



Swimming Studies

By Leanne Shapton

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Winner of the 2012 National Book Critics Circle Award, Autobiography

Swimming Studies is a brilliantly original, meditative memoir that explores the worlds of competitive and recreational swimming. From her training for the Olympic trials as a teenager to enjoying pools and beaches around the world as an adult, Leanne Shapton offers a fascinating glimpse into the private, often solitary, realm of swimming. Her spare and elegant writing reveals an intimate narrative of suburban adolescence, spent underwater in a discipline that continues to inspire Shapton's work as an artist and author. Her illustrations throughout the book offer an intuitive perspective on the landscapes and imagery of the sport. Shapton's emphasis is on the smaller moments of athletic pursuit rather than its triumphs. For the accomplished athlete, aspiring amateur, or habitual practitioner, this remarkable work of written and visual sketches propels the reader through a beautifully personal and universally appealing exercise in reflection.

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Swimming Studies By Leanne Shapton Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review

“*Swimming Studies* sets out, through a fusion of words and pictures, to capture a bittersweet part of the writer's past as completely as a scent trapped in a bottle. The book is beautiful as both a story and an object. It's about being very, very good at something, when you want to be great. I was moved by it in ways both expected and unexpected.”

—John Jeremiah Sullivan, author of *Pulphed*

“If there is a more beautifully observed examination of weightlessness, silence, rigor, and delight of what it means to swim, I've never read it. Leanne Shapton is one of the most broadly creative and gifted people at work today; a true artist, both visual and verbal. There seems to be nothing she cannot write or paint about: adolescence, Canada, yearning, dawn - even cake, for heaven's sake! - with a precision both surgical and poetic. The joys of *Swimming Studies* are in being in the care of someone of a prodigious and protean mind. My talent crush is official and deep.”

—David Rakoff, author of *Half Empty*

“I'm so happy this book exists. *Swimming Studies* expresses what it's like to be haunted by the person one used to be, and the search for how that person exists in the present. Leanne Shapton writes with such curiosity, ruefulness, intelligence, and grace. Here we see how the discipline of being an athlete can condition one's way of making art, and how the patience necessary to make art teaches other types of patience. Like the patience required to be a spouse and to love a person always. This book is a rare treat for anyone who cares about any of these things.”

—Sheila Heti, author of *How Should a Person Be?*

“A fusion of cool, clear-eyed prose and watercolors, photographs and painted portraits...[and] a curiously arresting study of the transition from a world of rigor and routine to one of reflection and recreation....The brilliance of *Swimming Studies* lies in its delicate exploration of how the identities we've carved out for ourselves in the present are both haunted and shaped by the people we used to be.”

—*Time Out New York*

“[W]hat makes this book astounding...[is] any dedicated swimmer knows exactly what Shapton means; we sense and control our movements, from the tips of our fingers to the flutter of our feet, breathing very specifically, detecting any shifts in conditions, from the presence of other swimmers to the tug of a current....Shapton pares down her experiences as a swimmer and grafts the core lessons to other parts of her life, allowing them to bloom in ways that have everything and nothing to do with swimming.”

—Buzz Poole, TheMillions.com

“A cool memoir about competitive swimming that might as well be called *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*....Shapton, never self-pitying, offers an original, mythical elixir of life in the water.”

—*Newsweek*

“[A] thoughtful, exquisitely written book...ostensibly about [Shapton's] lifelong relationship to the sport, complete with photos of her various bathing suits and meditations on the difference between swimming (i.e., competitive swimming) and bathing (i.e., swimming for fun)....She even includes some haunting, cobalt blue illustrations of pools she frequents as an adult, as well as a color guide to different swimming smells, such as

"coach: fresh laundry, Windbreaker nylon, Mennen Speed Stick, Magic Marker, and bologna." These extra visual elements dazzle, but the specifics of this world and her insightful take on her own far-from-ordinary life are what makes any reader wonder if Shapton's gold medal might have already been won—in writing."
—Oprah.com, Book of the Week

"Shapton draws on her experience training for the Olympic trials in a refreshing and thoughtful memoir about swimming as competition and way of life. Her ode to the water is not only philosophical but incredibly moving."
—*Entertainment Weekly*

"The talented illustrator Leanne Shapton, in her pointillistic and quietly profound new memoir, *Swimming Studies*...writes as confidently as she draws, and memorably conjures swimming's intense, primordial and isolating pleasures....Shapton's prose frequently has the density of poetry....[she] is so smart and so likable that you will pass her book along to the swimmers in your life."
—Dwight Garner, *The New York Times*

"In this small, lovely book, [Shapton] combines words and images in an exquisitely observed meditation on swimming and memory....What's thrilling about this book is its author's careful attention to detail and unlikely beauty. More impressionistic than a traditional memoir, the book nonetheless sketches an arc that brings the author back to competitive swimming, in masters races in the United States."
—Kate Tuttle, *The Boston Globe*

"Painter and illustrator Leanne Shapton relates with poignancy the details of a competitive swimmer's life...beautifully written, beautifully constructed, and thoughtful."
—Huffington Post

"[*Swimming Studies*] is brilliant, eccentric and moving—an immersion in a life....Shapton has a novelist's instinct for the nostalgic charge of the inconsequential....Her language is as crisp as the autumn day she describes."
—Kate Kellaway, *The Observer* (UK)

"Acknowledging the ultimate incomprehensibility of athletic greatness, [Shapton] nonetheless brings us closer to its essence....If those countless practice laps and those not-quite-Olympian results were what it took to produce *Swimming Studies*, it was worth it: Shapton has bottled the elusive meaning of having tried and failed at a sport better than any book I've read since Pat Jordan's classic *A False Spring*. Read *Swimming Studies* and enjoy the incomprehensible greatness of the world's best all the more."
—Ian McGillis, *The Montreal Gazette* (Canada)

"[Shapton's] eye for detail [is] amazingly shrewd...gaspingly beautiful in its insight, proving her project actually has very little to do with swimming...*Swimming Studies* is an intimate and beautiful meditation on human fallibility and the embarrassing, often unstated anxiety of success."
—Stacey May Fowles, *The National Post* (Canada)

"In her illustrated memoir, Shapton, a writer, artist, and former contender for the Canadian Olympic team, grapples with the habits she learned as a teen-age competitive swimmer....and her honed attention to detail gives the reader the sensation of watching a meticulous mind watching itself, down to the hundredth of a second."
—*The New Yorker*

“It looks like Shapton can succeed at whatever she puts her mind to; swimming is where that started....As few people can, Shapton draws a connection between making art and being an athlete, focusing on the unending effort it takes to do well....She is, no doubt, a creative powerhouse, one who puts words and pictures together with a quiet force that comes only from solid, dedicated practice.”

—Carolyn Kellogg, *Los Angeles Times*

“I was a competitive swimmer, and I have never read anything that captured the sport so well. Shapton knows just the details to include...Her sparse, satisfying prose is your guide, and you’re glad to get to swim beside her.”

—Carolyn Kormann, *TheNewYorker.com*

“Through immaculate observation and evocative recollection, Leanne Shapton’s autobiographical *Swimming Studies* achieves the seemingly impossible. In a series of sharp snapshots of life as a competitive swimmer and beyond, she has managed to find “the language of belonging,” giving a voice to silent hours spent submerged in water....beautifully written and gorgeous to look at, too....Ultimately, *Swimming Studies* is about more than swimming. It’s about how the discipline of competitive sport teaches routine, perseverance and good habits. It’s about how the diligence of athletic practice can translate into art, communication and even love.”

—Nicola Joyce, *The Washington Post*

About the Author

Leanne Shapton is an illustrator and author of several books, including *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris*. She is also the cofounder of J&L Books, a nonprofit publisher of art and photography books.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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