

Book Club Guide

Swimming Lessons by Claire Fuller

1. From the very first page of the novel, when Gil finds a letter tucked into a book called *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead*, books are a powerful symbolic presence in the narrative. This is most apparent in the books within which Ingrid hides her letters; the connections between the books and letters' contents are clear at times and ambiguous at others, but her choices never seem random. How does Fuller use books as symbols to convey meaning within the novel?
2. Flora's first appearance in the novel gives the impression that she is flighty, disorganized, and perhaps somewhat reckless. Does this fit with your first impression of Flora? How did your impression shift throughout the novel? Did you feel that you had come to know Flora by the end of the novel?
3. The novel alternates between Ingrid's and Flora's perspectives throughout the narrative. What do you think Fuller achieved through this technique? How did the shifting narrative highlight the connections — or, conversely, the differences — between the two women? What does it say about their relationship?
4. Although set in reality, *Swimming Lessons* is infused with a sense of magic. Certain events — such as the “raining” fish that Flora encounters in Chapter 3 — feel like signs or portents. In particular, Flora seems to believe in a fate or magic that guides the characters' lives. Are there other examples of this sense of magic? How do these events function in the novel?
5. In Chapter 4, Ingrid recounts a meeting between Gil and her study group. Gil, who at the time is Ingrid's professor, chastises the group for attaching too much importance to an author's intentions (and establishes his rationale for collecting books full of marginalia from unknown readers). “A book becomes a living thing only when it interacts with its reader,” says Gil, “And all books are created by the reader.” (33). Do you think this belief holds true? How do the novel's characters create their own versions of Gil and Ingrid's own story? What authorial strategies does Fuller use to encourage readers to “create” *Swimming Lessons* for themselves?
6. In Chapter 17, Gil tells his daughters, “I'm beginning to think it's better to know, one way or the other. It's taken me a long time to realize, but I don't think it's good to have an imagination that is more vivid, wider, than real life.” (120). Up to this point, Gil has been emphatic in his preference for imagination over reality. What does Gil mean by this? What do you think sparked this dramatic change in his perspective?
7. Why does Flora feel so insistently that Gil was a great father? Is she misremembering things to suit her belief, or was Gil really a good parent to Flora and Nan? In what ways are Flora and Nan the products of their upbringing, and specifically, of their parents' influence?

8. One of the novel's most moving passages comes in Chapter 33, when Flora recounts to Richard an experience she had with a childhood friend: overhearing adults speaking about Flora losing her mother, both Flora and her friend misinterpret the phrase and believe that Flora is at fault for "losing" Ingrid. How do our formative beliefs, misguided as they may be, influence our adult perspective? How did this misunderstanding affect Flora as she grew up? Are there other examples within the novel of this kind of childhood misunderstanding?

9. The plot of *Swimming Lessons* is shaped in large part by ambiguities: questions unanswered, secrets kept, and things left unsaid. What is the narrative effect of so many elements left unresolved? Were there any such ambiguities that you wished Fuller had addressed or filled in more clearly?

10. Why do you think Fuller chose to include an epilogue? How did you interpret the significance of these final two pages of the novel, and what might they mean for the continuing story of the Coleman family?