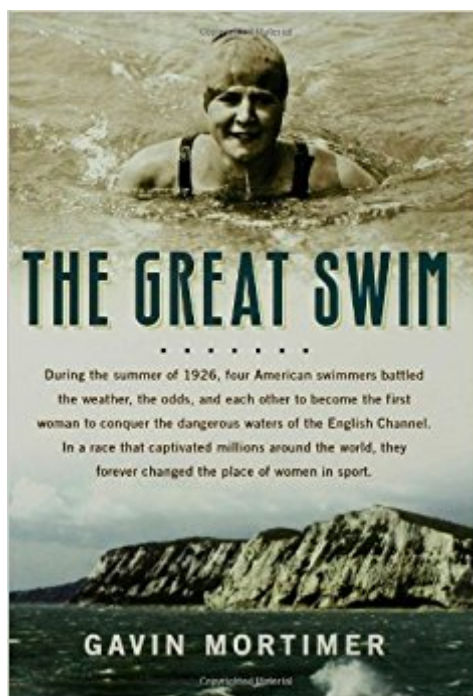


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The Great Swim



Synopsis

The dramatic story of the four courageous female swimmers who captivated the world in the summer of 1926. Despite the tensions of a world still recovering from World War I, during the summer of 1926, the story that enthralled the public revolved around four young American swimmers—Gertrude Ederle, Mille Gade, Lillian Cannon, and Clarabelle Barrett—who battled the weather, each other, and considerable odds to become the first woman to conquer the brutal waters of the English Channel. The popular East Coast tabloids from New York to Boston engaged in rivalries nearly as competitive as the swimmers themselves; each backed a favorite and made certain their girl—in bathing attire—was plastered across their daily editions. Just as Seabiscuit, the little horse with the big heart, would bring the nation to a near standstill when he battled his rival War Admiral in 1938, this quartet of women held the attention of millions of people on both sides of the Atlantic for an entire summer. Gavin Mortimer uses primary sources, diaries, interviews with relatives, and contemporary reports to paint an unforgettable portrait of a competition that changed the way the world looked at women, both in sport and society. More than an underdog story, The Great Swim is a tale of perseverance, strength, and sheer force of will. A portrait of an era that is as evocative as Cinderella Man, this is a memorable story of America and Americans in the 1920s.

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Customer Reviews

I greatly enjoyed this book for a number of reasons. As a swimmer it was very elucidating, shedding light on what is considered the greatest challenge in distance swimming. But as I stated in the title, this is more than just a book on the annals of Channel swimming. In fact, I would classify it as social

history. The events take place during the "Roaring Twenties", an era of change, turmoil and optimism after the destruction of the Great War of the previous decade. The place of women in society was changing. Part of this change, was the status of the woman athlete. This book focuses on the struggle of four courageous women to become the first female to swim the English Channel. Two accomplished the goal. An amazing feat considering that up until that summer of 1926 only three men swam the Channel successfully. As with any great story, there is no dearth of human emotion including ego, jealousy and pettiness. The author wrote the book in a fluid style (no pun intended) and it's a great read. I happened to read the book during the summer, 53 years to the day after the events. One last thought: I have to ask myself if Mr. Mortimer purposely used obscure words in many descriptions ("emollient", "mulligrubs" and many more). At any rate, I had to look them up so I must thank him for improving my vocabulary.

In 1926 Gertrude Ederle, a 19 year old New Yorker, became the first woman to swim the English Channel. She did it in record time, faster than any of the five men who had swum the Channel before her. Although that feat is little more than the answer to a trivia question today, at the time it was an accomplishment that rated a huge parade through Manhattan. She was treated as a heroine, at least until Charles Lindbergh flew across the Atlantic three years later. The Great Swim by Gavin Mortimer tells Ederle's story and the media frenzy surrounding it. There were three other American women competing to become the first woman to swim the Channel that year, including one who broke Ederle's record only three weeks after Ederle set it. What is most interesting is the role of the press in reporting, in making these historic events. Ederle and another of the swimmers were under contract to write regular newspaper columns about their preparations. Some newspapers sponsored one or more of the swimmers. They reported daily on the swimmers, and included lots of photos of the swimmers in their swimsuits. It had only been a few years since bathing costumes for women had included sleeves and stockings. The new one-piece form-fitting swimsuits of the twenties were the bee's knees. Incidentally, Ederle developed what may have been the first bikini, using men's swimming shorts and a modified bra. Shortly after she started the record-setting swim, she chucked the bra and swam the Channel topless. Mortimer covers the preparations, the swim itself, which was quite dramatic, and the aftermath. Ederle was treated as a conquering hero, then as an accused cheater, and then as a traveling show curiosity. If anyone thinks the media frenzies of today are new, they need only read The Great Swim to see that they are only carrying on a tradition as old as the press itself.

During the summer of 1926 the eyes of the world turned to Europe, specifically the small strip of water that separated the British Isles from France. Four American women had announced their intentions to swim the English Channel. The first swimmer to accomplish that feat would be the first woman to ever complete the channel swim, joining elite group of male athletes who had managed to navigate the channel. Women had been making huge strides in the realm of athletics, steadily setting aside stereotypes and prejudices. Four women, Gertrude Ederle, Mille Gade, Lillian Cannon and Clarabelle Barrett, completely different but each possessed the desire to be first to complete the swim. Each knew the accomplishment would thrust them into the public spotlight and could better their fortunes and futures. The public interest after their swims was beyond anything anyone could imagine, and changed their lives. The Great Swim captures the giddy optimism of the 1920's and the emergence of women as a force in the world. Using diaries, newspaper archives, and primary sources Gavin Mortimer brings to life the excitement that surrounded the swims, the people supporting the swimmers and the swimmers themselves. It is a unique glimpse into the "roaring twenties" and the way the idea of a lone female swimmer taking on the channel captured the American public's imagination. It is also a cautionary tale of public adulation, the power of the press and greed. An engrossing read.

This book was great. The stories of the four American women who tried to swim the Channel in 1926 are far more interesting than I anticipated -- and the Channel swim itself is much more complicated. The story is well told and compelling. The story touches on so much more than just these women and their challenges -- it's about the culture wars of the 1920s, equality for women athletes, and the newspapers of the era. I enjoyed the book. I read the book on my Kindle 3. The formatting was really, really bad, with so many OCR errors that some passages are almost incomprehensible. I was really disappointed. This is presumably not the author's fault, but the publisher's, which is why I did not factor it into my review -- I just want to note it for other Kindlers.

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