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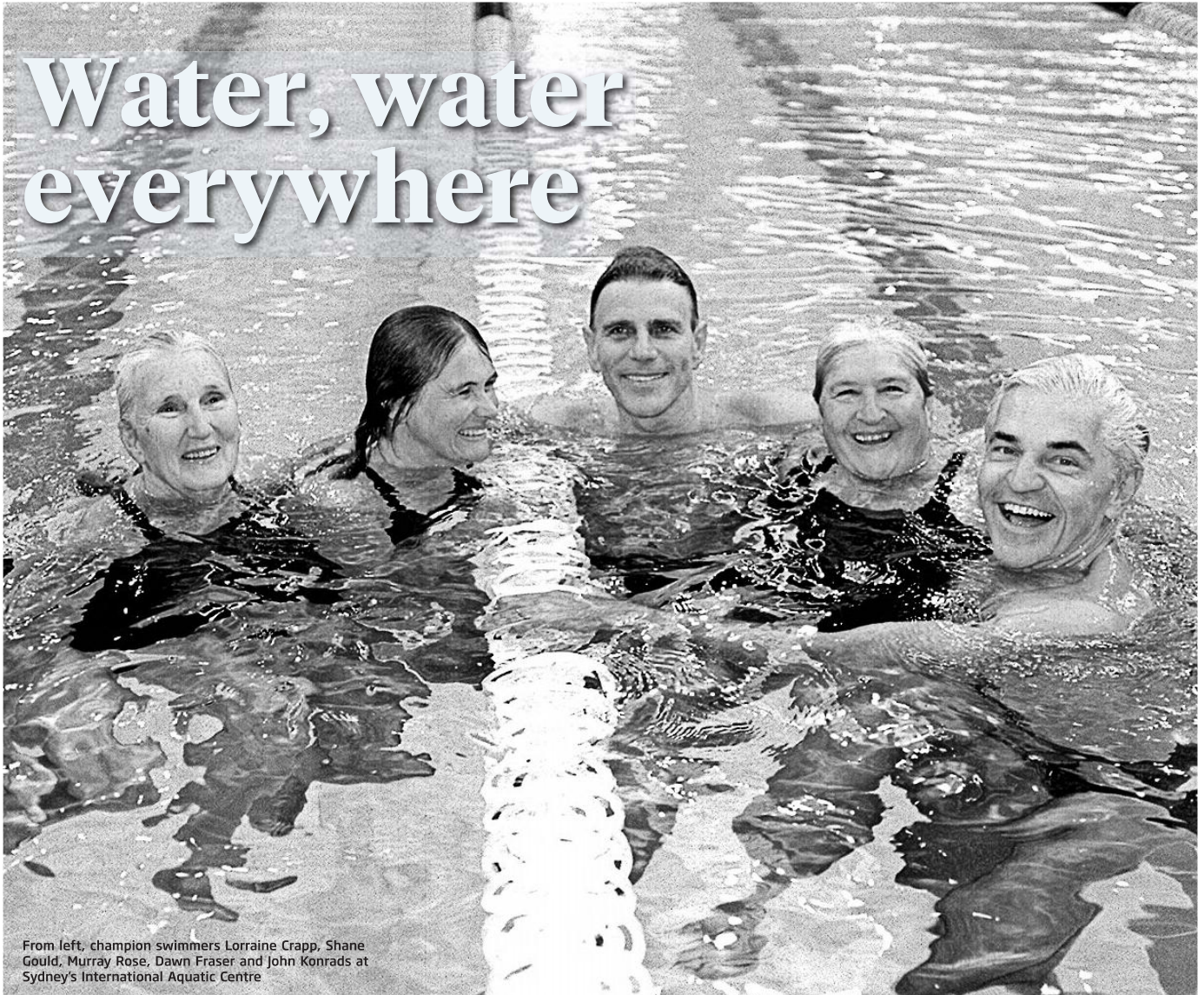
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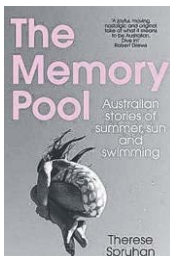
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From left, champion swimmers Lorraine Crapp, Shane Gould, Murray Rose, Dawn Fraser and John Konrads at Sydney's International Aquatic Centre

THE MEMORY POOL: AUSTRALIAN STORIES OF SUMMER, SUN AND SWIMMING

By Therese Spruhan
NewSouth, 272pp, \$29.99



Phillip Siggins

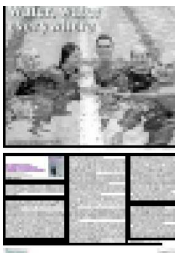
How timely is *The Memory Pool*, an anthology of recollections about swimming and swimming pools? Ambiguous summer looms, season of leisure and terror, but as temperatures rise we will be hankering for a refreshing dip and remembering swims from our past.

Water is life. Pools, lakes, streams, rivers and the sea have

been places that are the locus for religious impulses. The Celts and Romans threw weapons and other broken offerings into them to placate the gods. Bodies of water have engaged our collective imagination for millennia. They can be portals to real and imagined worlds.

As a recent ABC documentary reminds us, the swimming pool has an important place in our sporting history. Pools are also a great leveller, they are part of our democratic identity. It's difficult to insist on any form of social superiority as you heave your excess bulk out of the water or while standing around in your daggly togs or getting dunked or bombed when attempting laps.

Swimming pools have an equally important place in the story of our social identity and in the struggles for racial, gender and LGBTI equality. The pool has been a place for combat and reconciliation, for moments of great happiness and tragedy. It is also the place where we reconnect with the feel of water, with our sense of being powerful or helpless in the water, with nature and



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our sensuous, mammalian, fundamental self.

As you read *The Memory Pool* you are reminded of litera-

ture's pools and swimming legends. Think of Narcissus and his obsession with his reflection in the pool.

It is also impossible to forget John Cheever's *The Swimmer*, where a somewhat complacent, inebriated man sets off one afternoon to swim the eight miles home through the pools of his upper-middle-class neighbourhood. On the way he discovers his submerged identity and a series of uncomfortable truths about the world in which he has lived.

Time balloons out and takes on a surreal elasticity in this brilliant story. Time in *The Memory Pool*, however, doesn't do anything weird and stays realistic and dominated by generally positive childhood memories but, as in *The Swimmer*, there are powerful accounts of revelatory experiences.

In constructing this anthology Therese Spruhan interviewed a wide range of people she knew who had a close connection with a childhood pool, for whom the pool represented much more than simply a place to cool off in summer.

Once the interview was transcribed Spruhan wrote each person's story. The result is 28 stories "celebrating the pool from Australians aged from 28 to 97 from all over the country, and from a range of aquatic settings — chlorine, sea, bay, river and backyard".

A test for the success of this anthology is how deep it will take us on a dive into the world of the great Australian pool. A further related test will be how clear and distinctive are the voices of the tellers of these tales. Will their experience come through Spruhan's transcription and retelling process with authenticity and immediacy?

One voice that definitely comes through is that of Shane Gould and her discovery of her speed and competitive spirit: "If we were doing longer distances, usually I would lead the lane. I'd make the guys work hard and they hated me for it ... a lot of them would say, 'Oh, you're going too fast, Shane — we can't keep up' and I'd think, 'Yes.' I knew I was learning a life lesson about people, about how to be competitive and how you can psych someone out and put them off their game."

There's a certain raw edginess to Gould's account that is en-

tirely appropriate to the substance of this story of her connection with an "ugly duckling" indoor pool in Pymble on Sydney's upper north shore where she trained from 1970 to 1973. The result of all that dedication, drive and training was astounding: "It was what I did in that space — the hard work — that led me to be the only person, male or female, to hold every world freestyle record from 100 metres to 1500 metres and the 200 metre individual medley simultaneously in 1971 and 1972." She zapped the competition and her direct, excited voice, quite rightly, lets us know.

That note of triumph is found in other stories. Among her many achievements, Priya Cooper has won nine gold, three silver and four bronze medals across several Paralympics and was co-captain of the Australian team at the 1996 Atlanta Paralympics and at the Sydney 2000 Games. But her account of the years before she rose to such heights, from Kalamunda to the Paralympics, is told with sweetness and freshness.

There is innocence and determination also in another story, that of five young girls in the mid-1980s who dreamed of getting a pool for their home town. They formed a committee, and you'll have to read their story *Dreaming Big* in *Lightning Ridge* to find

out how it panned out. That story is as much about the community around them as it is about the girls.

Community, and what it can achieve, is central to Ellen Connor's *The Campaign to Save Fitzroy Pool*. I read it with Helen Garner's wonderfully observed Fitzroy pool from *Monkey Grip* in mind. And there it was in all its multicultural glory with its misspelled *Aqua Profonda* sign at the deep end. But in this story it is viewed through the eyes of a teenager who is beginning to grasp the basics of her political awareness.

But it's not all about activism and gruelling training. There are stories by notable Australians that direct the gaze inward, that use the chlorine, hot concrete, icy poles and chips, and all the paraphernalia of summers past to understand teenage loneliness, the need for refuge, sexual beginnings, early injustices and aspirations. This collection passes the tests it sets for itself.

Phillip Siggins is a writer and critic.