

Q&A with Jessica J. Lee

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Bookshelf

*For this **Bookshelf** post, we asked author and RCC alumna **Jessica J. Lee** a few questions about her work and her 2017 book, **Turning: A Swimming Memoir**.*

What is the subject of your book and how did it come about?

Turning is a hybrid work of nature writing and memoir, following a year I spent swimming a different lake every week in and around Berlin. I came to the subject near the end of my PhD—I was completely swallowed up by writing my dissertation, and needed something to take my mind and body away from the text. So I started swimming, and gave myself the structure of visiting a new lake each week, as a way to cope with how isolating the writing process can be. Of course, the swimming quickly spawned its own book, which came rather as a surprise.

What perspectives did swimming in particular give you on the landscape?

I found that with swimming I had a sense of the landscape that was quite different to my other usual approach, walking. Roger Deakin calls it the “frog’s eye view,” and I think that captures it well. I was able to view the world from this low point on the water, to see the world dome around me, and feel completely in the middle of the place I was swimming. It was multisensory in the most obvious way, and I found that quite productive for writing place-based work.

What was it like to move from academic writing to nonacademic writing? What did you find particularly challenging or particularly enjoyable?

It was a relief, if I’m honest. I think near the end of the PhD, I was becoming very frustrated with theory and wanted the freedom to write something beautiful for its own sake. So the writing itself came quite naturally. I think the cultures of academic and nonacademic writing are rather different though—I can’t say I miss the negativity of some peer reviewers—and was pleasantly surprised to see how warm commercial publishing

was as an industry. Getting paid for my writing, too, has been a big change, and I've had to constantly remind myself that writing is my job, is labor, and that it's worth a decent wage. And when the book came out, seeing reviews, excerpts of my work, and interviews in major papers was a small thrill, but more than anything played on the imposter syndrome I think I lug around. I suppose I've found the promotional process of having a book out and being read to be the hardest part, because it feels very public and very exposed. I'm still adjusting.

What was your route to publishing your book?

I ended up publishing the book rather unexpectedly, or at least on a much tighter timetable than I might have expected. When I started swimming the lakes, I wrote a small blog on a local travel site, hoping to practice nonacademic writing a bit. But two months in, the blog garnered a good deal of press attention in Germany, and then I started hearing from publishers. Panicked, I got an agent, wrote a few sample chapters, and four months after I started swimming the lakes, signed my first book deal. So I ended up writing the book to deadline, concurrently with my dissertation. They were due a month apart!

What is life as a freelance writer like? What advice would you give to someone interested in a writing career?

It's a bit of a hustle, but in a way it has the same freedom that I felt during my doctorate. I wake up and write in the mornings, then use the afternoons for admin, sending pitches, working on shorter assignments I may have, and even, once in a while, writing an academic article to keep a foot in that door. The big thing I needed to learn was to be firm about invoicing and to keep good records. I've found that applications for literary grant applications are less arduous than academic grants (thank goodness!), but that writing comes with the same sort of insecurity as being on short contracts. And though it is work, I do think I'm rather lucky to get this opportunity. I spend my days writing myself into landscapes and places that genuinely excite me, and get to hear from readers who've journeyed with me on the page.