

"In a time of monotony and chaos...  
*The Swimmers* is an exquisite companion."  
*The New York Times Book Review*

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## Celebrating 25 Years of Seattle Reads

Founded in 1998, Seattle Reads was the first program of its kind. Visit our exhibit at the Central Library to learn about its history and to share memories about the program through the years. The exhibit will run from April 24, 2023 - June 26, 2023 in the Level 8 Gallery at the Central Library.



# Land Acknowledgment

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ʒaciʔtalbiḡ<sup>w</sup> swatix<sup>w</sup>təd x<sup>w</sup>iʔ ləʒabšid ʒə tə dzix<sup>w</sup> ʒaciʔtalbiḡ<sup>w</sup>,  
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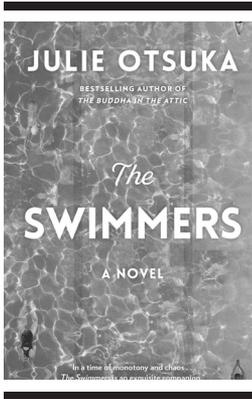
The Seattle Public Library is on Indigenous land. These are the traditional unceded territories of the Coast Salish people, specifically the Duwamish people.



# About the Book

## *The Swimmers*

by Julie Otsuka (Anchor Books)



From the best-selling, award-winning author of *The Buddha in the Attic* and *When the Emperor Was Divine* comes a novel about what happens to a group of obsessed recreational swimmers when a crack appears at the bottom of their local pool. This searing, intimate story of mothers and daughters—and the sorrows of implacable loss—is the most commanding and unforgettable work yet from a modern master.

The swimmers are unknown to one another except through their private routines—slow lane, medium lane, fast lane—and the solace each takes in their morning or afternoon laps. But when a crack appears at the bottom of the pool, they are cast out into an unforgiving world without comfort or relief.

One of these swimmers is Alice, who is slowly losing her memory. For Alice, the pool was a final stand against the darkness of her encroaching dementia. Without the fellowship of other swimmers and the routine of her daily laps she is plunged into dislocation and chaos, swept into memories of her childhood and the Japanese American incarceration camp in which she spent the war. Alice's estranged daughter, reentering her mother's life too late, witnesses her stark and devastating decline.



# About Julie Otsuka:



Julie Otsuka was born and raised in California. She is a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, and her first novel, ***When the Emperor Was Divine***, won the 2003 Asian American Literary Award and the 2003 American Library Association Alex Award. Her second novel, ***The Buddha in the Attic***, was a finalist for the National Book Award 2011 and won the 2012 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and the 2011 Langum Prize in American Historical Fiction.

***The Buddha in the Attic*** was an international bestseller and the winner of the prestigious Prix Femina étranger 2012, and the Albatros Literaturpreis 2013. She lives in New York City.

## Julie Otsuka discusses ***The Swimmers***

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**1:30 p.m. Friday, May 19**

SouthEast Seattle Senior Center / 4655 S. Holly St.

**7 p.m. Friday, May 19**

Central Library, Microsoft Auditorium / 1000 4th Ave

**11 a.m. Saturday, May 20**

Lake City Branch / 12501 28th Ave. N.E.

**3 p.m. Saturday, May 20**

Greenwood Senior Center / 525 N 85th St

Registration is requested. More information at [www.spl.org/seattlereads](http://www.spl.org/seattlereads)



# Community Events & Programs

## Seattle Reads Gallery Tour & Talk

4:30 - 6 p.m. Thursday, May 4

Frye Art Museum / 704 Terry Avenue

Free, Registration required at [spl.org/calendar](https://spl.org/calendar)

Join a facilitated gallery tour of the aquatic works in *Flying Woman: The Painting of Katherine Bradford* at the Frye Art Museum, then take a short walk next door to The Memory Hub and participate in a moderated book discussion of *The Swimmers*, by Julie Otsuka. Free program with snacks and drinks provided.

Presented by the Frye Art Museum Creative Aging Programs; The Memory Hub, UW Memory and Brain Wellness Center; and The Seattle Public Library.

## Flying Woman: The Paintings of Katherine Bradford

11 - 5 p.m. Wednesday through Sundays

Frye Art Museum / 704 Terry Avenue

Admission is always free

The first museum survey of the East Coast painter known for her vibrant palette, eccentric compositions, and personal, unpredictable approach to figurative painting. Drawn to aquatic themes, Bradford likens water to the act of painting—both are immersive and wild, yet malleable. The artist, now eighty-one, is at a pivotal moment in her career, creating some of her most thought-provoking paintings. On view through May 14.

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### About the Frye Art Museum Creative Aging Programs

The Frye Art Museum Creative Aging Programs offer adults the opportunity to deepen their life experiences and make connections with others through art. Programs include gallery discussion tours and art-making classes for adults living with dementia and their care partners, as well as conferences, workshops, and public events on creativity, dementia, and healthy aging.

Learn more at: <https://fryemuseum.org/creative-aging>



### About The Memory Hub, UW Memory and Brain Wellness Center

Bringing together people, programs and partners, the Memory Hub operates as a vibrant dementia-specific community center, collaborative workspace and training center. Spearheaded by the UW Memory and Brain Wellness Center (MBWC), and located on the campus of founding partner the Frye Art Museum, the Memory Hub welcomes visitors year-round to explore what it means to live well with dementia.

Learn more at: <https://thememoryhub.org/>



# Suggested Discussion Questions

1. **The Swimmers** is told in several distinct sections, and shifts narrative perspectives. Do the shifting perspectives change how you feel about the characters? Why or why not? How do they contribute to the story in a larger sense?
2. The first section of the book explores the community at a neighborhood swimming pool. Talk a little bit about the “above ground” and “underground” worlds in the book. What does each world offer?
3. When a crack appears in the pool, the community responds in different ways: Some swimmers are spooked and leave, some minimize its importance, some swimmers feel an “insistent downward tug,” and some feel that it’s a “symptom of some deep-rooted systemic decay” (pg. 37). Why do you think the crack matters? What does it represent to this community?
4. We learn more about Alice in the “Diem Perdidi” section. Talk a little bit about Alice’s memories: Do you see any patterns to what is remembered and what is lost? What are some of Alice’s memories that resonated with you?
5. How does memory act in the book: for Alice, for her daughter, for the swimmers?
6. Were there any parts of the book that you found funny? What were these? What role do you think humor plays in the book?
7. **The Swimmers** is a window into a mother-daughter relationship. What are some of the factors that make this relationship challenging? Rewarding? Does this reflect your experience with a parent?
8. The text has an incantatory feeling. Did you listen to the book on audio or find yourself reading sections aloud? Did it change how you engaged with the book?
9. What is the author referring to when she writes about the “First frenzy of forgetting,” (pg. 175) and how does that relate to what Alice is going through? Why does the author talk about it in this way, at this point in the book?
10. When the pool is closed (pg. 65) some swimmers feel, “Strangely relieved. The terrible thing we have been waiting for has finally happened.” How do you think this sentiment relates to the different sections of the book?

# Suggested Reading from Librarians at The Seattle Public Library

## Fiction

Akin to gazing into water, the experience of reading Otsuka's fluid and multifaceted novel fluctuates between flashes of droll wit and smooth lyricism with strong emotional undercurrents. The novels that follow complement these varying moods as they explore the persistence and fragility of memory and relationship, and the illusory nature of identity.

***The Fifth Woman* by Nona Caspers** - In spare and often dreamlike prose, the narrator processes her grief over the sudden loss of her lover, musing on memories as they fade and flash back into life. In a manner reminiscent of Otsuka's prose, we peer through a calm reflective surface into hidden depths.

***Then We Came to the End* by Joshua Ferris** - In a feat of irreverent first person plural narration akin to the first movement of ***The Swimmers***, we follow the ruminations of a confused and conflicted hive mind of hapless office workers amidst the final throes of their doomed company. Poignant and startlingly funny.

***Goodbye Vitamin* by Rachel Khong** - Her own life stalled at 30 after her fiancé walks out on her, Ruth quits her job and moves back home to help care for her increasingly irrational father, discovering his checkered past even as he tosses it aside on a one way journey to oblivion. Khong records this loss with candor and disarming humor.

***Dislocations* by Sylvia Molloy, Jennifer Croft, trans.** - The unsettling and moving English language debut of Argentine author and critic Molloy consists of fragmentary impressions and vignettes in which the author witnesses the gradual disappearance of her friend of 45 years, their relationship lost piece by piece along with her memories.

***The Lido* by Libby Paige** - A socially awkward young journalist finds herself joining forces with octogenarian Rosemary to rally the various swimmers of London's Brixton neighborhood, hoping to save their beloved community pool from gentrification. A nostalgic, feel-good novel about life in the lap lanes.



# Suggested Reading from Librarians at The Seattle Public Library

## Nonfiction

In *The Swimmers*, Julie Otsuka evokes a complex web of relationships, obligations, and lived experience. Dig deeper into the themes of the novel with this list of nonfiction titles that examine dementia and caregiving; the role of community spaces; Japanese incarceration during World War II; swimming; and mother-child relationships.

***Travelers to Unimaginable Lands: Dementia and the Hidden Workings of the Mind* by Dasha Kiper** - Clinical psychologist and caregiver Kiper draws on research and case histories to examine the relationships between caregivers and people with dementia, and how the differences in brain function can lead to frustration for both. An unflinching look at dementia and caregiving that also offers a measure of solace.

***Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life* by Eric Klinenberg** - Klinenberg examines the varied public and community spaces that help knit together civic life, delving into the important roles played by public pools and community centers, libraries, parks, and more in weaving social connections that foster connection and help mitigate a variety of societal ills.

***Nisei Daughter* by Monica Itoi Sone** - In this affecting memoir Sone describes growing up in Seattle in the 1930s and her family's forced relocation and incarceration in a Japanese-American internment camp during World War II, as well as her life immediately after the war.

***Why We Swim* by Bonnie Tsui** - Tsui takes readers inside the human relationship to water and swimming, reaching back into human history, evolution and mythology in an examination of how and why we swim for survival, well-being, community, competition, and "flow."

***What My Mother and I Don't Talk About* edited by Michele Filgate** - Fifteen writers explore a range of complicated mother-child relationships in this collection of essays.



# Suggested Reading from Our Community Partners

*The Swimmers* explores the nuances of memory and its loss, and Alice's memories touch on her experiences at "camp" during the war. Our partners at Greenwood Senior Center suggest a list of titles about memory loss and dementia while our partners at Densho recommend a list of books that examine the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II.

***We Hereby Refuse: Japanese American Resistance to Wartime Incarceration* by Frank Abe and Tamiko Nimura, Ross Ishikawa and Matt Sasaki** - An illustrated biography that shares the true stories of three Japanese American resisters to incarceration by the U.S. government during World War II.

***Clark and Division* by Naomi Hirahara** - A mystery set in 1944 Chicago that highlights the struggles of one Japanese American family after their release from mass incarceration at Manzanar during World War II.

***Concentration Camps on the Home Front: Japanese Americans in the House of Jim Crow* by John Howard** - A history of two concentration camps in Arkansas where nearly 20,000 Japanese Americans were incarcerated during World War II.

***Citizen 13660* by Miné Okubo** - A graphic memoir about her life in relocation centers in California and Utah after being forced into "protective custody" following Pearl Harbor.

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## About Densho

Densho is a public history non-profit that documents the Japanese American experience before, during, and after World War II incarceration. They view Japanese American history within a longer trajectory of American racism and xenophobia, and use their order to speak out against injustices both past and present. Founded in 1996, they are trailblazers in the use of open access digital technology to preserve and share historical materials. Their digital archives, comprehensive encyclopedia and educational resources for learners of all ages are all freely available on their website [www.densho.org](http://www.densho.org)



D E N S H Ō



# Suggested Reading from Our Community Partners

***Everything Left to Remember: My Mother, Our Memories, and a Journey Through the Rocky Mountains* by Steph Jagger** - Jagger and her mother embark on a road trip through national parks, revisiting the memories, and the mountains, that made them who they are.

***My Two Elaines: Learning, Coping, and Surviving as an Alzheimer's Caregiver* by Martin J. Schreiber** - This personal story shares both the experiences of Martin's wife as her disease progresses, as well as his struggles in caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's.

***Loving Someone Who Has Dementia: How to Find Hope While Coping With Stress and Grief* by Pauline Boss** - A practical guide that includes research-based advice on how to manage on-going stress and grief for people who care for someone with dementia.

***What I Wish People Knew About Dementia (From Someone Who Knows)* by Wendy Mitchell** - Mitchell's diagnosis didn't represent the end of her life, but instead, the start of a very different one. Her book combines anecdotes, research and her own brilliant wit and wisdom.

***Like Falling Through a Cloud* by Eugenia Zukerman** - Zukerman's poetry and prose usher the reader into her world as she unflinchingly examines familial loyalties, moments from her past and present and the need to face an uncertain future due to her diagnosis.

***I'm Still Here: A New Philosophy of Alzheimer's Care* by John Zeisel**  
A guidebook that shows the possibility and benefits of connecting with an Alzheimer's patient through their abilities that don't diminish with time, such as understanding music, art, facial expressions and touch.



## **About the Phinney Neighborhood Association's Greenwood Senior Center**

The Phinney Neighborhood Association's Greenwood Senior Center is an inclusive community that provides social, physical and educational activities focused around the needs of older adults. They work to fight isolation, build camaraderie and enrich each other's lives.

Learn more on their website: [www.phinneycenter.org/gsc/](http://www.phinneycenter.org/gsc/)





## Seattle Reads Through the Years

- 2023:** *The Swimmers* by Julie Otsuka (Anchor Books, 2023)  
**2022:** *The House of Broken Angels* by Luis Alberto Urrea (Back Bay Books, 2019)  
**2021:** *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett (Riverhead, 2020)  
**2020:** *There There* by Tommy Orange (Vintage, 2019)  
**2019:** *The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui (Abrams Books, 2017)  
**2018:** *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi (Vintage Books, 2017)  
**2017:** *The Turner House* by Angela Flournoy (Mariner Books, 2016)  
**2016:** *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* by Karen Joy Fowler (Plume Books, 2013)  
**2015:** *The Painter* by Peter Heller (Vintage Books, 2015)  
**2014:** *For All of Us, One Today: An Inaugural Poet's Journey* by Richard Blanco (Beacon Press, 2013)  
**2013:** *Stories for Boys* by Gregory Martin (Hawthorne Books, 2012)  
**2012:** *The Submission* by Amy Waldman (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011)  
**2011:** *Little Bee* by Chris Cleave (Simon and Schuster, 2009)  
**2010:** *Secret Son* by Laila Lalami (Algonquin Books, 2009)  
**2009:** *My Jim* by Nancy Rawles (Three Rivers Press, 2005)  
**2008:** *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* by Dinaw Mengestu (Riverhead Books, 2007)  
**2007:** *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri (Mariner Books, 2003)  
**2006:** *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (Pantheon Books, 2003)  
**2005:** *When the Emperor Was Divine* by Julie Otsuka (Anchor Books, 2002)  
**2004:** *Seattle Reads* Isabel Allende  
**2003:** *A Gesture Life* by Chang-rae Lee (Riverhead Books, 1999)  
**2002:** *Wild Life* by Molly Gloss (Mariner Books, 2001)  
**2001:** *Fooling with Words: A Celebration of Poets and Their Craft* by Bill Moyers (Morrow, 1999)  
**1999:** *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest Gaines (Vintage Books, 1994)  
**1998:** *The Sweet Hereafter* by Russell Banks (HarperCollins, 1991)

Seattle Reads is a city-wide book group, where people are encouraged to read and discuss the same book. It's designed to deepen engagement in literature through reading and discussion. Everyone is invited to participate in Seattle Reads by reading the featured book, joining in a book discussion, and/or attending programs with the featured writer. Seattle Reads *The Swimmers* is presented in partnership with Densho; Frye Art Museum, Creative Aging Programs; The Memory Hub, UW Memory and Brain Wellness Center; Phinney Neighborhood Association's Greenwood Senior Center. It is made possible by The Seattle Public Library Foundation and The Wallace Foundation, with additional support from media sponsor The Seattle Times, Anchor Books.

Contributors to this guide include Stesha Brandon, Andrea Gough, Danny Ramirez, Misha Stone, Annie Vasquez and David Wright. Thanks to our community liaisons and program advisors: Karen Maeda Allman, Emily Billow, Marigrace Becker, Mary Jane Knecht, Carin Mack and Natasha Varner.