

BENEATH THE SURFACE

The Memory Pool is a collection of Australian stories that dives deep into childhoods spent by the water.

TRANSFORMED. THAT IS how Therese Spruhan describes herself after swimming. “If I’m feeling a bit scratchy or anxious, I know I have to go to the pool. Then I come home transformed.”

Transformations big and small feature prominently in *The Memory Pool*, Spruhan’s first book, an anthology of “pool stories” by 28 Australians both famous and not-so-famous.

While beaches and surf may loom large in the imagination, Spruhan – a journalist based in Sydney’s inner-west – is more interested in examining the oft-taken-for-granted institution of the pool. “Everyone has a pool story,” she says.

After hearing singer Paul Kelly speak about his early experiences swimming at Norwood Pool, she began to pay closer attention to how people from all backgrounds spoke about pools, starting with the regulars at her swimming club – “The ex-bus-driver who was a refugee from Vietnam in the early 80s, the writer, the older guy who makes harpsichords and harps. I kept collecting pool anecdotes, and then I decided to focus on childhood memories because that’s when we have our most intense experiences.”

In this anthology, Spruhan expertly crafts a narrative, while retaining the distinctive voice of each contributor.

Comedian Merrick Watts picks fights with his brother at South Broken Hill’s Alma Olympic Pool against a backdrop of drought. Olympic champion Shane Gould develops an awareness of her physical prowess in a small pool in Pymble. Writer and anthropologist Tess Lea describes the devastation to her beloved Parap Pool in Darwin after Cyclone Tracy. Yusra Metwally, a policy advisor and founder of Swim Sisters, experiences a feeling “like being born again” swimming under the arch of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

“The stories couldn’t just be about someone who went to the pool. They had to [have] a relationship with the pool,” Spruhan explains. “It’s the human aspect. There’s so much more going on than just swimming laps. When my editor read the book, she said: ‘There’s a lot of love in these stories.’”

This is unsurprising considering Spruhan’s lifelong passion for swimming. She describes pools as being a constant in her life. Her blog *Swimming Pool Stories* is an affectionate exploration of Australia’s swimming places and their legacies. Her work also appeared in *The Pool*,

a bit of a luxury.” The storytellers in *The Memory Pool* reflect on their childhoods with similar tones of longing, for burning summer days where they danced over asphalt, dived bombs from starting blocks, sought out the smell of hot chips from canteens.

“You don’t have to be a swimmer or a ‘pool person’ to enjoy them,” Spruhan says of the tales in the book. “I’m interested in how the setting of the pools tells stories about people and about place and about Australia. Every pool has its own personality, depending on where it is, its design, who goes there...”

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Australia’s exhibition at the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale. From historical baths to hidden rock pools, Spruhan immerses herself in these spaces. When she speaks of them, it is as though she is speaking of old friends. Her formative first “meeting” with Sydney’s Northbridge Baths inspired her fascination with water. In those saltwater tidal baths, she discovered a love for the “physicality of swimming and the freedom of being in water”.

In *The Memory Pool*, bodies of water – whether chlorinated lap pools, tidal baths or ocean pools – come to stand for pivotal experiences in quintessentially Australian childhoods. It’s impossible to overlook the sense of nostalgia that permeates these stories. Learning to swim is a rite of passage for many Australians, and the promotion from kiddie pool to deep end a badge of honour. She fondly recalls knocking on a neighbour’s door as a child to ask for a swim – “Back then, having a pool was

Spruhan’s pools are also places for inclusion, vibrant hubs for social life. Mick Thomas, lead singer of Weddings Parties Anything, describes the pool as a democratic place, where the Geelong community banded together to restore the Eastern Beach Swimming Enclosure. Leah Purcell, award-winning actor, writer and director, describes her local pool as a uniquely safe place in the midst of racism in 1970s and 80s south-west Queensland.

The stories described in *The Memory Pool* expand outward like ripples; pools are not just containers of water but places of daring, fantasy and freedom.

In a poignant recollection of community and inclusion at Bankstown Baths, actor Bryan Brown summarises much of what is striking in all these stories. The pool is a “place of enormous life”.

by **Dasha Maiorova** (@DashMaiorova)
» *The Memory Pool is out now.*