

Learning to Swim

By Ann Turner

Scholastic Press

A Reading and Discussion Guide

Prepared by Carolann Mac Master
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SUMMARY:

Reprinted from <http://www.annturnerbooks.com/learningtoswim.html>

This powerful collection of autobiographical poems chronicle one summer in a young girl's life and the abuse she faces. At the beginning of the summer, Annie looks forward to learning to swim and faces the dark water bravely. But once the sexual abuse from a neighborhood boy begins, she hesitates, pulls back, and stays on the sand. When she finally tells her mother about the abuse, Annie experiences, once again, the love and comfort of her family. Although healing doesn't happen immediately, she begins to venture forth into the water again, to recapture her vitality and courage. Poems in Annie's teenage voice bracket the collection, reminding the readers that "telling is what matters."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What do you think about the way Ann Turner wrote the book? Why do you think she chose to write in poems? Do the poems evoke different feelings from prose?
2. Would you have read *Learning to Swim* if you had known the subject of the book in advance?
3. What would you have done if you were the little girl? (Remember you are only eight years old.)
4. Would you recommend this book to your friends? Why or why not?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

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I was one of those children who sniffed, slept on, and sometimes ate books. Once a week my father would go to the library and bring back seven books, one for each day of the week. I would open my mouth like a baby bird to devour food. I really think I would have died, had I not had books.

I wrote my first story when I was eight, about a dragon and a dwarf named Puckity. I still have it and use it when talking to children. The story shows that children have tales to tell, and ones worth telling. I was encouraged in my writing through school and college, but was afraid I could not do it. I trained as a teacher and taught for one year, but quickly decided that I would rather write books than teach them. I tried my hand at poetry for two years and had one poem published.

It wasn't until my mother, an artist, suggested that we do a book together about vultures that I tried writing for children. So my first book was about natural history, and I loved learning about vultures and watching them in Florida.

The queerest thing about writing is how a story chooses you, instead of you choosing it. I often feel as if I am walking along quietly, minding my own business, when a story creeps up behind me and taps me on the shoulder. "Tell me, show me, write me!" it whispers in my ear. And if I don't tell that story, it wakes me up in the morning, shakes me out of my favorite afternoon nap, and insists upon being told.

Writers write for the same reason readers read - to find out the end of the story. I never know the endings of my stories when I start out; I must wrestle my way through them, punching out unnecessary words, arguing with self-important paragraphs, until I arrive at the end thirsty, tired, but victorious. This tells you, of course, that writing is not easy for me. Once in a blue moon it is, but most of the time it is hard, hard work. And I work every day. I sit down at my computer and write. It could be about anything, or anyone - my husband, Rick, my children Ben and Charlotte, or the woods that surround our house in Williamsburg, Massachusetts.

Remember that you have stories to tell, too. Remember that you have a voice that is worth being heard. Write your stories down, keep journals. Learn to be a spy. I am a nosy, curious spy who eavesdrops on people at the beach, or as they stroll along at the mall. I always wonder; "Why is she walking so fast? Is she mad? How come his mouth looks like that? What is that lady saying to her child?" If you keep your eyes and ears open, you will see that you are surrounded by drama and astonishing things, even in the midst of everyday life. Notice it; write it down, and who knows, maybe someday you will be a writer, too.

HELPFUL LINKS:

Ann Turner's website: <http://www.annturnerbooks.com>

Lesson Plan - Writing Narrative Poetry

<http://www.schoollink.org/csd/pages/engl/narrativ.html>

Tell a Story ... in Poetry?

<http://teenwriting.about.com/library/weekly/aa072902a.htm>

Definition of Narrative Poetry

<http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Narrative%20poetry>

Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network: <http://www.rainn.org/>

CHILDHELP USA: <http://www.childhelpusa.org>

Companion Books:

The Truth About Rape, by Teresa M. Lauer

Lucky, by Alice Sebold

Recovering From Rape, by Linda E. Ledray

After Silence: Rape and My Journey Back, by Nancy Venable Raine



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