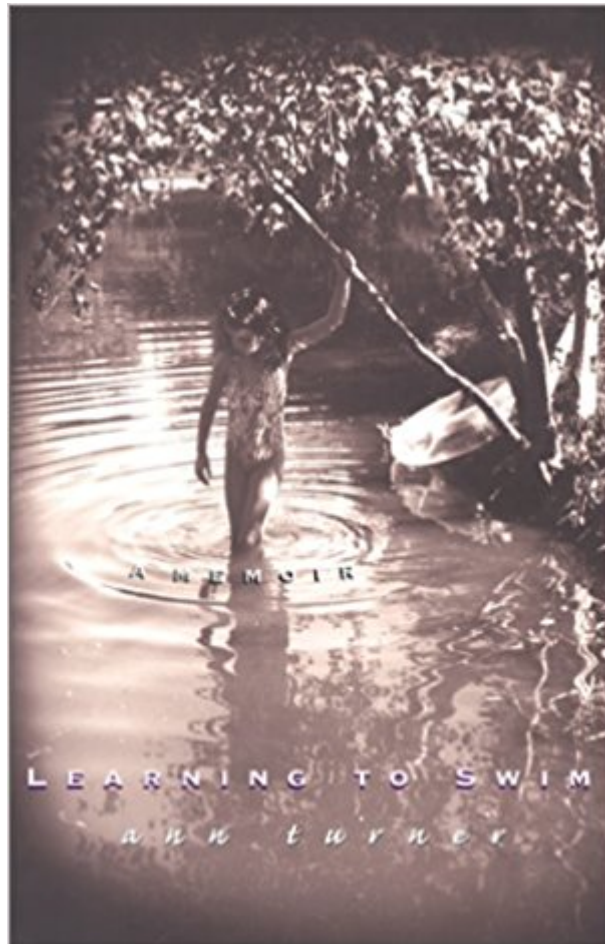




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# Learning To Swim



## Synopsis

A series of poems convey the feelings of a young girl whose sense of joy and security at the family's summer house is shattered when an older boy who lives nearby sexually abuses her.

## Book Information

Age Range: 12 and up

Lexile Measure: 1160L (What's this?)

Hardcover: 128 pages

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Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars 23 customer reviews

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## Customer Reviews

Ann Turner's lyrical *Learning to Swim* will resonate with any adult or teenager who knows the shame and confusion of sexual molestation. Her memories of a family summer vacation keep coming back "like a skunk dog / on the porch / whining to get in." For Turner, telling her story to the world is what sets that skunk dog running. Divided into three sections, "sailing," "sinking," and "swimming," the book chronicles a holiday trip through the eyes of a very young girl--small enough to use a pink swimming ring in Dresser's Pond, play dress-up, and run races. It's Kevin, an older boy from down the street, with the "hands that grab," who takes her upstairs under the pretense of reading to her ("a secret time for us / and never, ever tell"), and she doesn't even know she can say no. In searingly simple language, Turner walks us through the little girl's forever-altered world, past the place where the truth comes out and healing can begin. (Ages 13 and older) --Karin Snelson

Using spare vignettes laid out like poetry, Turner (*Nettie's Trip South*) recalls the summer she was six years old, when she was sexually abused by a neighbor. Convincingly assuming a child's voice, the narrative blends Annie's routine activities such as playing with dolls and swimming lessons with

darker images of the neighbor boy's transgressions (the boy "telling me to touch him/ in a hard, breathless voice, and I didn't even know/ I could say/ no"). Because Annie lacks the vocabulary to describe what is happening to her, it is her actions that most often imply her emotions (she draws an angry picture, she brushes her teeth five times a day, she tries to hide). Turner also describes Annie's painful longing to confide in someone (she says of her father, "I wish my words/ were smoke/ he could breathe in") but she is silenced by fear of what the neighbor boy's might do if she tells Aunt until Annie's mother extracts the truth. Throughout the volume, the narration shifts, sometimes addressing the reader, a few times her abuser; sometimes speaking in the immediate present and others recalling the recent past. The narrative itself may be at times disjointed, but the emotional truth comes through clearly. If older readers can get past the youth of the narrator they will likely appreciate the poetic voice and courage of the heroine. Ages 12-up. (Oct.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This short, easy-to-read-but-emotionally-gripping, collection of free-verse poetry is to be recommended to all ages, and both genders, of readers. The imagery of the dusty summer house and the promise of learning to swim, the hands and smells of loving family, and the pedophilic neighbor boy, the hiding beneath the blueberry bush, the secret forced, and then exposed, has a therapeutic quality. But as an adult male who has never experienced the horror exposed in this verse, it is a revealing, and disconcerting, journey into the thoughts and emotions of the little girl who endured it. Earlier this week a female student asked me for any books in our high school library on pedophilia. Those that I placed in her hands were so statistical and objective compared to this one. Next time, I'll be sure to recommend "Learning to Swim." It presents the victim's perspective with heart.

Unfolding in a series of exceptional narrative poems is a haunting true story of a life changing summer in a young girl's life. Turner powerfully juxtaposes the summer Annie is supposed to have - picking blueberries with her mother, walking hand in hand with her grandfather, learning to swim with her father - with the terrible secret of her molestation by a neighbor boy. The book is organized in three sections: sailing, sinking and swimming. Print is on only one side of the page, and a line from each 'poem' appears in lighter ink on the bottom of each page. This provides a sense of care and reverence to the story and book, and creates yet another poem in the book. Sailing tells the story of her close knit family at the beginning of their summer: "Daddy opens the door/to the summerhouse/where the air has missed us/all winter...." Sinking gently sheds light on abuse, how it

occurs, how it is perpetuated, how the victim is silenced by fear. Swimming chronicles Annie's experience after telling her mother and learning how to swim on her own. The book is beautifully designed. The cover effectively sets the mood and unconsciously evokes the content of the book. A sepia and purple toned photograph depicts a girl in a creekbed, in the center of the circles that water makes when a stone is thrown. She is holding on to a slight tree trunk while looking down into the water, where the circles surround her and the shadow of herself and the tree is reflected. On the bank of the creek is a plastic ring - a life-preserver. Just the right size for the hand, readers will look forward to opening the book. The inside is just as beautifully done, the first page showing the front cover photograph clipped: the girl is separated from the life preserver. The message is simple ("Listen./Telling is what matters./You have to catch/the words you've been hiding/inside or keeping in a dark/hurting ball in the middle/of your stomach that makes you/sick" ) and powerful. While the story may be "ideal" in that Turner experienced a close knit and supportive family, as well as a mother who believed her right away and took immediate action to end the abuse, it is no less powerful, real or believable. Told with simplicity and grace, this is an all around beautiful book. Would make an excellent gift for courageous women ages 13- adult. National 24-hour help lines listed in the back.

My first introduction to Ann Turner was in Dr. David White's Children's Literature course at Keene State College in New Hampshire. During the course I'd read Dakota Dugout, Nettie's Trip South and Katie's Trunk, all of which beautifully detailed the emotions and struggles of that time. An additional project was to read a realistic fictional book about a social issue then provide feedback regarding how the author dealt with the reality of the issue. After reading my paper on child sexual abuse in children's literature where I divulged my own victimization as a child, Dr. White advised me that Ann Turner was releasing her book, Learning to Swim: A memoir. I just received Ann's book from .com and in less than one hour rode her rollercoaster of emotions. One narrative to which I felt extremely close to was the following titled, Time to make a mess. "I took the garbage the whole pail and dumped it on the porch kicking the grapefruit against the stones grinding the coffee grounds into the hot boards. Someone shouted someone yelled I do not care it is time to make a mess." As a middle school student, I was feeling this same emotion. While I never told anyone of my experience until this past year, I was fortunate that my junior high school teachers had noticed a change in my behavior, one of self-destruction. Had Ann's book been available at the time I was dealing with my issue, it would have provided me with the support I needed to speak out, or as Ann says "Telling is what matters". As an aspiring elementary/middle school teacher, I will be sure to provide "Learning

to Swim" as a resource to all of my students so that they will know, no matter how hard it is to talk about sexual abuse, it is better to deal with it and talk about it. Thank you Ann for being brave enough to write your poems not only for you own healing, but the healing of many others dealing with this same, sad issue!

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