



The Sea of Light

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The Sea of Light is a wise, beautiful, and very American story of three women and their desire to excel and win - and heal one another - in the highly charged world of athletic competition. Angelita is the hurricane that brings down a plane carrying a team of star-quality swimmers, groomed from childhood to compete at the international level. Babe Delgado is a young Cuban-American woman, presumed dead, who is rescued from the crash. Fifty-one hours in the Atlantic have left her scarred in body and spirit, afraid to compete again. Brenna Allen is a tough, driven swim coach at a small university, grieving for a lover lost to cancer. She finds solace in building her own winning team, driving her overworked captain, Ellie Marks, ever harder. Ellie is a child of holocaust survivors, struggling to own herself and her sexuality as hard as she's working to win. Brenna recruits Babe, promising to help her rebuild her damaged body, strength, and will. *The Sea of Light* is a story of wins, losses, and passions in a world where destiny and magic interfere with victory, where families are forced to reconcile with private hurts and false dreams, and where a redemptive, healing love between women - erotic and overwhelmingly intimate - stands in stark contrast to the expectations of the world. A sensitive, powerful tale of self-discovery, sexual identity, and violent emotions unleashed by sudden disaster, this novel is sure to command attention and acclaim.

The Sea of Light Details

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From Reader Review *The Sea of Light* for online ebook

HeavyReader says

Found it!

I've been thinking about this book and *Water Dancer*, also by Jenifer Levin, but I couldn't remember the titles of these books, or the name of their author. Finally, with a little bit of trial and error internet searching, I found them. Yippee! That's two more books in my life that have been successfully accounted for.

Amy Laura recommended this book and *Water Dancer* to me. In fact, she loaned me her copies to read. She was a big fan. I liked these books too, and have obviously remembered them all these years. If I remember correctly, I liked this one better than I liked *Water Dancer*.

I especially liked the character whose parents were Holocaust survivors. She was a lesbian but feared telling her folks that she was a lesbian. I can't remember if she told them eventually or not.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

This novel is 20 years old, about collegiate swimming and recovering from trauma, professional women coming out in an era where this was very difficult. The writing is beautiful and the story is told in short chapters from many different characters' perspectives so I read it very quickly. I understand it to be a classic in lesbian literature, and I can see why! It would have been even better to read during the summer olympics.

Bill says

I really loved the first two-thirds of *The Sea of Light*; Levin's writing is beautiful and lyrical, the characterizations are sharp, and the plot is deftly woven through the voices of the characters. The story is told through the perspectives of several characters in the form of interior monologues. Each character's voice is distinct from the other characters and presents a separate, cohesive view on the events in the book. Levin's description of what it is like to get the rhythm of "wave" breaststroke is amazing, and her choice to have a character swim a great practice immediately before breaking down gives more insight into the psychology of elite swimmers than would the obvious choice of having that swimmer struggle during the same practice.

The book itself breaks down in the last hundred pages. Where the first two-thirds of the story are elegant and subtle, the last portion is like a cudgel and Levin starts throwing in plot elements that are not necessary. The worst of these, and the one that broke the novel for me, concerns the reveal of a traumatic event in the protagonist's life.

The Sea of Light is bookended by the tragedy of a plane carrying a Division I championship swim team in the Atlantic Ocean, killing all but two of the team. One, Babe, is the main protagonist, and her struggles to put herself back together in the aftermath of the crash make up a lot of the book. We see her struggle and take her trauma at face value; she was floating alone in the ocean for a couple of days before she was rescued and this alone would be basis enough for her difficulties. Later, we find that Babe had a complicated

relationship with two other swimmers, and this might color her ability to recover. This is all fine; these events give us insight to Babe and we can see at times how she is barely holding it together.

But then, right about a hundred pages from the end, we find that there was another horrific trauma that happened to Babe shortly before the plane crash. (view spoiler) I found this second tragedy didn't add anything to Babe's character and that the two tragedies-the plane wreck and this other-trivialized one another. The storm that caused the crash, Angelita, is always a background presence up to this point, it is a force that stands between Babe and all other characters. It is something that the other characters are aware of, and some of the tenderest moments of the earlier part of the book seem to have this implicit understanding as background. The second tragedy causes the reader to second guess these moments and is itself not developed in as rich a way as was Angelita.

It's as if Levin was not comfortable with her writing and at some point felt like she had to throw in an event that could be considered undeniably traumatic in case readers had remained unconvinced that a plane wreck and floating around without food and water would be believable sources of self-torture for Babe.

The other problems I had with the end of the book I could forgive, and actually think one of them might have been due to details earlier in the book that I had overlooked. I'll read this again some day because portions of the book are great, but I'll know what to expect at the end.

Kate Christie says

This is one of my favorite books of all time--beautifully written, complex characters, lesbians, and sports = a winner in my house. I re-read it every so often, and for me, this book has stood the test of time.

Lisa says

This was a very challenging book for me to start. Some of the writing seemed very fragmented, but once I got into the flow of Jenifers writing style I was absorbed into this emotional rollercoaster of the many lives it follows. Being able to read the story from many points of view gave the book a depth and intensity that is rare. The individual story tellers share their journey of humanity, endurance, fortitude, loss, passion, and hope. This is a book worth reading.

Chris says

I re-read this book almost once a year. As I've grown older, my insight into the main characters has shifted. It's like meeting with old friends but learning something you didn't know about before. It is a well written book and ultimately one of my top books. It is currently out of print, I had to hunt down my own used copy.

M.E. Logan says

Interesting read into the world of competitive swimming

Bonnie says

I look forward to reading this book again. That good.

Kristen says

Hands down, one of the most powerful books I've read.

Levin has crafted a beautiful story of love, loss, and redemption set against the backdrop of collegiate swimming. Her prose is amazing, and each chapter will leave you wanting more. I am sad that this book has gone out of print.... that makes it hard to recommend to people, because in some places it can be hard to find.

Lisabet Sarai says

A lot of book blurbs show up in my inbox. I'm on the e-mailing lists for my own publishers, plus all the publishers from whom I've purchased books in the past. I skim most of the notices I receive; rarely do I take any action. When Untreed Reads sent me the blurb for Jennifer Levin's *The Sea of Light*, however, something moved me to contact the publisher and request a review copy, which they were kind enough to provide.

Only later did I learn that the novel, originally published in 1993, is considered a classic of modern lesbian fiction. It deserves the acclaim it has received. *The Sea of Light* is the eloquent, painful and ultimately transcendent story of three exceptional women – their ambitions, their secrets, their weaknesses and their passions.

Babe Delgado has been groomed from childhood to be a champion swimmer. As she reaches her peak in her late teens, the Olympics beckon. Then a hurricane named Angelita dashes her team's plane into the Atlantic, killing the men and women closest to her. Two days adrift in the pitiless sea leave her hovering on the edge of death herself, irrevocably scarred both physically and psychologically.

Brenna Allen wanted to be a champion, but her body betrayed those dreams. Now she coaches the swim team of a small Massachusetts university, tough, driven, channeling the near-vicious intensity of her own former coach. Mourning the loss of her English-professor lover Kay to cancer, Brenna pours every ounce of her emotional energy into transforming what she knows is second-rate material into a winning team. She is perceptive, intelligent and exercises fanatical self-discipline. As she manipulates parents, colleagues and her own swimmers in the quest of victory, she tries to ignore, deny or hide her own needs.

Ellie Marks, captain of Brenna's team, knows she'll never be more than an average athlete, but that doesn't stop her from dedicating herself to serving the coach she loves and admires. The child of Holocaust survivors,

Ellie knows more than a twenty year old should about suffering and loneliness. She recognizes that her desire for Brenna will never be consummated, and yearns for someone who will love and accept for who she is – a woman who loves other women.

A year or more after Angelita, Brenna manages to recruit the still-fragile and damaged Babe to join her team. Under Brenna's careful tutelage, the former winner begins to heal and her performance begins to approach her former capabilities. It is more difficult, though, to rebuild her shattered spirit. Gradually her friendship with Ellie helps Babe overcome her survivor's guilt and her self-disgust. Ellie, however, needs more than a friend.

Narrated mostly in the first person present, by these three women as well as several ancillary characters, *The Sea of Light* is a terrifyingly intimate book. Babe, Brenna and Ellie each conceal far more of themselves than they reveal to the outside world, but the reader gets a glimpse into their souls, and that's not always a comfortable place to be. For these women, honest communication presents a nearly insurmountable challenge, even when they are in the company of people they love. Every character – even the minor ones – experiences a level of isolation so painful that I was tempted to put the book aside for something less taxing. However, Ms. Levin's insight into the subtleties of emotional experience kept me reading. And the ultimate connections between the characters, imperfect though they are, have a luminous joy that balances the pain.

I would not label *The Sea of Light* as erotica, but sex and sexuality are recurring themes. The author vividly describes the experience of being queer in a straight world. Brenna, in particular, fears being “outed”, but even Ellie, more accepting of her own sexual orientation, feels confused and alienated. In one of my favorite passages, Brenna describes her experience visiting San Francisco with her lover and discovering an environment where lesbians and gay men are so common that they're completely unremarkable.

I kicked around the city feeling lazy, sated, drowsy, like a well-fed animal. It was there – near that hilly nexus of streets in the Castro, as I wandered in and out of shops smiling at people, at women and at men who were all naturally, casually, unquestionably gay – where I felt there was this dark cold thread inside me that might be broken, that could be changed to something resembling the nature of light. If only I could stay there somehow, in that city – with Kay, with my very own love – and wake up every morning to know how intrinsically, undeniably mine the city was, how at the core of it stood this still-unfulfilled offering of ecstasy and freedom, a self-contained world where straight people mattered not at all. I could feel the bright sure power of that. Beyond the power, very close, lurked dignity; and beyond that, I knew, there was peace.

The sexual encounters in *The Sea of Light* are as intricate and nuanced as the rest of the book. As Babe and Ellie discover one another, Brenna is drawn back into the orbit of her old friend Chick, the woman who introduced her to Kay. This is Chick's voice in the next passage, describing their inevitable but emotionally tangled physical encounter.

Some things we remember in detail; others, in metaphor. Maybe that's why, later, it will come back to me as a blur: the long, long time that the kiss went on, became not a kiss anymore but an exploration of skin; the beginning of how we touched hair, lips, cheeks, breasts and thighs through cloth; the moment she started to take off my clothes, there on the floor in front of cold pizza and a snorting dog, and I let her do all the work – sensing somehow that seizing the

physical initiative was what she needed. There had been something vaguely frightening and unfamiliar about my saying where and when. Her power to control and to please linked inextricably to her passion; and if I wanted her passion, and mine, I would have to give up a measure of my own control – not something I ever did lightly. But I realized, through a cloud of anxiety and desire, that control was a much-overrated thing I could do without. And, anyway, we must all give it up in the end.

These two passages I've just quoted will give you a feel for the flavor of Ms. Levin's prose – complex, expressive, ideas tumbling over one another, moods and thoughts flitting by instant to instant – all this internal churning, separate from the outside world. Indeed, this is a very internal book. Aside from the disaster of Angelita that sets the tale on its tracks, not a lot happens. The movement is all inside the characters.

Because of this, I feel that the book would actually have been stronger if Ms. Levin had restricted the narration to the three protagonists (although I would be sorry to forgo Chick's eloquent and perceptive voice above). In order to move the story forward, the author provides short chapters from the perspectives of Babe's father, Babe's mother, Babe's brother, even an elderly Afro-Cuban *bruja* who is Babe's real world aunt and true spiritual parent. These other people are important only because of the light they shine on the main characters. Allowing them the space and time to speak diluted the focus of the novel to some extent.

Overall, though, I thoroughly enjoyed *The Sea of Light*. I would not call it entertaining – enlightening, moving, or satisfying would be more appropriate descriptions. On the other hand, I find deep pleasure in prose that is beautiful and true - like the writing in this fine novel.

Kim says

American contemp....late 1990s Boston....collegiate swimmer survives plane crash, self discoveries and recoveries in new life. Told from multiple narrators.

Anna says

Good job tracking the minds of several different characters who look at the same situations from varying points of view. Intellectually engaging. For me, the saddest story was not that of the protagonists, the two swimmers, but of their coach. No spoilers but egads... Not being a sports person, I enjoyed an insider's view of a sport that didn't shut out a non-sportiv person like myself.

Tamara Covacevich says

I bought it in London, at the Gay's The Word used book section. It was a perfect read for the subway, since it is structured in chapters narrated from different characters. It was a complete surprise to me, I was expecting some light fiction and found deep characters, life lessons, realities, strong situations and true non perfect

love.

Gaijinmama says

An interesting, complex, engaging story. I'd say the major theme is survival. Most of the characters, in one way or another, are coming to terms with tragic events. Everything from a plane crash to the Holocaust, they have been through it. To paraphrase one of the protagonists, some people's lives have a Before and an After. It is pretty amazing how they manage to reconstruct their lives.

As a former swimmer (not competitive but it was a daily habit) I loved the lyrical passages about being in the water.

On another level, it's also a very sweet love story. And in spite of the dark, horrific things they have been through, there are some truly funny moments.

Marian says

This was a solid story and has really complicated and likable characters. Some of the point of view characters are better than others. Chick is a beast to read --- just heady and wordy and philosophical and annoying, actually. But I think she's supposed to be.

The romances work and then they don't and then they do again. It's a mixed bag. For being a story that is expressly about three women -- Babe, Bren and Ellie --- they seem to interact sparsely. Not just on the page, but always at distances from each other. Bridging those distances is maybe the aim of the book --- I'm not sure it succeeds. The writing can be lovely (notable exception is a gratuitous rape scene).

Solid is really the word.
