

By Tracey Edstein



# Different strokes

Swimming exerted such a strong pull on Therese Spruhan she felt compelled to document others' memories of swimming in her book *The Memory Pool*.

**W**here did you learn to swim? It may not be a question you're often asked, but it's way more democratic than 'Where do you live?', 'Where do you work?' or even, 'Where did you go to school?' Try it at your next social gathering.

Therese Spruhan can answer that question easily, not only for herself but for 27 other Australians whose stories feature in her anthology, *The Memory Pool*. After interviewing her subjects Therese crafted their stories in first person to preserve the individual voices.

Therese, a Sydneysider, says she 'can't imagine life without swimming'. It's been the constant in her life, surviving changing addresses, varied employment, the deaths of her parents, who introduced her to swimming, and travel all over the world. Therese has worked as a journalist and in communications at a variety of organisations, including *The Australian* newspaper, Catholic Healthcare and Sydney Catholic Schools. Her blog is called 'Swimming Pool Stories'.

## A depth of pools

You might think, 'Isn't one swimming pool much the same as another?'

‘YOU GO INTO A CHURCH AND THERE'S THAT QUIET THAT YOU DON'T GET IN THE REST OF THE WORLD. I FIND THAT AT THE POOL AT CERTAIN TIMES.’

The answer is no. In interviewing her subjects, Therese uncovered stories of ocean pools, backyard pools, town pools and some literally carved out of the earth by would-be swimmers.

Therese learned to swim at her mother's hands, at Northbridge Baths. 'Mum joins us in the water, holding my hands and leading me along, encouraging me to blow bubbles and kick.' Formal lessons follow and at 7, Therese is awarded a 'certificate signed by H Wyndham, the Director-General of the NSW Department of Education, for swimming 30 yards.' Do you have one of those?

When Therese and her two siblings join the Northbridge Amateur Swimming Club, swimming becomes more than just summer recreation.

She finds she's quite competitive and remains part of the club long after many of her peers have moved on. 'I loved it. I loved the physicality of swimming. I liked competing. I liked being in the water. And last time, I went back to the baths it was high tide and really clear. I thought, I never want to get out. It just reminded me of being a kid.'

Therese and her brother and sister were obsessed with having a pool at home. 'Mum used to get *House and Garden* magazine and occasionally she'd get *The Women's Weekly*. We all loved the magazines for the pool pictures! Just look at this one or that one...! We never did get a pool.'

## Pools as refuges

For a number of Therese's subjects in *The Memory Pool*, the pool was a refuge – from conflict at home, from poverty and in places such as the Northern Territory and Queensland, from relentless heat. Leah Purcell tells a story of mowing her mother's lawn in order to earn 20c pool admission. When she arrives at the Murgon pool, she's 1c short. 'I said to the manager, "Mate, I just mowed the lawn to get here – can I pay that 1c later?" and he said, "Oh, go in".'