost nothing, you see them: eels, the length of matchstick forests is steeped in history. It is perfect

Appearances can, however, be deceptive. People have been known to drown here. Two miles to the east, a matter of minutes by car, is Orford Ness, a one-time MoD establishment used for atomic weapons research. Now it is a benign and deserted haven for wild birds. Visitors in a small but steady stream come to visit it all year round, to walk, and observe the wildlife. This flat land with its extraordinary skies and matchstick forests is steeped in history. It is perfect country for painters, perfect crow country. But it is almost nothing, you see them: eels, the length of matchstick forests is steeped in history. It is perfect

The journalist who had filed the report was a married man, bored by the fact that nothing ever happened in Orford. The editor told him to stop complaining, forget the animal killer, and write a feature on the circus instead. But luck was on his side. While he was poking around the caravans, there was a commotion. One of the performing monkeys had been found dead. Its throat had been slit. The journalist’s eyes gleamed.

The day was marked by a warm breeze carrying the smell of ozone and fish, the sea was jewel-like and sparkling with the sun spilling over it. A small plane from RAF Mildenhall droned overhead, children played ball on the shingles. By nightfall the beach would be crowded with people returning from the circus, heading towards the fish-and-chip shop or the pub. But for now Eddie Sharp’s matinee performance was about to begin. Minus one small monkey.

No one would talk to the journalist. His eager, wolfish face made the circus folk wary. The monkey was buried quickly before the flies and the stink took hold, and the unease was quietly papered over.

In the centre of town a book launch was under way. A bestselling crime novelist was discussing his latest novel before a small audience. The journalist poked his head through the door of the bookshop. The launch had been advertised as ‘Fiction Noir’ with a picture of a corpse on a red background on the poster. The shop was packed. Solving a crime was better than Sudoku. There’s nothing here, thought the journalist, and he headed back to the office.

‘Not enough for a story,’ said the editor, shaking his head. ‘Talk to the police, see what they think. They won’t want you alarming anyone while the circus is here.’

The journalist was expecting this response. He had just been trying it on. The editor, who understood him all too well, eyed him speculatively.

‘Take a break, John,’ he said easily. ‘Take your son to see the big top.’

John frowned. He didn’t welcome advice about what to do with his kid, but he decided it mightn’t be a bad idea to take another look at the circus that evening, when it was dark. Something was nagging at him; perhaps a return visit would clear his mind. And what could be more natural than taking his four-year-old son?

‘It won’t finish until after his bedtime,’ his wife protested. ‘And he’ll be bad-tempered tomorrow.’

But the journalist insisted, and as it had been years since she had been to a circus, his wife agreed. ‘I’ll be back in a minute,’ John announced when they were settled in their seats. His son was clutching a balloon, staring solemnly at the empty ring ahead.

Sawdust and bright lights, with a hint of tiger musk. John slipped out. The caravans’ entrances were obscured from view. When he tried to push past the barrier, he was stopped. His press pass was useless against the wall of hostility he encountered. He slipped back into his seat just as the drum rolled.

‘What are you up to?’ his wife hissed.
John shook his head, placing a finger on his lips. 'Shh!' he mumbled as the show began.

The applause was deafening. No one heard the scream. No one inside the tent, anyway. By the time the story was out, it was too late; the show was over, the trapeze artist had folded himself down to the ground, the sawdust was soiled with sweat and the tent had emptied. John Ashby, freelance journalist for the Suffolk Echo, heard nothing until the next morning when his editor informed him of the event.

A circus woman in her mid to late thirties had been attacked in her caravan. A kitchen knife had been held to her throat and the threat of rape whispered in her ear. She had not seen the man's face but his hands were dark-skinned. Later, she told the police that all her travel documents, including her British passport, had been stolen.

Ria

I remember it was towards the middle of August. Thursday the eighteenth, in fact. That I remember so clearly, so painfully still, tells me that I have never for one instant truly forgotten what happened. Great waves of tenderness sweep over me even now, and I am still able to feel within myself the faint, dreadful stirring of what so overwhelmingly and completely engulfed me then. That night the heat held me in a stranglehold. I remember swallowing it in huge gulps and sighs as I listened to the soft gosp of the river. A vast yearning, an unknown expectation was poised to grip me, so that some time later I thought my heart itself would burst. But first came the beginning.

Towards midnight on that evening I woke with a start to the crackle and dance of white static on the television screen. I think I must have fallen asleep with my fingers wrapped around the remote control. It was stiflingly hot, unusual for East Anglia. I remember I wiped small beads of perspiration from my face with the back of my hand, thinking how unlike Britain this was, to feel so hot. I must have been disoriented, confused rather than frightened. No, I wasn’t frightened at all on this perfectly ordinary summer night. Car headlights swept up and down the length of the garden like giant eyelids lighting up parts of the river, dipping into woodland mud before vanishing. The summer renters from Italy had returned after an evening out. I heard them slamming doors in a reckless way, laughing, happy.

‘Si, va bene;’ one of them said, faintly. ‘Capisco, capisco’ and then they went inside.

I switched off the television without moving from my chair and the surface of the night appeared once more as an undisturbed skin. Except for a small liquid sound, quickly suppressed. So small was it that I continued to sit, glasses in hand, straining my ears, still half asleep, only half listening. Then I padded across towards the open window where the air was filled with summer fragrance. And I heard the sound again quite distinctly. A splash, some movement, then . . . nothing. The river licking itself, perhaps. Fully awake now, I stood bandaged in the folds of the thin curtain, glad of the high hedge that screened the garden on one side from my neighbours. And I heard it again, that sound, soft and rhythmic, like oars, moving through water. It was coming from below, from the direction of the river. An animal perhaps, cooling off. From where I stood I caught a glimpse of the water. A horned moon cast a dim light over it. In the distance, not quite discernible, was the vast shingle waste of Orford Ness.

One of my tasks that August was to do something about the inlet from the river that lay at the end of the garden. Over time, slowly and due to lack of use, it had become a swamp of leaves and drowned insects. There was no one to swim in it any more; no children escaping from parents, no adolescents messing about in boats. Since I returned to the house it had become merely a thing of untidy beauty. Only Eric came past occasionally in his boat, looking for places to leave his eel-traps. Eric had farmed the land and fished these waters for as long as I could remember. He lived at Fruit Tree Farm. When my Uncle Clifford decided to split his farm and sell it because of ill health it was Eric who saved the land from developers by buying it at a decent price. It all happened long ago, when I was still at school and the house we call Eel House came to be mine.

I was still living with Ant when Clifford died, still hoping I might have a child, still craving for love of sorts. We were in the middle of doing the rounds of the fertility clinics with dreary futility. First Ant was tested, then I. There were months of endless temperature charts ahead of us before I was forced to acknowledge that no technology on earth could help an old uterus. I was told bluntly that the eggs would not stick, whatever that meant. I was thirty-eight and, it would appear, punished by inexplicable infertility. When it sunk in, when at last I said the word barren out loud to myself, staring into a mirror, I began to notice that infertility was on the increase in Britain. Everywhere I went, I met women who could not hold a fertilised egg. There we all were, girls with bodies that still looked young but had grown old internally.

‘It’s always been this way,’ the doctor told me, when I protested. ‘Women’s reproductive rate slows down with age.’

So why hadn’t I realised there was an epidemic of childlessness? The papers wrote about insecticides and too many chemicals in the soil. Women, they told us, were filling up with harmful poisons. It would take years to reverse the current trends. Teenage pregnancies are best, the papers urged, contrary to everything they had been saying for years. If only it were that simple.

Ant left me. He was desperate for a family. If I couldn’t help him then he was sorry but he would be forced to go elsewhere. Who says men don’t have biological clocks? His callousness was breathtaking. In the long, sleepless nights that followed I began to think of Eel House. Throughout what was left of that miserable year the memory of it shifted uneasily within me. Like a tennis ball passed over the net, a plan went backwards and forwards across my mind.
Once, many years ago, I had been happy there and
now it was as though a fragment from that time had
begun working its way to the surface, dislodging
the earlier hurt, buried for so long. Suddenly my
homesickness could not be contained and I wanted
to go back. I remembered East Anglia as a place of
both love and betrayal, of far-away summers and
family fictions. A place where my beloved father had
walked with me in the matchstick woods, and the
place where, after his death, I returned to briefly in
despair. Eel House belonged to me now, it would be
easy to go back. On an impulse I wrote to Eric, who
replied with a single word.

‘Come!’

So I turned back towards the east and my past,
wanting to see again those wide watercolour
skies and soft reed-grey marshes that blended so
perfectly with the sea. Hopefully, looking for peace.
I was forty-three years old; a poet whose work, even
before Ant left me, dealt with emptiness; the colour
of it, its smell.

The tug of the water being pushed aside grew
louder. It wasn’t an animal; there was too much
control, too many regular pauses, as if something, or
someone, was taking their time. The moon came out
from behind a cigarette-paper cloud and I caught a
glimpse of the row of wooden fence-posts rising up
like the river’s rotten teeth, and then some spray as
an arm rose and fell and turned again in the water.
My first thought was that I ought to warn whoever it
was that this inlet was dirty and had been stagnant
for a long time. Swimming in it would only churn the
mud up. My second was that the door into the house
was not locked. Whoever was down there could
easily come in. I was alone, of course. Earlier that
evening Miranda, my sister-in-law, had rung to say
they were leaving London the following morning for
their annual visit. In the morning, too, the cleaner
would arrive, but now, at midnight, I was alone. With
the darkness and the soft paddling of human limbs
in the water below.

The movement stopped and then resumed,
stroke by stroke, rhythmically. Silently, avoiding
the furniture, the small occasional tables, the standard
lamp, the foot stool, I moved across towards the
French windows. I could get a better view from here.
By now I was fully awake, breathless with suspense.
Like a young girl, alert and taut, interested. Even my
dress, caught in the moonlight, scrunched up and
white, felt insubstantial, as though worn with the
crumpled haste of youth. The moon was so good
a liar, I remember thinking fleetingly, as I edged
towards the window. Why was I so unafraid?

The man – no woman would have ventured into
such filthy water – reached the end of his length and
I saw a pair of hands rest against the grass before he
heaved himself up on to the bank. I squinted, trying
to catch sight of a face, concentrating hard, wishing I
knew where my glasses were but not daring to move
too much in case I was spotted.

The straw-coloured moon was just slipping
behind a cloud as I saw with some surprise that he
was bare to the waist. He had been swimming in his
trousers.

The Swimmer
by Roma Tearne
is published
in paperback
by HarperPress,
price £7.99.
To claim your
FREE* copy, see
page 43.

Struggling to remember the books you’ve read?

Reading Notes is a small 80-page hardback notebook in which to record all the
books you read. With space to write a little about the author and your thoughts
on the book, it’s perfect for pocket or handbag.

‘I don’t know how anyone manages without Reading Notes.’ One happy reader.

Order direct from our website
www.newbooksmag.com/home/shop.php

ONLY
£5.99
each – order yours
now on page 43
The Swimmer Summary. SuperSummary, a modern alternative to SparkNotes and CliffsNotes, offers high-quality study guides that feature detailed chapter summaries and analysis of major themes, characters, quotes, and essay topics. This one-page guide includes a plot summary and brief analysis of The Swimmer by John Cheever. Originally published in The New Yorker magazine (1964), John Cheever’s The Swimmer (1968), by Eleanor Perry. More info about this movie on IMDb.com. For educational purposes only. "The war has begun. Our country is being invaded. They have taken the first swimming pool." IONESCO. [1] It is a radiantly beautiful Sunday afternoon. A man is walking through a woods barefoot and in bathing trunks. His step is jaunty, and he is whistling. Dapples of yellow sunlight slant through the leafy boughs overhead onto his tanned, lean-muscled body. The man's name is Ned Merrill. The The Swimmer Community Note includes chapter-by-chapter summary and analysis, character list, theme list, historical context, author biography and quizzes written by community members like you.â by John Cheever. About The Swimmer The Swimmer Summary Character List Glossary Themes Quotes Analysis Symbols, Allegory and Motifs Metaphors and Similes Irony Imagery Literary Elements Essay Questions. The Swimmer Background. These notes were contributed by members of the GradeSaver community.
"The Swimmer" was a critical and financial disappointment back in 1968 when it was released because it was a subject matter that was never covered before in the movies, as far as I know. The film was so ahead of its time that the viewers back then couldn't quite understand just what it was trying to tell them.