

A CONVERSATION WITH DON CALAME

author of

SWIM THE FLY

Q. Is there any backstory to your writing of this novel?

A. It started out as a short piece (a page-and-a-half scrawl, really) that I wrote in a workshop around six years ago. It was the true story of how my swim coach asked me to swim the hundred-yard butterfly when I was a fifteen-year-old broomstick in a bathing suit and how I was too scared to say no. What followed was a torturous summer of dread as the swim meet approached and I knew that I was going to lose that race in a bad way—to the biggest, strongest kid on one of the other teams.

The story sat in a notebook, and I didn't think much about it until my wife mentioned that she thought it would be a great kicking-off point for a young adult novel. She had just published a young adult novel herself and felt there was a real need for material that would appeal to boys on a humorous level.

Q. So what inspired you to really sit down and turn that short piece into your first novel?

A. As I said, it was really my wife's idea. I've been a professional screenwriter for quite some time and was working on a project when she bullied me into putting that project away and start working on *Swim the Fly*. (I'm sure my wife will be getting a call from my film agent when she reads this.) When I say bullied, I mean it in the nicest sort of way. Basically, she wouldn't let it go. She had a really strong feeling about me writing this

book, and if there's one thing I've learned after being married to her for the last six years, it's to never discount her strong feelings about things. So after the thirty-eighth time my wife brought it up, I finally caved and started writing the book.

Q. Why did this story in particular need to be told?

A. I've read a lot of young adult literature, and it took me a long time to find a few truly honest male voices out there—at least, honest in how I remember things: the way my friends and I used to talk and think and act, the ridiculous (and embarrassing) situations we often found ourselves in. I wanted to get down the truth as I remember it: the awkwardness, the camaraderie, the fun, the humor, the terror of being fifteen.

Q. Do you think that *Swim the Fly* may have a crossover adult audience and why?

A. I hope so. I know that the adults (both male and female) who have read it really enjoyed it. They've told me it evokes the memory of being that age, and all of them said they were laughing out loud.

I have a friend who's a sixty-eight-year-old superior court judge; he was over at our house reading the manuscript, and when I saw him sitting on our sofa with tears of laughter rolling down his cheeks, that's when I knew I really had something.



Q. Which character did you most enjoy writing?

A. I had a great time writing and getting to know all of the characters. It was a fun book to write from start to finish. Much of the time, I'd just be sitting there writing and making myself laugh. It sounds odd, but it's true. It's the most fun I've had writing anything.

And I got just as much enjoyment writing the female characters as the male ones. A lot of times the girls in the book would surprise me by what they'd say or what they'd do, which was exciting.

Readers have their own favorite characters, though. From the feedback I've gotten so far, a lot of people seem to love Coop, who's probably the crudest of the boys and also the one who comes up with most of the schemes and plans. I guess there's this feeling of, "What is Coop going to do or say next?" Ulf (the militaristic lifesaving instructor) seems to be another favorite, mostly because of his mangled idioms.

Q. We know that you swam the butterfly when you were fifteen. Were any other parts of the story based on real-life experiences?

A. This is a loaded question—especially considering the things that go on in this novel. I guess the truth of the matter is that none of the things that happen in the book happened in real life, though I've drawn from my own life experiences to "spice the soup," so to speak.

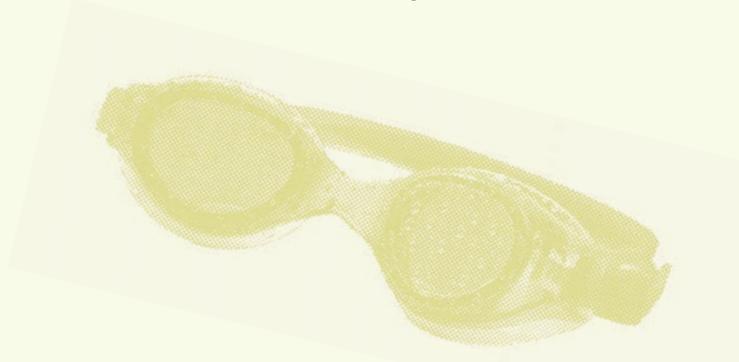
As I said, I did swim the butterfly when I was fifteen, though it wasn't my own choice and I didn't necessarily do it to impress a girl. Also, none of my swim coaches were anything like Ms. Luntz or Ulf.

Other than that, my friends and I did think and talk like this; we did play a whole lot of Ping-Pong; we did make up foul drink concoctions that we dared each other to drink; we did hear about a nude beach that we sought out; and there was a girl in sixth grade who had an affinity for Tootsie Pops.

So I guess the answer to your question is no, but also yes.

Q. What do you most want readers to take away from this novel?

A. Mostly I'd like my readers to have a good time with the characters and the story—to laugh a whole lot, to be entertained. If people have half as much fun reading it as I did writing it, then I think I've done my job. Other than that, maybe if readers can see themselves or their friends in these characters—to see their vulnerabilities. If they can say, "Yeah, that's how it really is," then that would make me feel good too.



SWIM THE FLY

On sale April 2009 • ISBN: 978-0-7636-41573

Hardcover \$16.99 (\$19.00 CAN)

5¼ x 7¾ • 352 pages • Age 14 and up

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