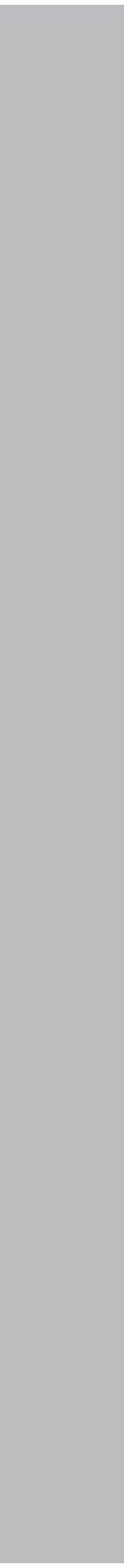


Swimming Sweet Arrow

by Maureen Gibbon

A READING GROUP GUIDE

“Here is what they never tell you about being a girl.”



A Conversation with Maureen Gibbon

An obvious component of Swimming Sweet Arrow is the explicit sexuality. What did you hope to achieve through this explicitness?

I think many women have the sexual feelings and experiences that my protagonist Vangie has, but those things aren't always discussed openly. That's part of what the sentence "Here is what they never tell you about being a girl" is about. I didn't want things to stay polite in this story, so I pushed myself to let Vangie say things that were hard to say. I wanted her to be able to speak bluntly and specifically about the things that compel her. The result is sometimes raw. Sex isn't the only thing Vangie is explicit about, though. She's also explicit in the ways she describes her jobs — carrying chickens, waiting tables, and picking pears. All of her jobs are very physical, and I hope those descriptions are no less vivid or detailed.

Your book invites the reader into the bedroom (or backseat) of the main character, and it almost demands a kind of intimacy on the part of the reader. What kinds of reactions have you gotten?

That the book is daring. That the sex is enthusiastic, and that there is a joyousness in the frankness of it all. A couple people have read it all at one sitting. All kinds of things.

Did you feel that you had crossed over some kind of line in writing so explicitly?

Sure, I often felt I crossed the line. A few places in the book are still hard for me to look at. But once I started being that direct and specific, it was hard to be anything but that. Vangie's voice became the standard.

You commented earlier on Vangie's jobs, all of which you write about very knowledgeably. Have you worked as a waitress, pear picker, or chicken carrier?

I did all those jobs as I was growing up. They all made a very strong impression on me, and I've never been able to forget them. It makes sense to me, because when you learn a job, you take in a lot of information that you need to know, and if the job involves any manual work, you take in information with your body, too. My body remembers picking pears, carrying chickens, waitressing. It also remembers the very visceral details of those workplaces. I like to write about work because I like to describe the actions and processes of it, and how the person moves through the work. There's a lot of beauty in it to me, even if it's a bad or taxing job. I've also worked as a church secretary and as a change girl in a casino, but I haven't written about those jobs yet.

Of Vangie's jobs, which was your personal favorite?

Picking pears was the hardest but the most beautiful because of the green fruit and trees. Carrying chickens was not as

bad as you'd assume it to be, in spite of the chicken shit. Waitressing produced the greatest number of nightmares and feelings of dread, but I remember that job best of all and feel some strange sort of love for its details. I still have one of my old green "Guest Check" pads.

Do you believe it enriches a writer's work to have those kinds of jobs?

Many American writers have thought that for a long time, and I respect and embrace the tradition. Yet I say that from a position of luxury, because I don't have to do those jobs now to earn a living. I don't know what would have happened to me if I hadn't gone on to college and moved into the wider world. I don't know if I would be calling those jobs enriching then.

There are tremendously deep friendships in Swimming Sweet Arrow — and tremendous betrayals. Can you talk about those themes of friendship and fidelity?

I didn't think about themes as I was writing, but you're right, there are certainly deep betrayals between different characters. The question makes me think of a poem by Marina Tsvetaeva where she writes about how sometimes, when we are being utterly faithless to others, we are being true to ourselves. I believe that. At the same time, you don't want just to go around damaging people, or acting wholly out of self-interest. That's no life either. I'd say that Vangie

has awareness of that distinction. And she knows herself, or is trying to know herself and the behavior of which she's capable.

Any plans for a second book?

Absolutely. I'm in the gathering stage right now, letting voices and images come and go. I can't say more than that. It's good to be at this place. I don't want to jinx it.

Reading Group Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. What are the forces that, in the absence of parental or other adult guidance, help Vangie determine the kind of person she wants to be? What fuels her frustration when, at the end of the novel, she tells her mother, “I don’t know whose life I want to have”?
2. None of Vangie’s jobs is very enviable, but she derives a strong sense of self and purpose from them. Why? What do Vangie’s jobs teach her about the world? About herself? Why is the most physically demanding job — picking pears — described in almost poetic terms?
3. Maureen Gibbon’s writing has been likened to that of Kate Chopin, Anaïs Nin, and Colette because of its frank exploration of female sexuality. What do Vangie and June have in common with the characters created by Chopin, Colette, and Nin? Why do you think sexually forthright women characters in fiction continue to cause such a stir?
4. At the beginning of Chapter 2, Vangie states that there is a great deal “they never tell you about being a girl.” How does this lack of information affect Vangie? Can Vangie gain the knowledge she seeks through means

other than hard experience? Do girls today confront a comparable lack of access to information?

5. When Vangie reflects on June's involvement with two brothers, she states that "none of us did anything for long unless we wanted to." What is Vangie saying here about choice? About self-knowledge? Are there other instances in the novel where Vangie seems to struggle to understand herself or her own role in an event?
6. What is the significance of Vangie's dream of the owl at the end of chapter 17? How does her experience of this dream contrast with Del's interpretation of the dream in chapter 24? Why does Vangie reject the religious devotion that seems to bring Del such comfort?
7. Del makes a valiant effort to rehabilitate himself after his overdose and seems to cleave to the principles of a twelve-step program. What undermines his efforts to change?
8. How would you characterize the relationship between Vangie and June? Why does Vangie turn away from June at the end of the book, at a moment when her friendship would have probably been particularly important to June? What does Vangie mean in chapter 25 when she says, "I could not keep letting [June] touch me"?

9. After tremendous intimacy and friendship, Del and June are still “strangers” to Vangie, “all the more strange because I loved them,” she says. What is Vangie saying here about the nature of love?
10. Although Vangie makes numerous missteps over the course of the novel, she also takes certain steps to expand her world and to increase the number of choices she has. Identify some of those steps. Is Vangie a character who is bound to be determined by her environment, or are there hints that she will go beyond the limited world of Mahanaqua?
11. The characters in *Swimming Sweet Arrow* seem to talk more easily about explicit sexual acts than about virtually anything else. While the physicality of the sex in the novel cannot be denied, how does sex also serve as a metaphor in *Swimming Sweet Arrow*?
12. What is the role of the water imagery in the novel? Besides the title, where else does it occur?
13. Why is it important to Vangie to tell this story? Why does she struggle until she can say, “There. Now it is all written down”?

Maureen Gibbon's suggestions for further reading

The Professor's House

by Willa Cather

The Awakening

by Kate Chopin

The Lover

by Marguerite Duras

The Nick Adams Stories

by Ernest Hemingway

The Diviners

by Margaret Laurence

So Long, See You Tomorrow

by William Maxwell

Lives of Girls and Women

by Alice Munro

Train Whistle Guitar

by Albert Murray

The Atlas

by William T. Vollman

Winter Wheat

by Margaret Walker

Maureen Gibbon's suggestions for viewing

Each of these films is currently available on video.

Desert Bloom

Gas, Food, Lodging

Ruby in Paradise

NOW IN PAPERBACK • GREAT FOR READING GROUPS

The Boys of My Youth

by Jo Ann Beard

“Utterly compelling . . . uncommonly beautiful. . . . Life in these pages is an astonishment. . . . *The Boys of My Youth* speaks volumes about growing up female and struggling to remain true to yourself.”
— Dan Cryer, *Newsday*

“Reading Jo Ann Beard’s prose feels as comfortable as falling into step beside an old, intimate friend. . . . She remembers (or imagines) her childhood self with an uncanny lucidity that startles.”
— Laura Miller, *New York Times Book Review*

Dale Loves Sophie to Death

by Robb Forman Dew

Winner of the National Book Award

“A novel that profoundly satisfies both the mind and the heart.”
— Robert Wilson, *Washington Post Book World*

“Like Virginia Woolf, Robb Forman Dew reaches into the flow of daily life to break open a single moment. She captures beautifully the shift and flux of feelings, friendships, perspectives, the child in the adult and adult in the child.”

— Jean Strouse, *Newsweek*



Available wherever books are sold

NOW IN PAPERBACK • GREAT FOR READING GROUPS

This Body

by Laurel Doud

“A frisky, riveting debut. . . . With Doud’s brightly visceral prose and deft sense of tragicomedy, *This Body* proves equally engrossing for the senses, soul, and mind.”

— Megan Harlan, *Entertainment Weekly*

“Lots of fun. . . . Every woman has had the fantasy of waking up in a younger, skinnier body. But what if you had to die first? And what if the body you came to one year after your death belonged to a freshly OD’d junkie?”

— Cindy Bagwell, *Dallas Morning News*

Snake

by Kate Jennings

“*Snake* can be read in a single sitting. In fact, this is the ideal way to absorb Ms. Jennings’s stunning narrative. . . . Clearly the work of a powerful imagination.”

— Carol Shields, *New York Times Book Review*

“The chapters in *Snake* are short, vivid bursts of imagery, anecdote, insight. . . . It’s hard to believe a full-blown family tragedy can be told so wholly and well in such small, deft snatches, but then rarely has a poet’s skill at compaction been put to better use in prose.”

— Michelle Huneven, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*



Available wherever books are sold

NOW IN PAPERBACK • GREAT FOR READING GROUPS

Sonny Liston Was a Friend of Mine

by Thom Jones

“True to form as one of literature’s practicing wild men of prose, Thom Jones delivers a collection that is a nutty perfection of the weird and the wasted, done to wondrous effect. . . . Jones is a brilliant risk taker whose stories reward you with their ornery, out-there energy.”
— *Elle*

“This might be Jones’s best work yet, which is saying something, since *The Pugilist at Rest* was a National Book Award finalist. . . . The stories in *Sonny Liston Was a Friend of Mine* snap and crackle like high-tension wires.”

— William Porter, *Denver Post*

The Power of the Dog

by Thomas Savage

with an afterword by Annie Proulx

“Thomas Savage is a writer of the first order, and he possesses in abundance the novelist’s highest art — the ability to illuminate and move.”
— *The New Yorker*

“*The Power of the Dog* offers so many pleasures readers will be forgiven if they do not immediately notice that it also engages the grandest themes — among them, the dynamics of family, the varieties of love, and the ethos of the American West. Put simply, *The Power of the Dog* is a masterpiece.”

— Larry Watson, author of *Montana 1948* and *Justice*



Available wherever books are sold

NOW IN PAPERBACK • GREAT FOR READING GROUPS

Make Believe
by Joanna Scott

“Wonderful. . . . There are things in *Make Believe* that take the breath away. . . . One cannot help urging anyone who loves writing to read this book.”

— Nick Hornby, *New York Times Book Review*

“There’s something particularly magical when a full-fledged grown-up author is able to tell a story as if the words were coming directly, innocently, from the mouth or mind of a child.”

— Patrick T. Reardon, *Chicago Tribune*

Evening News
by Marly Swick

“An affecting novel . . . utterly palpable and real. . . . It possesses both the psychological suspense of Sue Miller’s bestselling *The Good Mother* and the emotional acuity of Alice Munro’s short stories.”

— Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times*

“A novel that might be lifted right out of the headlines — a story of a family shattered by loss when a nine-year-old accidentally shoots his half sister. . . . A book that lingers in the mind and heart.”

— Colleen Kelly Warren, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*



Available wherever books are sold