

SAGE ISLAND

By **Samantha Warwick**

(Paperback 240 pages, Brindle and Glass, \$19.95)

Joanne Malar

Do you get excited at the possibility of something swimming related making it onto mainstream television, magazines, movies, or books? Did you wait in anticipation when Michael Phelps hosted Saturday Night Live or when Amanda Beard revealed her latest cover shoot? Did you curiously await the movie premier of *Swimfan*? Was your Canadian pride sparked with “Victor,” CBC’s rendition of Victor Davis’ life? Of course, after swimming for years, chlorine runs through our veins, and we live and breathe it. The problem is that besides the Olympics—two weeks every four years—our need for ongoing quality swimming content is unfulfilled. Outside of our own training and racing, we look for more swimming-related substance to entertain our lives, and it’s hard to find.

Enter Sage Island

Canadian writer Samantha Warwick re-creates a swimming milestone with her first book, *Sage Island*. Born in Montreal, raised in Sutton (Quebec), Vancouver, and presently residing in Calgary, her experiences span the country. Equipped with a broad swimming background, Warwick is able to stylishly execute a witty and much-needed realistic swim-based drama climaxed by the momentous open-water swimming race, the 1927 Wrigley’s Ocean Marathon. Like a first-time national qualifier who astonishingly strikes gold, Warwick’s literary skills have launched her shoulder-to-shoulder with veteran novelists while delivering a golden piece of history.



This 240-page historical fiction is based on the chilling 22-mile winter open water race from Catalina Island to Point Vicente, Los Angeles. *Sage Island* is hot off the press in bookstores across Canada, priced at \$19.95.

The story is told through the eyes of a top-ranked New York swimmer, Savanna “Savi” Mason. She desperately seeks to

escape a life-long vocation working in her family’s “bake house.” With a stubborn and raw personality, she is ready to earn her position, alongside of Johnny Weissmuller and Duke Kahanamoku, on the 1924 US Olympic team heading to Paris. A fluke technical decision sideswipes her dreams and she is forced to abandon ship, but comfortably falls into the lap of distance swimming. With the help of a sponsor, she aims to be the first woman to successfully cross the English Channel and outdo her self-proclaimed archrival, Trudy Ederle. Although her swimming ambitions are once again thwarted, she finds refuge in seeking out the \$25,000 purse of the Wrigley Ocean Marathon.

Sage Island possesses all the essentials to lure in its readers: rebellious youths (during the Prohibition era), colourful characters, young love, and a preposterous pinnacle swim marathon that she is determined to complete. (*Sage Island* contains some mature language and content so it may be best suited for older audiences.) It takes the cold January current to crack Savi’s hard shell, which ironically loosens her up to expose a new self and opportunities. *Sage Island* concludes with both a surprise and a delightful ending that is guaranteed to make waves whether in the 1920s or today!

As a swimmer, I find it difficult to put into words how I enjoyed the extensive hours and years spent immersed in water. From the thrill of competition to the demanding daily grind of training, *Sage Island* is packed with deliciously accurate descriptions of a sport we equally love and ache through.

“That feeling when you first enter the water, straight as a needle; that underwater glide, the flying, weightless sensation of being suspended—free. You soar up to the surface and hit a rhythm, strike forward into a hypnotic swimming trance. That is where I feel right.”

The race was swum in numbing Pacific waters, where the ocean temperature hovered in the mid-50s. It was an era that sported uncomfortable wool swim suits as well as modesty and conservatism, and swimmers faced many hurdles such as the monstrous sores from the wool suits chafing their skin. Nonetheless, several swimmers, including the protagonist, found a controversial yet natural solution to the limitations of the day.

“Cold is carving me out, looking for a place to rest, to sleep. Dig deep, keep on digging. As feared, the sores at my sides where my suit has been chafing are bleeding. I don’t have to see this to know that it doesn’t look good, and I begin to shrink a little from the pain with each stroke, the sting of wool against water-softened flesh—the more I think about it, the worse it seems to become.”

Warwick’s universal themes of overcoming obstacles, finding success in our actions (regardless of “winning”), and challenging our mindset

demonstrate her tasteful style.

Equally refreshing is her ability to accurately describe the mindset, thoughts, and ramblings of an exhausted swimmer’s mind. It is amazing to me how Warwick was able to capture in words what so many swimmers would not be able to describe: the loss of time, the “autopilot” experience, the exhilaration, anguish, exhaustion, and love-addiction to swimming. Warwick captures swimming with poetic justice and includes the delirious brain banter often experienced by open-water swimmers in the depth of a marathon race:

“My stomach burns for food. And I can’t pee until my limbs stop moving; the body can’t do both. Or can it? I don’t know. Too cold to stop, even for that. Skin hurts. Okay, count to sixty twenty times, that’s twenty minutes, and then you can have a rest for a moment, have chocolate. Right now—keep moving. Stroke, stroke, stroke, breathe.”

As much as there are lyrical thoughts and descriptions throughout the book, Warwick provides a balance of clever 1920s street-talk between her racy characters. I found the main characters to be genuine and intriguing. From Coach Higgins, the cliché-throwing military-style coach to Maizee, her boisterous best friend and teammate, there is no time for dull moments, yet plenty of time for troublesome distractions. In that regard, not much has changed in swimming the last 80 years. Savi recounts Coach Higgins’ attempt to straighten up the team in an era seemingly filled with new distractions:

“He had taken a good twenty minutes away from training time to rail on us before the meet, warning us against the deplorable epidemic of flapperitis that was sweeping the nation. Chief symptoms included a reduced ability to focus, profanity, back-talk, a lost sense of modesty, materialism, sneaking smokes, morbid discontentment and, above all—laziness.”

Do you have to be a swimmer to enjoy this book? Although I am biased being a swimmer, I believe any non-swimmer will be just as absorbed by *Sage Island*. Warwick does not over-describe the swimming portions, while magically allowing us to feel the power of swimming. Did you need to be a cyclist to enjoy Lance Armstrong’s *It’s Not About the Bike*? Of course not. In *Sage Island*, it’s not just about swimming either. Rather, swimming is used as a vehicle to set the stage for the authentic storyline and ultimately the life lessons to be learned.

Warwick should be commended for reviving an exceptional piece of swimming history while recognizing how Canadian George Young’s victorious role in the event prompted open water races into the limelight. I encourage all friends of swimming to support this emerging Canadian novelist who is well on her way to accomplishing all of her goals. I believe *Sage Island* will soar, whether the reader can dog-paddle or not. ■

DIVE INTO SWIMMING HISTORY with *Sage Island* author Samantha Warwick

Joanne Malar

What did you do to prepare for writing this historic fiction?

I read everything I could find about the 1927 Wrigley Ocean Marathon and swimming in the 1920s, as well as 1920s literature in general. Meanwhile I swam—both in the pool and in the ocean. I didn't know at the time that my swimming would eventually serve as "preparation for a book," but ultimately it did.

Which characters in the novel are "real" (non-fiction) people? Was it difficult to find information about them?

Gertrude Ederle (the first woman to swim the English Channel) and George Young (winner of the 1927 Wrigley Ocean Marathon) are the two most significant "real" people in the book. It was more difficult to find information about George than Trudy. I did involve other swimmers from the 20s to varying degrees if they were present at events I wanted to write about. The protagonist—Savanna "Savi" Mason—is a fictional narrator. Having a fictional narrator gave me more flexibility.

Can you tell me about the historic Canadian content/legacy in the event?

The fact that a 17-year-old Canadian amateur champion, George Young, decided to motorcycle/hitchhike from Toronto to Los Angeles to ultimately win the Wrigley Ocean Marathon is inspiring. He had no money, and nobody had really heard of him. Nobody thought he had a chance. Not only did he win it, he was the only finisher, and his record of 15 hours and 43 minutes stood for 25 years. Also important to mention, it was because of George's accomplishment in California that CNE officials and William Wrigley Jr. joined forces and marathon swims were introduced to the Canadian National Exhibition in August 1927. It would be the first professional CNE swim with a total of \$50,000 in cash prizes (in the realm of a million dollars today). Publicity surrounding the Wrigley Ocean Marathon and George Young had generated a huge increase in public interest and the 1927 CNE marathon brought in record-breaking ticket sales for the Fair. The open-water events took place at the waterfront on Lake Ontario and became known as the "Big Swims." They were international races—World's Professional Championships. Swims of varying distances continued (on and off) into the 1960s.

How far did you take your swim career?

I started too late (at least that's how I see it). I swam on my high school team, and when I was 16, I started swimming on a Masters team. Our coach at the time (Jeff Beatty) also coached for a local age-group club—the West Vancouver Otters. He encouraged me to join the club, but being 16 already, I was intimidated and/or reluctant to start so late (which is kind of ironic, because I would join the team three years later). At 19, I joined an open-water swim team called the Pacific Breakers Rough Water Swim Club and decided (rather suddenly) to start swimming seriously. I spent that summer training with the Breakers and competing in open water races including the Vancouver Open Water Swim Series and the Skaha Lake Ultra-Swim in Penticton. We went to San Francisco to swim the "Escape from Alcatraz" race. It was amazing, I loved every minute—even the very cold and uncomfortable moments—and that's when I decided to really train. So I joined the Otters where Sam Montgomery had taken over as head coach.

How else were you involved in swimming (coaching etc.)?

After a year of swimming with the Otters, I started coaching the development swimmers and taking NCCP courses. I loved it and wanted to learn everything I could about the sport. I started coaching in 1997. I coached for the Otters and the Canadian Dolphins in Vancouver, and later coached with Cascade Swim Club in Calgary.

What did you do to physically and/or mentally prepare for stepping into the mind of Savi during her distance events?

All of my swimming—both training in the pool and racing in the ocean—helped me step into Savi's head during her distance events. I don't know how I would have been able to write about her swimming experiences without having done it myself. But because Savi lived in New York, I wanted to get a sense for the city, and decided to go there with a friend while it was still early in the research stages. While I was there, I swam an open water race in the Hudson River "for research." It turned out to be one of my best races ever, and it gave me the necessary insight to write about swimming in the Hudson.

What was your personal goal of your book?

Finish it.

How long did it take you from beginning to end to write/edit/publish the book?

About five years.

Was writing a book a more difficult process than physically training for swimming?

The parallels between long-distance training and finishing a book are similar on so many levels. Both swimming and writing are solitary and submerged activities, so you have to spend a lot of time in your own head, with yourself. And while finishing a book took five years and my longest swim race took some five hours, both swimming a channel and writing a

book requires you to push through the voices that tell you all the reasons why you should just stop. Why you shouldn't be doing what you're doing, why it's not worth it. You have to overcome the voice that wants you to stop, not let it get the better of you.

Who are your role models in life/writing?

Trudy Ederle—for several reasons. Not only because she was the first woman to swim the English Channel in 1926 when everybody said a woman couldn't do it, but because of how she ultimately overcame significant setbacks after her swim. Her hearing started to deteriorate after the swim and she was almost totally deaf by age 23. Apparently, the cold water had aggravated pre-existing problems with her ears. Her near-fiancé left her because of her deafness, and she wasn't allowed to follow her dream of teaching swimming because certain authorities claimed she wouldn't be able to know if a student was having problems. She became withdrawn and had a nervous breakdown. A few years later she accidentally fell down a flight of stairs, seriously hurting her spine. The injury had her in a body cast for a long time and doctors told her she might never walk again without a cane, never mind swim. Swimming, they said, would be impossible for her. For two years she could barely move, becoming more depressed and apathetic. Then, one morning—still being told by doctors and specialists that she'd never swim or walk properly again—she set out to prove them all wrong. She drummed up the determination to relearn how to walk and swim. It took another two years, but at the New York World's Fair in 1939, she swam one length across Billy Rose's Aquacade. Everybody cheered. After swimming her length across the aquacade and inserting her hearing aid, she told reporters that her rehabilitation was "something like swimming the Channel, only harder." It was observed that she didn't seem angry about anything that had happened to her, and she went on to live a long and satisfied life, teaching deaf children to swim. First she was told she couldn't swim the Channel because she was female, then she was told she'd never walk properly or swim again. I truly admire her will to defy the people who told her she couldn't do something.

What are your new goals now?

Complete a second novel... if there is a parallel between my next project and *Sage Island*, it's that I am still drawn to themes and ideas that surround the way we perceive success and failure. And I would love to get back into better swimming form and swim a channel. It doesn't have to be the English Channel or the Catalina Channel—but I'd like to swim the Burrard Inlet again in Vancouver, and also the Maui Channel.

Final thought: I am delighted that the Olympics have made open-water swimming a bona fide Olympic event. ■