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READING GUIDE:

Faye Guenther's *Swimmers in Winter*

Dear reader,

Welcome to *Swimmers in Winter*. As I write this reading guide, we're living in the middle of a global pandemic. The present and the future seem so uncertain. I hope you're finding forms of consolation. I've been searching for consolation too. This search is also a current running through these stories. What forms of consolation do the characters search for? Why and how do they search for consolation?

There are six stories in this collection, in three sets of diptychs. How are the stories connected? You might want to think of these connections as hinges—movable joints linking two objects together. What story do they offer when you read them side by side, or alone? Looking through a wider lens, what themes drive this trifecta of diptychs?

The most interesting kinds of characters to me are brought to life through a careful blend of individuality and humanity, giving them a presence that lingers long after their stories end. These are the kinds of characters I look for when I read fiction or watch film or theatre or television, and these are the characters I aim to write. You could read this book as a collection of character studies that use action and its resulting tension as the primary force for revelation. I was interested in writing stories with main characters who are queer women, and who are represented with full humanity. This interest was a creative impulse for me rather than a plan or a decision. I'll give you one example:

The same year I read *The Things They Carried* (1990) by Tim O'Brien for the first time, I also watched the documentary *Hell and Back Again* (2011), directed by Danfung Dennis. Both O'Brien's interrelated short stories and Dennis' documentary present the experiences of American soldiers fighting (in the war in Vietnam or the war in Afghanistan), and then returning home to civilian life. The struggles and the conditions portrayed in these two works made a strong impression, and I wanted to explore them as a writer. I started to imagine my main character, Carmen. As she came to me, I realized her story was wide-open space to explore, because even though there are many modern and contemporary stories featuring soldiers as the main characters, very few are women or queer.

As you read, consider how you perceive and understand the characters in *Swimmers in Winter*. Can you relate to them? Are they familiar or unfamiliar? How do they surprise or confound you? What (or who) do they remind you of?

I spent about ten years with these characters, so I got to know them well. Now that the book is done, I've had to let the characters go. I miss them, but I'm so glad you have the chance to meet them now.

Take good care, dear reader. Till next time,
Faye Guenther

