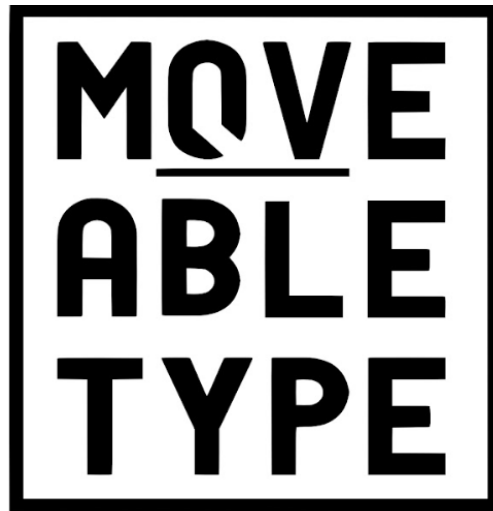




Memoir: Sea Swimming
Author: Fiona O'Malley

Source: *Moveable Type*, Vol. 16, 'Promise'(2025-26)
DOI: 10.14324/111.444.1755-4527.2301

Moveable Type is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

© 2026 Fiona O'Malley. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



Sea Swimming

FIONA O'MALLEY

I've known how to swim since I was six. I knew how to doggy paddle before then, but a few days after my sixth birthday, my father announced that he would teach me, 'how to swim properly'. He brought me to our local pool, fitted my armbands, took me to the deep end, told me to pinch my nose and chucked me in.

The initial immersion was a sensory overload— an amalgamation of feeling heavy yet weightless, my feet kicking out in short, staccato beats. The water enveloped my body, disrupting any concept of gravity, suspending the usual restrictions of the body's weight. My feet lost contact with the ground, and I was in a strange dance, a slow-motion freefall, staying in the same spot. The environment of floating, bobbing and thrashing was simultaneously exhilarating and unnerving.

It was the first time I was totally submerged in water, albeit for a split second, until the air in the armbands lifted my scrawny body to the surface.

As I coughed and spluttered, I heard a splash, felt a rain of chlorine water drizzle over me, and saw my father's head bobbing in the water next to me. 'I'm in the deep end!' I announced with glee, as though it was an achievement my father was unaware of.

Thinking back on this moment, I don't recall if my father laughed or rolled his eyes. Once I got over myself and the achievement of doing absolutely nothing, being propped up by armbands in the deep end, I followed by father's instructions to lie back in the water, keep my back straight and let the water carry my weight; to become acquainted with the water's temperament and might.

Initially, I struggled to coordinate my limbs and balance myself in the water, leaning forward or backward too much, creating a symphony of splashes and sporadic, flailing limbs. I imagine I must have been a source of entertainment for any onlookers, but I don't remember anyone else being in the pool. Just me and my father— in our own bubble. I felt confident with my father next to me. Confident in the promise of the process.

Over time, I learned how to conduct and control my body and paddle my way into the aquatic ballet rhythm of swimming.

My great-great uncle was a fisherman who lived on Clare Island, off the coast of Mayo. He grew up with nonsensical superstitions and practices, like fishermen not learning how to swim, and this was one my great-great uncle honoured. Unfortunately for him, the boat he was fishing in met very choppy waters (like all the waters off the coast of Mayo) and he was thrown overboard. There was a buoy on the boat, but nobody threw it to him. Nobody. They just let him drown.

When my cousin told me this story I recoiled and my face contorted in horror, imagining these men looking at him flailing in the water, gasping for breath, choking, and sinking slowly into

the white-webbed waves, his arms wheeling around wildly, his hands grabbing and grasping at the air.

‘Why did they do that?’

‘They believed if the sea wanted someone, they’d take them. It was bad luck to save them.’

‘Bad luck?’ I said incredulously, ‘*Bad luck?* Bad luck to save a man’s life?’

She raised her eyebrows and nodded.

I don’t know where this tradition of fishermen not learning to swim came from. Was it a pagan belief, or just local folklore? My great-great uncle went to mass every week and died with a crucifix around his neck. It didn’t do him much good in the end.

Although I knew how to swim from a young age, I wasn’t a strong swimmer. I certainly wouldn’t have been able to save myself from drowning if I was thrown overboard off the west coast of Ireland.

I had to improve my speed and stamina when I signed up for a triathlon. It was on my bucket list for a while, and I decided to enter. I misread the race distances. I thought the swim was 150 metres, which pushed my swimming capabilities to the limits. It was only a month before the triathlon when I realised the swim was actually 750 metres.

I wasn’t physically able to do this. I was exhausted after 150 metres. I booked swimming lessons to see what I was doing wrong, which, I learned, was almost everything.

The instructor told me I was pushing off too fast and swimming too quickly at the start, exhausting my lungs because I was focusing on my speed and not my breathing. Every time I lifted my head to take a breath, I was stopping my flow in the water. The instructor’s voice echoed across the tiled pool when she shouted at me to slow down and focus on my breathing.

‘You’ll exhaust yourself Fiona! Turn your head and breathe deep!’

I never thought as a grown adult, I’d have to learn how to breathe properly, but it was a pivotal turning point of my lessons – the art of rhythmic inhaling, aligning with when my arm cupped over my head into a new stroke, and then exhaling down into the water beneath me, creating ribbons of bubbles in the water. My instructor also told me, before I retrained myself to ‘swim breathe’ properly, that I was stopping or almost stopping every time I needed to take a deep breath, something I wasn’t even aware I was doing. When she pointed it out to me, I could see the regressive pattern of stopping or slowing down, lifting my head out of the water, taking a deep breath, and then ploughing ahead again in the water. This interrupted the flow and fluidity of my swimming. My haste was slowing me down.

I felt free in the water, pushing forward with every stroke of my arms, and breathing deeply through the side of my mouth. I felt weightless and fluid, after a while almost part of the water, my arms weaving in and out of it, pulling my torso along.

Between the laps I swam, there were moments where I involuntarily gulped water. I tried not to think of how many people had relieved themselves in the water or how many chemicals I ingested when I swallowed pool water, but it wasn’t as bad as accidentally swallowing a mouthful of sea water.

Swimming in the open water was a totally different ballgame. There are elements in sea swimming you never experience in a pool, like the invigorating smell of sea salt and seaweed; the sheer force of the waves; the freezing water which brings a unique rush of terror and adrenaline after the tingling shock makes the body numb or burn; the screaming, hushing and shushing of

the water; and the drops of water on top of the sea that take flight into the air as the wind whips them up.

Sea swimming is far more beautiful than swimming in a pool. The sea draws the eye. I watched the gurgling, frothing waves curling into themselves, like butter being scraped by a butter-knife before it's spread onto bread. The tapestry of the sea throwing itself onto the seashore is bewitching. The backlash of the water, spraying back from the force of its smash into the cliff edge, thousands of drops flung into the air. I could stare at it for hours. If I stared at a pool for hours, someone would probably call security (quite rightly).

The further you swim out, the more the sea unveils its treasures, like a mosaic, foggy at first and then gradually coming into view. A dull glint becomes a shard of glass. A protruding shadow becomes a plank of wood. The water creates a shimmer over the seafloor littered with swaying seaweed, half-shells, and the odd plastic bottle. The water is ever-changing, ever-moving and ever-moody – either triumphant or vicious in its ever-dramatic movements.

The sound of the waves brings an orchestra never experienced in a pool. The sea sounds are both a lullaby of whispers and a melody of percussion. On the coastline off the west of Ireland, it creates a constant low drumroll that crescendos and decrescendos, punctuated with the sound of screaming seagulls overhead and the cries from children racing each other on the sand. The drumroll beckoned the locals to meet every morning for a dip in the water and they came to swim in the spring, summer, autumn, and winter. One man lost the feeling in his toes because he swam in the water when it had blades of ice woven through it. A woman told me, through gritted teeth, she never misses her daily swim. Frowning, she walked into the freezing water. 'It's good for the head!' she shrieked before plunging into the waves. She emerged two seconds later, gasping and laughing. The swimmers came out of the water smiling and invigorated.

When I looked out at the wild waves in Achill, I could see Clare Island in the distance, a hazy expanse where the sea meets the sky —a small blip in the coastline, like a long, faded slug. Sometimes when the clouds descended and met the sea, you couldn't see Clare Island at all. Sometimes you couldn't see past a few hundred metres because of the veil of mist cloaking the sand, the sea, and the sky.

Sometimes when the sun shone, it danced upon the rippling waters, the light bouncing off it, like diamonds on gold, creating a mirage of serenity amidst the ever-restless waves. In these fleeting moments, when I stood against the ebbing and flowing shoreline, it was as though time stood still, as if nature held her breath in reverence. You could always feel the storms coming. You could feel it in the air. The locals would say 'it's very close' before looking out to the sea, gripping their windbreakers, and pulling their hoods down. Like the tension before an argument. Or an unspoken strain building and building. I knew the gentle swell of the waves would soon mount to water smashing against the concrete blocks along the pier. Passionate and violent. The weather was forecast to change. Like it always did.

I thought about how brave the fishermen of Clare Island must have been three generations ago, without the technology fishermen rely on today. They had no temperature detectors, no weather forecast apps, no mobile phones, and no RNLI helicopters to help them if they got into trouble. No ambulances that could reach them. No God that could save them.

When I first heard about the fishermen letting anyone who fell overboard die, not throwing them a buoy, and that the fishermen, often families of fishermen going back generations, who didn't teach their own children how to swim, I thought this was barbaric. It was utterly nonsensical. Stupid. Ridiculous. A senseless waste of life. Who on earth would decide not to teach their own child to swim, and then send them out to sea every day?

But then when I looked at the power of the waves before my eyes, I thought even the strongest swimmer I knew wouldn't survive a storm in those seas. Perhaps they knew, or assumed, their loved ones couldn't possibly live past falling into the turbulent waters and it was a kindness, albeit a warped one, letting them die. It would have ended their suffering sooner. It was a practical tradition. Wise. Thought-out and considered. It was a tradition for a reason.

* * * *

Fiona O'Malley recently completed a Master's in Creative Writing in UCD. She works as the CEO of Sonas, the largest domestic violence services provider in Ireland. She worked previously for publications including *The Observer*, *The Sunday Times*, *VOGUE*, and *The Irish Times*. She is a qualified barrister and holds a Master's in International Human Rights. She is currently pursuing a PhD in law on the regulation of online misinformation. In her spare time, she enjoys hiking, Pilates, and reading murder mysteries.