

A LIFE AQUATIC

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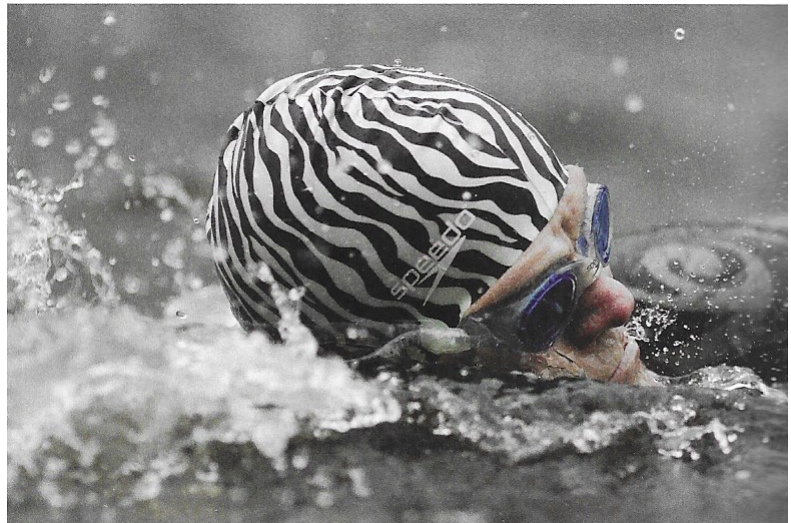
Creative-writing prof Rick Taylor dries off long enough to write WATER AND DESIRE, a book about swimming in the wake of famous writers.

“All good writing is swimming underwater and holding your breath.”

- F. Scott Fitzgerald

Scientists estimate that long ago, some of the earliest ancestors of *Homo Sapiens* left the water to lurch ashore and become upright terrestrials. Some of us keep going back.

Rick Taylor was hired as writer-in-residence at Carleton in the mid-‘90s. He’s been teaching literature and creative writing ever since and is a man who has with lived the aquatic life for as long as he can remember.



Despite spending his use landlocked in suburban Ottawa, he found early succour through dips in Gatineau lakes before his family moved to Vancouver in the late ‘60s and he fell in love with surfing and the headiness of open-ocean swimming.

The bug really grabbed hold when Taylor and his wife bought a Volkswagen and surfed the coast of North America in 1976 before jumping off on a world tour of surfing hotspots. Forty years on, Taylor is about to release a travel memoir, *Water and Desire: Swimming With Writers and Others*, a semi-autobiographical tale of pursuing specters of his literary heroes with a steady front crawl.

Taylor has swum the Thames and unusual places (including moats) in England, Thoreau's Walden Pond, Dylan Thomas' waterfront property in Wales and a shark-infested Hawaiian coastline. He has followed F. Scott Fitzgerald's custom of diving off cliffs in southern France and has taken a dip in Ernest Hemingway's private pool in Key West - before being kicked off the property.

"The thing with writing about water is that it is a great metaphor for connecting everything," says Taylor, from his waterfront home and Val-des-Monts, Québec. "Two summers ago I swam in the perimeter of 30 of the Val-des-Monts Lakes. I feel semi-invincible in water, but I've also been in situations where things can go wrong very fast. You're flirting with danger and beauty at the same time, and that's what makes it compelling."

"Basically what I do is travel around to the past haunts of mostly misogynist, alcoholic, depressed, suicidal and mainly iconic writers, and I sort of swim in and their shadow and echo things back-and-forth about how water influenced them," Taylor says. "I also swim with more upbeat writers like Oliver Sacks, though."

"In the '70s, I was reading and studying writers and found many of them used swimming as therapy, to pull them out of a funk - for example, Virginia Woolf, John Cheever and Ernest Hemingway. Cheever wrote *The Swimmer*, which is a classic story of this guy who ends up swimming home in suburban New York, swimming pool by swimming pool. I realized there was a real connection between swimming and the depth of their writing."

While it is the swimming in the writing of others that thematically unifies *Water and Desire*, threads of Taylor's own life - including the metaphorical sharks - cut through the narrative. The recent passing of his father, a looming age count (Taylor turned 60 last year) and the threat that local authorities will drain his Val-des-Monts lake all find emotional resonance in the dark literary waterways Taylor explores.

"The thing with being in the water is that you're immersed - it unties all the knots in your life. You have this incredible flow, but you never really get where you want to go because you're swimming in this element that is bigger than you are and you're swallowed up by it. Your mind can get in Zen mode where you don't even think much, but I'm lucky that I've managed to swim this little tributary in life and against the grain of so many things. I think it has made me a better person."

Rick Taylor back by the river where in 1972, he sat and thought long and hard about how he would be able to live a life of writing, swimming and adventure. He graduated in 1976 and has been teaching writing workshops and swimming all over the world ever since. Taylor is preparing for the Waikiki Rough Water Swim in Hawaii this September.

