Trunk route

The story of the youngest boy to swim the Channel

DAVID HORSPOOL

Tom Gregory

A BOY IN THE WATER
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Since 1875, around 1,800 people have swum the English Channel. In an age of endurance feats completed by ordinary people, that number is remarkably low. Around 4,000, by contrast, have climbed Everest since Hillary and Tenzing did so in 1953. Channel swimming has become popular – accompanying pilots' boats are booked up three years in advance, though many will follow relay swims rather than individual attempts – but it remains one of the hardest of the proliferating athletic challenges that push people's limits far beyond any benefit to health. And as well as being long, cold and numbing to both body and mind, swimming the Channel can be dangerous. Ten people have died in the attempt; the Channel Swimming Association website contains information about Swimming Induced Pulmonary Edema (SIPE): "fluids from the blood leak abnormally from the small vessels of the lung (pulmonary capillaries) into the airspaces (alveoli)".

It is doubtful that Tom Gregory, who successfully swam from England to France in 1988, knew about SIPE, and not only because medical knowledge has increased in the past thirty years. At the time, Tom's passion for swimming vied with such vital questions as why his Walkman (actually a Saisho) didn't have a rewind button, and whether it was cool

Tom Gregory

to wear a bowtie to the disco ("mum said that if girls were going it was best to be smart; girls liked boys who were smart"). As this memoir demonstrates with affectless honesty, Gregory was an ordinary eleven-year-old in 1988. But that year he became the youngest person ever to swim those unforgiving 32 miles ("because of the tides"). He retains the record to this day.

Gregory's memoirs of a middle-class childhoood in Eltham, south London are almost defiantly ordinary. He describes struggles with schoolwork, following his football team, keeping up with the earliest iterations of the *Now That's What I Call Music* compilation series, negotiating friendships and crushes. It was as an appendage to his older sister that he joined the local swimming club, aged eight and, he writes, "the slowest swimmer in Miss Morgan's school swimming lessons", unable to make it across a width of the pool without standing up. One might assume that the transformation from tadpole to dolphin would involve the uncovering of a prodigious talent, but Gregory is far too modest to point us in that direction. On his account the credit (or blame) for his singular achievement goes almost entirely to his trainer, the manager of the local swimming baths, founder of the swimming club, and self-taught outdoor swimming guru John Bullett.

Bullett's tough, unsentimental and relentless shepherding of the boy to his unlikely destination is the focus of the book. Gregory intersperses an extended recollection of the attempt itself, in all its hallucinatory agony, with an affectionate narrative of his first tentative visits to the club, and his growing bond with its presiding deity. It is no suprise to learn that there isn't much of a trick to long-distance open-water swimming. Gregory is encouraged to eat a lot, to sleep with the window open and without a blanket, and never to wear a coat – all to acclimatize to the cold. And he swims great distances, in pools, lakes and sea. There aren't too many details of this training: part of the point of it is to help the swimmer overcome the boredom of doing the same thing for hour after hour, so it would not make for thrilling reading. But the accounts of the longer swims themselves have an almost dreamlike quality, in marked contrast to the burble of a normal life of pop songs and penny sweets:

> I concentrated on the shape of the water rolling back on itself in a circular motion as I glided gently across its surface. Underwater the scene was changing rapidly as the first of the sun's rays popped over the ridgeline. As I faced downwards and forwards, breathing out smoothly, the grease on my arms flashed bright white against the blackness of the water below.

Watching Gregory throughout, or occasionally conspicuously ignoring him to toughen him up, is John Bullett. We are so familiar with memoirs of neglect and abuse that it can be disconcerting to read an account that confounds expectations of human failings. Even at the time, Gregory could see that Bullett was an odd man, single-minded to the point of monomania, gruffly dismissive of both teachers ("idle") and parents ("dozy"). The club swimmers go on long summer trips to Lake Windermere, which Gregory also conquered, and while Bullett clearly singles him out for an accelerated programme, he is treated much like everyone else, in a barely more sophisticated but much colder version of being chucked in at the deep end. But Gregory knows too that Bullett is his biggest supporter, able not only to help him to do the nearly impossible, but willing to recognize his limits (pulling him out of the Lake on his first long-distance attempt, for example). Gregory takes to heart what Bullett tells him on one of their swimming trips, looking him in the eye to assure him that "I will always, ALWAYS look after you".

As an author, Gregory has barely any more doubt of Bullett's abilities and his qualities than he did as a devoted acolyte. But there are indications that others were not so trusting. The Channel Swimming Association, which recognized Tom Gregory's feat, introduced a rule to ban swimmers under the age of twelve (the limit has since been raised to sixteen, though twelve- to sixteen-year-olds can still take part in relay swims). The vote came shortly after Gregory's swim, and it was almost unanimous: John Bullett's methods were officially frowned upon. We observe his tough approach going too far when he throws one of Gregory's friends back in the water after he has complained of serious cold, though Gregory thinks this is an aberration brought on by overwork and stress. Even Gregory's mild-mannered father (who barely figures in the book) has a run-in with Bullett, describing him as brilliant but difficult.

Nonetheless Gregory convinces us that for all his flaws, Bullett (who died of a stroke not long after the swim) was an extraordinary, inspirational man. He seems less willing to acknowledge that there is something even more remarkable about a chubby eleven-year-old fuelled by chocolate Digestives and Heinz tomato soup, with the sound of "Together in Electric Dreams" in his head, swimming in temperatures of around 16 degrees for 11 hours and fifty-four minutes. But *A Boy in the Water* allows the reader his own private amazement.

Black widow mother

MICHAEL FRANK

Glen David Gold

I WILL BE COMPLETE
A memoir
477pp. Sceptre. Paperback, £9.99.
978 1 63286 858 9

Edward M. Hallowell, M.D.,

BECAUSE I COME FROM A CRAZY FAMILY
The making of a psychiatrist
406pp. Bloomsbury. £20.
978 1 63286 858 9

Glen David Gold's *I Will Be Complete*, an account of his stomach-tightening childhood and youth in California in the 1970s, is a loose baggy monster-like eruption of energy and verve. Gold (the author of two exuberant novels, *Carter Beats the Devil*, 2001, and *Sunnyside*, 2009) appears to have poured as much of himself as he could into this geyser of a book, where some experiences receive closer attention than others, but for better and at times worse the profusion of detail accrues into a portrait of a highly complex personality formed by – what else? – a highly complex set of parents.

I Will Be Complete invites the reader to join the author in trying to work out the central conundrum of Gold's life, which is the who and the why of his mother, who advances and retreats over the course of these nearly 500 pages, with each experience sharpening the reader's attention and feelings of anxiety and doom. Even when she is offstage, Gold's unnamed mother is there, poised and ready to sweep in with still another confounding pattern of behaviour, as if to force the writer to try to answer the key question that has haunted him since birth: how can I have been born to a mother who – where to begin? – impulsively boards an airplane one day, leaving her twelve-year-old son alone for several weeks in an apartment in San Francisco, with barely enough pocket money for groceries and no one to look in on him when he falls ill. She later goes to bed with two strange men who help her move house when she is down – way down – on her luck; this "primal transaction" results in a horrible car crash of a relationship with a junkie twenty-four years her junior who shoots up what is left of her money, steals Gold's Social Security number, and threatens to murder him. Gold's mother drifts in and out of a survivalist compound, a woman's shelter and a trailer park; she bounces up and down the West Coast; she caroms from Vegas to New York and back to Southern California. "When I think of my mother," Gold observes at one point, "I see a landscape of payment-due storage units, immolated friendships, bankruptcies, double-wide trailers illuminated by sheriff's deputies' flashlights, flies buzzing over kitchen counters with government-issued tubs of ketchup and

relish standing open like interrupted surgeries".

Similarly striking images are strewn through Gold's memoir, which is rendered all the more heartbreaking by our awareness that these lives were never meant to play out so grimly. An English beauty with a posh accent and writerly ambitions of her own, Gold's mother made a love match with Gold's industrious father Herb, a Chicago businessman of Russian Jewish background who accumulated a fortune, then through high living and bad luck lost most of it before getting back on his feet; nevertheless, pretty early on he recognized that he had to cut loose from Gold's mother, who was, as he later tells his son, a "black widow. She'll drain you. To her, it's her survival or yours".

Describing himself as amoral and described by Gold as someone who "never comforted me in my life", Gold's father nevertheless joins with his mother in building up the young Glen, treasuring his intelligence "like a pile of fissionable material that needed velvet ropes around it". With a prefigured destiny so, well, golden, there is of course nowhere to go but down. And down happens soon enough. Herb flees (to a new wife, a new house and new children), leaving Glen to deal – or fail to deal – with his mother and fend for himself, which for a time he improbably and impressively does. Against the odds he wins a place at Thatcher, a boarding school in Ojai, northwest of Los Angeles, and later attends Wesleyan University and the University of California.

To Gold's credit, he lets us see his defects. His apparent candour leads to the inevitable question, how reliable is the narrator? The question feels especially pertinent, perhaps, given that the narrator's mother is a relentless fantasist who with every new venture, man, house, job and city insists that she is about to turn her life around. Gold's experiences, by

Victor Sjöström and Bibi Andersson in *Wild Strawberries* (1957)

contrast, seem to have made him a harsh realist, yet even so you might as well ask how you ever gauge reliability in a memoir. Partly by considering its language: Gold's is often fresh, dynamic, aching. Then there is his self-portraiture: he is unafraid to show himself as smug and over-confident about his attractiveness to women and his writing on one hand, and full of anguish, despair and paralysis on the other. For long stretches he is open about being almost entirely lacking in self-knowledge. It takes a series of girlfriends, recalled in vivid if overly detailed set pieces, to draw his attention to his own interiority. One of them suggests that he might try to unearth his anger at his mother; another points out that his family background affected the author.

Early in his life Gold had an inkling that all his struggles had some kind of greater purpose: "I felt a calling. I had to notice all the world's wonders and sadness, and to report to someone somewhere how much there was left to lose. I felt extended beyond myself". It's a beautiful, almost otherworldly moment. Gold's extension beyond himself, his call to writing, may be a staple of many authors' memoirs, but in his case, we receive it with relief and even a pang of hope.

Edward Hallowell, the bestselling writer on psychology, experienced something similar: as a boy he heard a voice tell him, apparently out of nowhere, that he should become a psychiatrist; and in *Because I Come from a Crazy Family* he seeks to explore what lies behind that *because*. Born into a deeply troubled New England clan, in which mental illness and alcoholism were rampant and marriages bitter and frosty, he was conceived when his father, in the midst of a psychotic breakdown, threatened to kill his mother, who convinced him to make love to her instead.

Alas, the appeal of Hallowell's memoir lies more in the life the author has to recount than in the way in which he recounts it. He does at least draw a convincing portrait of a good-hearted, curious young boy and his – yes – dysfunctional family. His stepfather was a demon, his mother gave in to drink, and everyone around him spoke in platitudes and clichés that merge into the equivalent of a lid on a cauldron of anger, resentment and hatred. Another young man saved, in part, by boarding school (and in part by strong bonds with his cousins and siblings), Hallowell experiences his most touching moment of awakening when one evening in Exeter he wanders into a screening of *Wild Strawberries*, a movie that "midwifed . . . the empty, confused, lost, depressed, despairing, hopeless part of myself that I had spent so much of my life fleeing".

Ingmar Bergman's doctor looks back on his life just as Hallowell does; it's a lovely intersection of nostalgia and self-awareness in a book that otherwise lopes along from the author's childhood and youth to his medical training and therapy sessions (his own and with his patients), to his marriage, children, travels; even his preferred (preppy) wardrobe is accounted for. Throughout, the central haunting figure in Hallowell's life, as in Gold's, is his mother, who compels him to realize – after years of struggle and therapy – that "I could live the rest of my life for her . . . or I could cut the tie and try to fashion a life of my own". In the end Hallowell doesn't cut his mother off entirely, but he, like Gold, does decide to stop letting her happiness determine his. Psych 101? Maybe. But far easier taught than done.

Would you listen?

The relationship between patient and therapist

BETH GUILDING

Jane Haynes

IF I CHANCE TO TALK
A LITTLE WILD
264pp. Quartet. £20.
978 0 7043 7454 6

"People . . . come into analysis, however fluent they may be, because they are unable to speak. But some people have had unspeakable experiences, or experiences that have been made unspeakable by the absence of a listener." It makes sense that Jane Haynes should quote these words of Adam Phillips in both of her memoirs, *Who Is It That Can Tell Me Who I Am?* (2006) and *If I Chance To Talk a Little Wild*: tying the two books together is her focus on the relationship between patient and therapist – which is, or in Haynes's opinion should be, one of "reciprocity" – as well as the story of her childhood and how it inspired, and affects, her work as a psychotherapist. Haynes's experience of parental love left a lot to be desired; hence, perhaps, the closeness of her bond with her own psychotherapist.

However, whereas Haynes's first memoir can be characterized by an urgent need to tell her story, and raises some troubling issues (her level of disclosure concerning her patients' case histories, for one), *If I Chance To Talk a Little Wild* is written from a much more considered position. Key insights and memories are given space to unfold and resonate. The book is ordered thematically, with whole chapters focusing on specific topics: friendship; the mother–child dyad; the relationship between apparently untreatable physical pain and psychic conflict; and child sexual abuse – of which Haynes writes that it is "naïve" to assume that all abusers are "socio- or psychopaths"; rather, "the compulsive desire to commit abuse appears to be an inerasable part of human nature that has nothing to do with . . . money and power". She discusses mythical inspirations, including Dionysus and Apollo, as well as literary ones. Proust, for example, "supplies us . . . with the lineaments of what it means to be a human being" – he is a writer who "changed the ways in which I think [and] the tenor of my syntax". Haynes reveals that her decision to write her second memoir followed a dispute with her daughter; and she describes their differing beliefs concerning unconditional love: "although I like to give", Haynes admits, "I . . . find it hard to give without thinking about the return". It is a fleeting insight, and yet it lies at the heart of her approach to the psychotherapeutic relationship, and indeed permeates the entire book.

"Vision of the Mind" by Andrew Ostrovsky

Haynes explains that, having moved away from traditional Jungian psychoanalysis to become a "relational psychotherapist", she "prefers to have a conversation with [her] patients rather than . . . professing to have spurious access to their unconscious". In this light, she presents herself less as a blank canvas for her patients' projections than as an "other" being who has the "privilege" of joining her patients in psychotherapy and guiding them through it. Readers of traditional psychoanalysis, as well as books such as *The Examined Life* by Steven Grosz or *The Private Life* by Josh Cohen, will find some of Haynes's methods of treatment surprising, if not unorthodox. She tells us, for instance, that "there are some occasions when it is helpful for patient and therapist to become mutual confidants and for the therapist to make relevant self-disclosures", and gives an example: when one patient describes her difficulties surrounding "maternal love", Haynes tells her that they elucidate some of her own "maternal dilemmas". "I hope I am helping you as much as you are helping me", the patient replies. "She is", Haynes writes.

In spite – or perhaps because – of such disclosures, *If I Chance To Talk a Little Wild* is a moving and accessible account. In a field that can often be daunting to consider, let alone enter into, Haynes's memoir provides refreshing and interesting perspectives on theories of transference, as well as the importance of the psychoanalytic relationship for both patient and analyst. It also illuminates the paradox of learning to "let go" in psychotherapy: what is let go of is not lost; it is, rather, replaced by a shared experience of self and other.