

Black Inc. Book Club Notes

TITLE: Swimming Home

AUTHOR: Judy Cotton

Book description

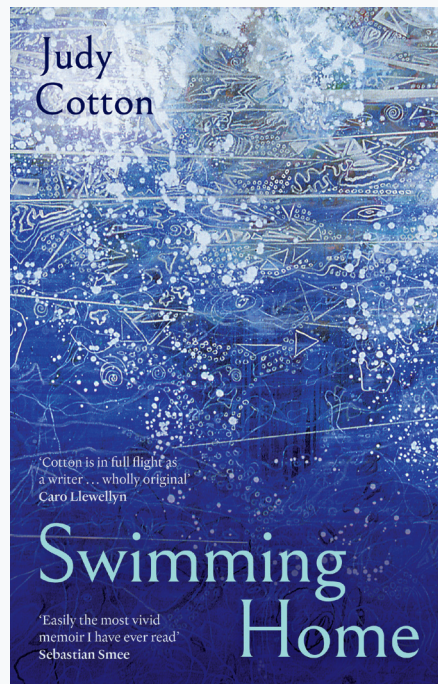
'I was sitting at my father's desk, waiting to call intensive care . . .
It was September, the wattle was flowering and it smelt like napalm.'

In this stunning memoir, full of black humour and razor-sharp observations, visual artist Judy Cotton captures the intricacies of family relationships and the push-pull of home.

Her mother, Eve, was a brilliant but exacting woman, a gifted pianist whose perfectionism cut her career short. After marrying, she established a successful stud farm for sheep in the Blue Mountains while supporting her husband's political career. Judy's charismatic father, Bob, was a federal minister and ambassador to the United States, with traditional ideas about who Judy should become.

Sent to boarding school from the age of four, Judy yearned for her parents but found them increasingly controlling. Her desire for freedom eventually took her overseas, to Korea and Japan in the late 1960s, and later to New York, where she finally discovered belonging in the art scene. But the undertow of home was impossible to escape.

In dazzling prose and with an artist's eye for landscape, *Swimming Home* is a powerful meditation on loss and longing, freedom and connection.



About the author

Judy Cotton is an internationally recognised visual artist based in Connecticut, USA. Her work is held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Lyman Allyn Art Museum, the National Gallery of Australia and numerous private collections. From 1974 to 1993, Cotton was the New York contributing editor for *Vogue Australia*. *Swimming Home* is her first book.



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Discussion Points

1. How does Eve's relationship with her mother and her sister play out in the way Eve parents her daughters. What does the writer mean by 'we both lost in the equation' (p. 6)?
2. How does Judy observe beauty in others and how does this influence the way she sees herself?
3. What is your response to the use of first names for all of the characters (rather than 'mum' etc)? How does this serve to blur the lines between the women in the book, and emphasise the way their lives mirror each other?
4. Do you enjoy the fragmented structure of the narrative? How would your response to the story change if the book had been written in a more linear way?
5. What are your responses to the author's disenchantment with her 'life of privilege and deprivation' (p. 77)? Discuss the writer's recollection of her experiences at this time in the context of contemporary conversations about privilege and wealth. How does Judy recognise and grapple with her own privilege elsewhere in the book?
6. Judy frequently positions herself as the outsider – she describes her experiences in Korea as a Western woman, saying 'on more than a few occasions, I was struck by stones thrown to indicate contempt for Western women, considered lower than prostitutes because, as it was explained to me, 'A prostitute has a function, but a Western woman has no function' (p. 78). But she is also an outsider in more localised ways – in her marriage Judy has an itchy spirit (p. 77), and in her family she is 'sacrificed' (p. 64). Does she ever find a place where she feels she belongs?
7. What are Judy's experiences of being sick and being cared for by people outside of her own family? How do these shape the way she moves through the world and interacts with other people?
8. Discuss the social and political backdrop of the story – how different would Judy's experiences have been if she was growing up now?
9. How does Eve's relationship with her animals act as a stand in for the emotional connections she struggles to find with her daughters? How does this make the sisters feel?
10. In painting, Judy finds a way to defy her parents and explore beauty in another way. Does it ever allow her to escape? How does the language of the novel reflect the writers' experience as an artist, and visual perspective?
11. Until the very end of the book, we only see Eve from Judy's perspective, but the inclusion of the article from the *Sydney Morning Herald* and letter from Shirley Hazzard allow us to see her in a different light. How does this change your opinion of Eve? Does the writer feel that these portrayals are accurate?
12. Eve's letter to Judy towards the end of the book reveals her regrets about their relationship (and Eve's relationship with her own mother). How might things have been different if they had been honest earlier about their feelings? Do you agree with Judy that Eve 'told the truth'? What didn't she tell the truth about?
13. Do you believe that Judy has found home by the end of the book? Where (or what) is it?