

Learning to Swim Discussion Questions

by Sara J. Henry

Author Bio: (Fantastic Fiction)

Sara J. Henry has worked as a magazine editor, correspondence writing school instructor, newspaper sports editor, website designer, e-commerce webmaster, soil scientist, bicycle mechanic, and health and fitness writer. She has edited many nonfiction books, and has a master in journalism from Carleton University, Ottawa. She is a Tennessee native living in southern Vermont with at least one too many dogs.

Learning to Swim won the Agatha Award for Best First Novel (2011), the Anthony Award for Best First Novel (2012), and the Edgar Awards Mary Higgins Clark award (2012).

Characters:

- **Troy Chance:** A young woman who dives off of a ferry to rescue a child who falls from a different ferry. She is a free-spirit; a freelance writer who likes sports and a flexible, independent, unencumbered lifestyle. Lives in Lake Placid, New York.
- **Paul Dumond:** The 6 year old boy who fell from the ferry. Missing for at least 6 months.
- **Philippe Dumond:** Paul's father. President of the Dumond Agency, a marketing agency.
- **Madaline Dumond:** Paul's mother. Went missing at the same time as Paul.
- **Baker: (Susan Baker):** Troy's best friend. She has 3 sons and a husband named Mike.
- **Elise:** Paul's nanny. An older woman who loves Paul.
- **Simon Chance:** Troy's brother. A policeman in Florida.
- **Claude:** Madaline's brother. Works for Philippe's marketing agency.
- **Alyssa Cox:** A reporter who is interested in Paul and Troy's story.
- **Detective Alan Jameson:** Police officer in charge of Paul's case.
- **Tiger:** Troy's dog.
- **Thomas Rouse:** Troy's current boyfriend. He lives in Burlington and is a history professor at the University of Vermont.
- **Marguerite Thibault:** Vince's wife.
- **Vince Thibault:** Professor at the University of Vermont. Hosts a French club. Owns a boat.

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. The novel opens when Troy dives into Lake Champlain to save a child she had only seen for a split second. Have you ever been in a situation anything like this - where you had very little time to act? How did you react?
3. This book is written from a first person perspective. Does this writing style help or harm the book?
4. Troy describes her attachment to Paul as quick and atavistic and wonders if this is what her sisters felt like when they had their children. Do you think a maternal bond is instinctive? Can similar bonds be formed through traumatic experiences?
5. Having to protect Paul from being put into foster care, or possibly being returned to a bad home situation, Troy keeps him at her home until she can track down his father. Why do you think she does this? Was she right to keep the police out of it?
6. Troy thinks she will be able to tell immediately if Paul's father had anything to do with his kidnapping. Is it possible to be so sure about a person's motives based on a first impression or gut reaction? What did your instincts tell you about Philippe when he and Troy first met?
7. In Lake Placid, Troy doesn't really have to adhere to any schedule or be accountable to anyone until Paul enters her life. Aside from her lifestyle, how else does Paul change Troy? Are these changes for the better?
8. Philippe pays multiple ransoms, even though paying brings no results. Why do you think he continued paying the ransoms? Would you have done the same?
9. No one in Philippe's household talks about Madeleine. What conclusions did that cause you to draw about her relationships with Paul and Philippe?
10. When Claude learned that a body was found that matched Madeleine's dental records, he was devastated. Did this change how Troy saw Claude? Did it change how you saw him?
11. Vince, Marguerite, and Alyssa all gain Troy's trust quickly, while it takes her a while to warm up to Detective Jameson. Was Troy's trust always well placed? Which characters did you find easier to trust than others?
12. Claude and Madeline grew up in foster care after tragedy struck their family. What role do you think this played in their actions as adults?
13. There are several men in the book who seem to care for Troy deeply, particularly Thomas. Does Troy treat him well? What do you think her feelings are toward the other male characters and how well does she handle them?
14. Why do you think the kidnapper did what she did? Why go after Troy once she had gotten away with it?

15. How does the title illustrate the themes in the book? Troy has to swim for her life several times, but do you see any other significance to the title? What else does she learn?
16. Was Troy living a happy life before she saved Paul? What about after she saved Paul?
17. At several key moments in the book, Troy reminds herself that the best thing to do is usually the hardest thing to do. In the end, she makes a particularly difficult decision. Was this the right choice? What about her other decisions? When she responded with ease, did she usually make the right decision or the wrong one?
18. One of the criticisms of this book is that the author focuses on a number of insignificant details (computer file extensions, what Paul would have eaten if the nanny wasn't there, etc.) What do you think of that criticism? Did the story seem to drag to you?
19. *Learning to Swim* has a number of similar to *The Boy in the Suitcase* which we read earlier this year. Which did you like better? Why?
20. This was Henry's debut book. She has written a sequel called *A Cold and Lonely Place*. Will you read it?

References:

- Fantastic Fiction - <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/h/sara-j-henry/>
- Goodreads - <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/8736390-learning-to-swim>
- Novelist - <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/novp/detail?sid=7b619db9-3e2b-4107-a41a-e522959e51c0%40sessionmgr4005&UI=UI+380281&hid=4204&vid=6>
- Sara Henry - <http://www.sarahenry.com/>

If you liked *Learning to Swim*, try...

- *Two Little Girls in Blue* - Mary Higgins Clark
- *Killer* – Jonathan Kellerman
- *Eleven* – Patricia Reilly Giff
- *Boy in the Suitcase* – Agnete Friis and Lene Kaaberbøl
- *Book of the Dead* – Patricia Daniels Cornwell

Troy Chance Series

1. *Learning to Swim* (2011)
2. *A Cold and Lonely Place* (2013)