



Turning

Jessica J. Lee

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Through the heat of summer to the frozen depths of winter, Lee traces her journey swimming through 52 lakes in a single year, swimming through fear and heartbreak to find her place in the world

The water slips over me like cool silk. The intimacy of touch uninhibited, rising around my legs, over my waist, my breasts, up to my collarbone. When I throw back my head and relax, the lake runs into my ears. The sound of it is a muffled roar, the vibration of the body amplified by water, every sound felt as if in slow motion...

At the age of 28, Jessica Lee--Canadian, Chinese, and British--finds herself in Berlin. Alone. Lonely, with lowered spirits thanks to some family history and a broken heart, she is ostensibly there to write a thesis. And although that is what she does daily, what increasingly occupies her is swimming. So she makes a decision that she believes will win her back her confidence and independence: she will swim fifty-two of the lakes around Berlin, no matter what the weather or season. She is aware that this particular landscape is not without its own ghosts and history.

This is the story of a beautiful obsession: of the thrill of a still, turquoise lake, of cracking the ice before submerging, of floating under blue skies, of tangled weeds and murkiness, of cool, fresh, spring swimming--of facing past fears of near-drowning, and of breaking free. When she completes her year of swimming, Jessica finds she has new strength--and she has also found friends and gained some understanding of how the landscape both haunts and holds us.

This book is for everyone who loves swimming, who wishes they could push themselves beyond caution, who understands the deep pleasure of using the body's strength, who knows what it is to abandon all thought...and float home to the surface.

Turning Details

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From Reader Review Turning for online ebook

Penny says

3.5

There seems to be a trend in 'swimming memoirs' at the moment, some of which I've enjoyed a lot more than others.

In *Turning* Jessica Lee writes about her exploration of, and swimming in, the various man made and natural lakes surrounding Berlin, a city she is currently living and working in. She sets herself a challenge to swim in 52 lakes, all year round.

Lee has a British father and a Chinese mother but was brought up in Canada. However, she seems to struggle to settle anywhere - a short lived early marriage saw her living in London - and I suspect she won't always stay in Berlin.

I enjoyed the mixture of personal memoir, landscape writing and history. Lee is clearly a very talented writer.

However there's sometimes only so much you can say about getting up, packing a picnic (exactly the same picnic every time which I thought was telling!), getting on her bike, cycling to a lake and swimming. It definitely got repetitive.

We are no doubt supposed to be suitably impressed when she swims during the bitterly cold winter months, taking a small hammer to break the ice. People, well wrapped up against the cold, who see her doing this indicate they think she is crackers to do such a thing. I agree - but she has a point she wants to prove to herself. I'm not quite sure she knows herself what that point is though!

Lee often comes across as much younger than she really is.

Clearly a clever, academic woman she is also riddled with self doubt and insecurities, worrying about friends and life in general in a way that you would expect a teenager to do, not a woman nudging 30. It constantly came across to me that she has plenty of growing up to do.

Buchdokter says

Die Autorin Jessica J. Lee hat in London in Umweltgeschichte über die Verwandlung der Hampstead Heath in eine Waldlandschaft promoviert und gelangte dort in Kontakt zu den Schwimmerinnen vom Ladies Point. Ein Forschungsstipendium führte Lee nach Berlin, wo sie auf der Suche nach sich selbst beschloss, in 52 Wochen in 52 Seen in Berlin und Brandenburg zu schwimmen. Die Zahl ist als Mittelwert zu verstehen, in den Sommermonaten waren es mehr Begegnungen mit fremden Gewässern als im Winter. Die angeschwommenen Seen liegen um Berlin, Potsdam, Wandlitz und Köngis Wusterhausen herum. Unterwegs ist Lee mit öffentlichen Verkehrsmitteln, mit dem Rad und zu Fuß. Zwischen Toronto, London und Berlin und nach einer gescheiterten Ehe wirkt die Autorin anfangs entwurzelt, sie kämpft auch spürbar gegen wiederkehrende Ängste vor dem unbekanntem Gewässer oder vor unerfreulichen Begegnungen mit Fremden. Ihre Ängste zeigen sich z. B. in der spontanen Frage, wie ein See sicher sein kann, wenn dort gerade keine Menschen zu sehen sind, oder wo im Wasser Schwermetallablagerungen von Kraftwerken zu finden sind.

Ab und zu wird sie auf ihren Erkundungen der Brandenburger Seenlandschaft von Freunden begleitet. Lee ist Kind von Einwanderern nach Kanada, ihr Vater stammt aus Wales, ihre Mutter aus Taiwan. Wichtig zu wissen, dass sie als Kind Schwimmen lernte (lernen sollte?), weil ihre Eltern es nicht konnten und wollten, dass ihre Töchter es einmal besser haben. Jessica Lee schwamm als Kind eine Weile im Verein und in jener Zeit in Schwimmhallen. Als Wissenschaftlerin hat sie zu ihrem Projekt limnologische Fachliteratur gewälzt, aber auch Fontanes Wanderungen durch die Mark Brandenburg und John von Düffels Bücher gelesen. Trotz seines ernsten Tons und des üppigen Quellenverzeichnisses habe ich Lees Projekt des Slow Tourism an keiner Stelle wie aus dem Elfenbeinturm verfasst erlebt. Eher ist es eine sinnliche Begegnung mit einer durch die Eiszeit und den Braunkohlenabbau des Menschen geprägten Landschaft, bei der ich glaubte, der märkische Sand würde zwischen meinen Zehen hervor rieseln. Sehr sympathisch wirkt Lees Beschäftigung mit der deutschen Geschichte, dem Zweiten Weltkrieg und der deutschen Teilung. Dass sie sich einige Male exakt dort befindet, wo früher die Mauer verlief und die Menschen eben lange nicht schwimmen durften, dessen war sie sich bewusst.

Am Ende ihrer 52 Wochen in Berliner und Brandenburger Seen hat Jessica Lee sich aus ihrem alten Leben buchstäblich freigeschwommen, ihre Leser nicht gelangweilt und die Übersetzer Nina Frey/Hans-Christian Oeser haben diesem persönlichen Text mit regionalem Bezug eine runde, authentische Sprache gegeben.

Frede says

4.5 stars

Jen Kayna (Habitat for Happiness) says

This, unfortunately, was not the book for me. I picked it up because the true story of someone swimming through lakes year round sounded super interesting. Unfortunately, it wasn't what I was expecting at all. I thought the author would be attempting to swim across entire lakes and that there would be a lot of focus on the actual process of swimming, but instead she doesn't actually swim across them she just visits many different lakes but doesn't spend much time in the water and she also goes into very little detail about the actual swimming experience. Most of this story was spent describing the hikes she took to get to the lakes or describing the cities in which the lakes reside. Don't get me wrong, I love nature and go on hikes weekly, but this story got very repetitive and I felt like I was sitting through a German history and geography lesson....which are my two least favourite subjects. I think this would have translated much better as a documentary. I also found the story a bit difficult to follow, because it jumps back and forth from the present to the past quite often. I will say, however, that I did enjoy learning about the author's childhood and past relationships and I think the author is so amazing for having the courage to swim in the winter time!

Asya says

Lovely and lyrical, at times profound, and at times just gorgeous nature writing. My only objection is that the chapters get repetitive without added depth in the second half of the book, but still a worthy addition to the swimming literature along the lines of Roger Deakin and more recent swimming memoirs, such as Jenny Landreth's Swell and Alexandra Heminsley's Leap In.

Rosamund says

This is a gorgeously written book with some interesting local insights, and the idea of a memoir combining several particular elements made me feel inspired. An autumn of reading a chapter or two before going to sleep was very comforting. However, by the time I got to the last page, I had been left a little cold — and not just because of all the descriptions of winter swimming.

The events in the author's past didn't seem so remarkable that they should form the thematic spine of a book that ultimately... purported to be about something else? I'm not saying someone's personal story needs to be super unusual to be written about. To be more specific, I guess I craved a more engaging context behind the swimming, since fresh air and exercise aren't exactly radical ways of dealing with feeling miserable.

I was frustrated about how we kept going back to these different bits of the author's past, but in the end, there was no real resolution or conclusion on them. I was curious about how living in a country other than the one where she was born to migrant parents has affected her relationship with each of them? Or what was the lesson from her divorce — how has it made it harder to open her heart to others (especially since there was a burgeoning Berlin love interest for a while there)?

Just some picky editorial remarks... the consistent literal translation of German phrases got on my nerves. For example, "*waren Sie...?*" is closer to "have you been...?" than "were you...?", which was how it appeared in the book. Also, I would have liked some illustrations or photographs in it to break up the repetition.

Taylor says

In this memoir, Jessica Lee recounts the time she spent living in Berlin while working on her doctoral thesis in environmental history. During this time, she also set herself the challenge of swimming in 52 lakes over the course of a year. This challenge is the focus of the book as Ms. Lee takes the reader along on a number of her swims. While doing so, she also writes about the German culture and people, shares bits of local history, and vividly describes the settings of her swims.

This was a tough book to rate and review. It's received a number of glowing reviews while a number of other reviewers stated that this just wasn't the book for them. I'm kind of in both camps. I can definitely say that this book was not for me, mainly because I found it incredibly boring. Yet I still gave it four stars. Why? Because the writing was exquisite. To get the most out of it, I ended up treating it more as a book of poetry than a memoir, and read only short passages at a time while savouring the language and descriptive qualities.

Thank you to Goodreads Giveaways for providing me a copy of this book.

Karin.gry says

A passionate wild swimmer, currently situated in Berlin, away from home as I know it, this book spoke to me on so many levels. The language is beautiful, first of all. I couldn't even imagine it was possible to write an entire non-fiction, centred mainly around the sensation of lakes, and swimming in them. The multi faceted

depiction of loneliness, both the sad and the serene kind, tells a story of freedom and rootlessness that any wandering person can relate to. What I would have wished from this book though, that I did not quite get, was a satisfying conclusion and a full development of the underlying love story. Didn't keep occupying my thoughts after finishing reading it, quite as much as I'd hoped when getting attached to the story.

Anyway, overall a pretty amazing concept of a biography (if that's what to call it).

Trevor Pearson says

Received a copy of *Turning* by Jessica J. Lee through the GoodReads First Reads Giveaway program in exchange for an honest review

"The first entry in the Oxford English Dictionary for the word 'lake' doesn't refer to lakes as we know them. Instead, 'lake', from Old English, means 'an offering, sacrifice; also a gift'. This origin of the word has nothing to do with water, but I find myself thinking about it sometimes, about the ways lakes hold themselves open to the world. Broad plates beneath the sky, they welcome a swimmer fully. Perhaps they swallow a swimmer whole. But there's a kind of offering in the generosity of water holding you afloat. In the heart way water holds feeling, how the body is most alive submerged and enveloped, there is the fullness of grace given freely."

Turning is a memoir written by an Ontario born twenty-something as she searches for meaning while dealing with emotional trauma caused by a failed marriage, drug and alcohol abuse, casual sex, pregnancy, her own parents divorce, abortion, and her mother's battle with mental illness. In some ways she is her own worst enemy as she beats herself up and tears herself down because of her overwhelming, paralyzing, and unpredictable fears. While she is in Canada she is having a difficult time straddling the fine line between living a life of solitude, which is fine if accurately measured, if not it can lead to social isolation with periods of sadness and bouts of depression. Jessica's hit rock bottom and her depressive state has made her feel that the only way to climb back up to a healthy frame of mind was through education and in doing so retreating from her complicated family life and leaving her small town. Jessica moved to England for school and was later sent to Berlin for research as she was working on her dissertation on environmental history. Jessica doesn't appreciate the word escape to summarize her way of dealing with conflict, she would prefer that her mode of survival and an ability to transform herself and flourish would be expedited in a place foreign to her where self reliance and sufficiency would help her find her place in the world and not have the world swallow her whole. *Turning* is set through a full year, or four seasons for the purpose of this book and follows the author as she sets out to swim in fifty two lakes around Berlin and experience all of what the temporal waters have to offer. Her plan would serve as a source of information and more importantly inspiration for her thesis as she conducts research on environmental changes, learns to be alone and becomes one with the open water.

"Freedom is the negotiation of ghosts on a haunted landscape; it does not exorcise the haunting but works to survive and negotiate it with flair'. I was sitting in the library, racing to the bottom of a stack of books, facing a deadline. But these words stopped me. I paused, traced my way back to the beginning of the sentence, and began again. 'Freedom is the negotiation of ghosts on a haunted landscape' - I mouthed the words, running my fingertip over the page."

Maybe this was it. Each time I had moved somewhere new, to a new country or a new city, I soon found only the past in the present. There was a choice: keep moving or learn to live with ghosts. Freedom, it said. This seemed a promising thought."

The water acted as a cleansing for the mind, body, and soul as she tends to lost love, depression, homesickness, and a healing heart. Swimming became a remedy for depression, it was her responsibility to find a constructive balance to live with the hurt and better understand herself. During the fall season water feels sharper, more clean against your skin, this is when the water turns, and each season features their unique characteristics to demonstrate to people when the water is turning. During the winter swimming season (yes I said swimming season) Jessica would agree that this is the moment of truth when the changing water separates the recreation swimmer from the true enthusiast. Like me, a devoted walker of my Chiweenee named Bentley, we diligently travel through rain, sleet, sun, snow, wind, and ice, only to see the number of dog-walkers multiply once the snow melts, cool air dies down, and the warm air takes over. What's up with that my fair-weather four-legged owning friends? Jessica is an enthusiast, a day without swimming was considered a failure, she thirsts for the feeling of euphoria that can only be experienced during late night frozen swims and the awareness that yes she is alive and frigid temperature only serve as a reminder now that she has overcome common fears and broken free from past restraints.

"In the stillness of the lakes, the border between nature and culture is thinned. Swimming takes place at this border, as if constantly searching for home. Water is a place in which I don't belong, but where I find myself nonetheless. Out of my culture, out of my depth."

Two of my most vivid memories of open water swimming happened when I was a child. The first was in Stoco Lake where I first felt the creepy, slimy, overwhelming, almost invasive nature that is seaweed. There is actually a term for this fear it called fykiaphobia, and after that experience I believe it. As troubling as that experience was it also allowed me to see the beauty that are painted turtles. My other memory was swimming to some sort of buoy or marker in the Gulf of Mexico with my twin brother. Being around eleven years old, naive, and competitive we challenged each other to swim out and touch it and I remember the feeling of the water turning warm to very cold as we got further out from the shore. The metal marker was also disgusting and I never swam so fast going back in. I will never forget these open water memories.

Turning by Jessica J. Lee features good writing that demonstrates elegance and stirs emotion at times, but the story didn't have enough to hold my interest even if it was a unique experience being one of the first nature memoirs that I have ever read. Secondly, Turning is a history lesson and a commentary on Berlin while it primarily does its best to explain the inexplicable seduction as well as the dangers of open water swimming. Overall it achieves its purpose in enlightening the reader on how despite the miles you travel or what you believe deep down inside, you can't outrun your past, but I believe the story ultimately fell flat with respect to maintaining an interest level and distinguishing each swimming expedition without becoming repetitive. There is obviously an audience but I do not fall in that category.

"I've been troubled by these narratives of women walking out on their lives, exiling themselves in order to take up space. I'm worried by the idea that in order to find a place for themselves, women walk away, as if the only choice is between the room of one's own or the inexorable, unequivocal wild. Between Penelope and the sirens. But likewise I've lingered over Atwood's

lines, wondering whether my decision to swim was a way of surfacing from a suffocating pain, a way of marking territory. The ghosts can't be exorcised, though, and there isn't any wilderness left to claim. Though pain alleviates with time, fear remains, rolling as if on the tide."

Andy says

enjoyed this so much

postgraduate environmental historian, while completing studies in Berlin, commits to swimming in 52 lakes over the course of a year

blends so many details, personal, relationships, friendships, setbacks, struggles, historical, geological, environmental

All briefly, tantalising glimpses and flashes, like the lakes seen through the forest trees as she cycles to another swim.

these sidebars tend to occupy thoughts while travelling to or from a lake

and are replaced as she enters the lake and moves away from the shore, with a focus on the present, the feel of the water, the turbidity of the water, the temperature

felt honest and unprepossessing

and some new words - Bryology, angiosperm, secchi disk and my favourite, limnology

SarahJaneSmith says

This was an intriguing read - as I love outdoor swimming myself I enjoyed diving into this book. And I found Jessica J. Lee's writing to be as beautiful as nature itself. I could almost taste, see, smell and feel every word: meteors, moods, the scent of wood smoke, fragments of ice, patches of moss, heath, tiny blue dragonflies, asphalt roads turning into sand, verdancy, the mirror glass of the lake, cold winds, fragments of pine cones drying in the sun, storm clouds.

Paul says

At the end of her twenties, Lee finds herself in the city of Berlin. Ostensibly there to write a thesis she has left behind a home, family and quite a lot of heartache in Canada. In a city of 3.7 million people, she is all alone. The thesis plods along, but what motivates her to get up in the mornings is taking a swim in one of the lakes that surround the city. Even though she is swimming solo, there is something reassuring about swimming in the cool dark lakes that help ebb away her inner pain. Knowing how many lakes there are

around the city, she decides to try and swim in fifty-two different ones regardless of the season and the temperature.

It doesn't stay this way, but for a few magical moments in autumn the water is crystalline, like swimming through a gemstone

What starts as a challenge to get herself out of the house and exploring the area slowly descends into an obsession, finding that perfect lake, luxuriating in the cold waters, watching the clouds reflect in the mirror like waters and floating in a gin clear lake. The ritual of wild swimming gives her a new inner strength and helps overcome the past fears of swimming in open water when she was small in Canada. Winter swims add another level of difficulty as she has to use a hammer to crack the ice from the lakes before sinking into the bitterly cold water.

I hear nothing. It isn't a terrifying, muffled nothingness, but a quiet solitude. Stillness, and I float.

I have read a fair number of these nature memoirs now where the author seeks solace in the natural world to overcome a set of personal issues and tribulations. This, however, is one of the best that I have read so far. Lee's writing is beautiful, immersive and effortless. The prose has a clarity and depth that is quite breath taking for a debut author. Her openness of her past issues and descriptions of the lakes that she swims in, the way that she notices the details in the way the seasons turn the lakes are quite something. Lee is an author of some skill and I can highly recommend this.

Emily says

Before reading this book I read a review of it that said that the author has no personal growth from the start to the end. I think it was meant negatively, but I loved that. I haven't read a ton of these kind of one year memoirs but of the ones I've read it feels like there's an expectation (and often some shoehorning to make it happen in the writing) that the writer will change and grow and I don't think that always reflects real life.

I've now read it and I'm not sure how I feel. I think I still - despite what I thought I wanted from the book and after reading that review - expected some learning and growth in the sense of feeling stronger in the water or tackling 'harder' swims, but she's already a strong and regular swimmer so that doesn't happen of course. There is a lot more writing about her feelings and back history (which I found off-putting in its jumping around in time) and the history and geography of the area than writing about the actual swimming, which I suppose made it more varied but wasn't what I was expecting. I think I preferred *Swell: A Waterbiography* by Jenny Landreth in that the non-personal history parts are filled with the history of women swimming.

I was trying to work out why I wasn't enjoying it and wondered if it was the continuous format of a book and that maybe I'd have preferred to read it as a blog, and yet I follow a swimmer's blog and I think his entries are more enjoyable to read (and he swims in the same place every time). I wonder if it was because the writer and I are such different people? That although I felt empathy, I just couldn't directly connect with her motivations and emotions other than her mixed feelings about wanting company vs being independent.

To end with things I did like: learning a little about limnology, learning about the language of German place names in relation to history, seeing how someone can keep swimming throughout the year, that doing something by yourself is possible if you're an experienced swimmer.

Rebecca says

This beautifully reflective personal story arose from Lee's resolution, when she was 28 and in Berlin on a research placement for her dissertation in environmental history, to swim in 52 local lakes – a year's worth – no matter the weather. At the time she blogged about her "52 Lakes Project" for *Slow Travel Berlin*, and kept friends and family up to date through social media as well. Her focus would be on the former East German region of Brandenburg, which has Berlin at its center and was first popularized by Theodor Fontane's 1862 travel book.

Lee traveled to the lakes under her own steam, using trains and her bicycle; occasionally she took friends with her, but most often she was alone, which became a chance to cultivate solitude – not the same as loneliness. The challenge entailed all kinds of practical difficulties like bike trouble, getting lost, and a dead phone battery, but gradually it became routine and held less fear for her. On summer days she could manage multiple lakes in a day, and even small encounters with Germans gave her a newfound sense of belonging.

Within chapters, the memoir gracefully alternates pieces of the author's past with her lake travels. With a father from Wales and a mother from Taiwan, Lee grew up in Ontario and spent summers in Florida. She remembers taking YMCA swimming lessons alongside her mother, and swimming in Canadian lakes. Back then the water usually intimidated her, but over the years her feelings have changed:

Water feels different in each place. The water I grew up with was hard, cutting, and when I go back to visit it now, I feel it in my ears when I dive in. something different, more like rock. The lake a whetted blade. The water in Berlin has a softness to it. Maybe it's the sand, buffing the edges off the water like splinters from a beam. It slips over you like a blanket. There's a safety in this feeling. In the lakes here, there is a feeling of enclosure and security that Canada can't replicate. And it shouldn't – the pelagic vastness there is entirely its own, and I've learned to love that too.

Swimming fulfills many functions for Lee. It served variously as necessary discipline after going mildly off the rails in young adulthood (drinking, smoking pot and having an abortion during college; a short-lived marriage in her early twenties); as a way of bouncing back from depression when her planned life in London didn't pan out and a budding relationship failed; and as a way of being in touch with the turning seasons and coming to know the German landscape intimately. Symbolically, of course, it's also a baptism into a new life.

Yet I had to wonder if there was also something masochistic about this pursuit, especially in the winter months. On the back cover there's a photograph of Lee using a hammer to chip out a path through the ice so she can do her minimum of 45 strokes. (No wetsuit!) As spring came, ironically, the water felt almost too warm to her. She had learned to master the timing of a winter swim: "Between pain and numbness there's a brightness, a crisp, heightened sensation in the cold: that's the place to swim through. When it ends, when numbness arrives, it's time to get out."

The end of Lee's year-long project is bittersweet, but she's consoled by the fact that she didn't have to leave her ordinary life in order to complete it. It was a companion alongside the frantic last-minute work on her dissertation and it never got in the way of her relationships; on the contrary, it strengthened certain friendships. And with Berlin looking like her home for the foreseeable future, she's committed to seeking out

more lakes, too.

There are a lot of year quest books out there, but this one never feels formulaic because there's such a fluid intermingling of past and present. As memoirs go, it is somewhat like Amy Liptrot's *The Outrun* – but much better. It's also comparable to Angela Palm's *Riverine*, with a watery metaphor at the heart to reflect the author's conception of life as a meandering route. Unlike the other swimming memoirs I've sampled, I can recommend this one to a general reader with no particular interest in wild swimming or any other sport. It's for you if you enjoy reading about the ebb and flow of women's lives.

In the stillness of the lakes, the border between nature and culture is thinned. Swimming takes place at this border, as if constantly searching for home. Water is a place in which I don't belong, but where I find myself nonetheless. Out of my culture, out of my depth.

There is more space inside than I can imagine, more hope and possibility than I'd known. Feeling as clear as the day, as deep as the lake.

Originally published with images on my blog, [Bookish Beck](#).

Paul says

A charming, well-researched meditation on wild swimming and life in general. Although this is a memoir written with something of an academic slant, it has a great deal of heart and self-belief. I enjoyed the combination of exploring a new city/region; the scientific descriptions of lake biology; the snapshots of life events; and of course the descriptions of entering a new lake for the first time. Less a guide book to the lakes of Berlin, this is more a meditation on what it truly feels like to slide into the water come rain or shine. I found this appealing, despite not being a wild swimmer myself - it was particularly nice to read hints that the author sometimes has to get over a fear or anxiety related to open water swimming herself. Elsewhere, the method of weaving together narratives past and present was enjoyable. Subtle repetitions exist throughout the text which I found comforting and helped illustrate the quest towards achieving the goal of swimming 52 lakes in a year.
