

## BACKSTROKES: What You Can Learn From Swimming With Dead Authors

By Paul Gessell  
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**JONATHAN GOLDSTEIN**  
"People just aren't having enough fun these days. And I intend to change that."  
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**JANE MACDOUGALL**  
"When was the last time you had marmalade? I ask, hoping to encourage this choice."  
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**A Dip with the Dead**  
Author Rick Taylor swims the same waters as Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Woolf.

**BOOK LINE & SWIMMER**  
To really know an author, you must swim a mile in his trunks. WP14

Rick Taylor loves swimming with dead people, fellow writers in particular.

Lord Byron, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry David Thoreau, Dylan Thomas and Virginia Woolf, she of the watery suicide, are among the most famous of Taylor's swimming companions. But there are more. Many more. A planned book will recount some of Taylor's mystical, poetical, sometimes hilarious adventures swimming with both the quick and the dead in their favourite waters. Early versions of some chapters have already appeared in some magazines and newspapers.

Consider Taylor's swim with the late Roger Deakin, an author and fellow "wild swimmer," as the addicts for rough, open waters are called in Britain. Deakin died in 2006 after

reaching cult status as the bestselling author of *Waterlog: A Swimmer's Journey Through Britain*. Taylor attended the memorial held at Deakin's moated Elizabethan-era home in Suffolk. While 300 members of the British literati chatted and drank champagne, Taylor did 30 laps in the moat, a coddled environmentally healthy moat Deakin also loved to lap.

“I swam the moat with Roger even though Roger was dead,” Taylor said, most seriously, during a recent interview at his rural home on Lac Brassard in the Quebec municipality of Val-des-Monts, a great swath of hilled, forested cottage country about an hour’s drive north of Ottawa.

Consider that swim with Deakin a conversation with a deceased friend. Swimming the same waters some deceased author did supposedly allows you to understand that person so much better; it’s as if they left some essence of themselves in the drink. The experience, Taylor claims, is as informative as going online and researching everything Mr. Google has to say about these authors.

The 60-year-old, whippet-lean Taylor, a merman if there ever was one, is a creative writing teacher at Carleton University in Ottawa, an author of three books, two fiction and one memoir, and such a passionate, compulsive swimmer that his wife of almost 40 years, Dale, claims that she has actually hunted for gills on his body.

An artist and teacher, Dale paints realistic pictures of crashing waves. Their home is filled with Dale’s paintings and Rick’s driftwood sculptures. A visit to the interior of the Taylor abode is like a trip to the seashore, especially with the many windows that seem to pull Lac Brassard right into the rooms.

Taylor swims the four-kilometre circumference of Lac Brassard three times weekly from May to October, the colder seasons wearing a wetsuit. Dale sometimes spots him from a kayak. As well, Rick regularly does 10-kilometre swims across the Ottawa River from Quebec to Ontario and back to the multi-generational Taylor family cottage at Norway Bay. Two summers ago, Taylor swam the perimeters of all 30 lakes, whose shoreline residents have formed an organization called the Federation of Lakes of Val-Des-Monts.

“I did it out of spite,” says Taylor. Someone at a meeting of the federation had jokingly dared him to swim all the lakes. What else could an aging Peter Pan do but accept the challenge? A two-part account of the swim was published in the federation newsletter, *Echoes of Our Lakes*.

Taylor’s next book is tentatively titled *Water and Desire: Swimming with Writers and Others*. Literary agents have suggested a snappier title, such as *A Dip in Hemingway’s Pool* or *Into the Drink with Lord Byron*. The final manuscript should be done in a year or so.

The recreation of Lord Byron’s swim was recounted in a 2008 article Taylor

wrote for the Ottawa-based literary publication, *The Feathertale Review*.

“When I flew to England for a bit of outdoor swimming with eccentrics, both living and dead, my friend Rosemary suggested I sign up for an adventure triathlon in Scotland to swim with the Loch Ness Monster,” Taylor’s article begins. “I was tempted, but triathlons are not Byronic enough; I was interested in more literary aquatic feats. Already I’d jumped the wall of Dylan Thomas’s writing shed in Wales, swimming the tidal estuary to a medieval castle. ... In Sussex, with an actor and his lovely friend, I swam a spooky mile of the River Ouse where Virginia Woolf had committed suicide. But the scariest and most outrageous swim I was saving for the last.”

That was a dip in the River Thames, where Lord Byron had, in 1807, swam three miles from Lambeth, past the Westminster and Blackfriars bridges. Then, in 1824, his funeral barge floated down the same river.

“I slipped down mud slime into water, then lunged forward, hyperventilating into each breath of breaststroke,” Taylor wrote. “It was cold, and my stomach wanted to heave. Even from this far upriver, I felt the pull of the North Sea. The whole muscle and life blood of Empire flowed in these waters.”

Taylor did not complete Byron’s swim. The MI5 spy centre was nearby. Police boats were patrolling. Taylor feared he would be mistaken for a terrorist. Also, he kept thinking of the human garbage – pills, tampons, razor blades and condoms – flushed into the river. Nevertheless, he emerged “exhilarated,” satisfied that he had been immersed in Byron’s “peaceful acceptance of uncertainty” and had joined the poet in “going against the flow.”

The Hemingway swim came in the pool of the late author’s home, now a museum, in Key West, Fla. When Taylor briefly found himself alone at the pool, he stripped to his Speedo and jumped in to commune with the late author.

“Halfway back on the final lap of my swim, a group of 30 tourists and their tour guide rounded the corner of the pool house,” Taylor



Val-des-Monts, Que.

wrote in an article that has appeared in various publications. “They stared open-mouthed at me in the water, crowding to the edge between me and my clothes on the bench. Giving me the filthiest look, the tour guide said, ‘You’ll have to leave the premises.’ Someone in the crowd chanted, ‘Way to go.’ Another gave me two thumbs up, and someone asked, ‘How’s the water?’ Still perturbed, the tour guide said flatly, ‘We don’t have liability for swimmers.’ And I mumbled, ‘I’m writing a book about swimming with writers. I just couldn’t resist.’ ”

Taylor’s focus now is on swimming with living writers: “I have to swim with more living upbeat writers rather than misogynist, alcoholic, depressed writers, just to balance it off.”

The living are sometimes less co-operative than the alcoholic, depressed, dead ones. Margaret Atwood, despite being outdoorsy, turned him down. She claimed to be too “rusty.” Taylor suspects she didn’t want to show up in a bathing suit because living writers are a little reluctant to get half-naked with a stranger in a black Speedo.

Taylor wears his bathing suit beneath his trousers for special occasions, like the day at Hemingway’s pool and the day he planned to disrobe quickly and jump off the Staten Island Ferry to replicate, sort of, the 2004 suicide of American author Spalding Gray (*Swimming to Cambodia*). At the last minute, Taylor chickened out, reluctant to create “an international incident,” and spent the day teaching children on Coney Island how to body surf. Gray also liked to body surf. Bodysurfing with the spirit of Gray was undoubtedly a happier adventure than replicating suicide.

Despite Atwood’s decline, Taylor is optimistic about swimming alongside such living literary-minded swimmers as British-American author Oliver Sacks (*Awakenings*), American author Lynn Sher (*Swim: Why We Love the Water*) and Canadian author Leanne Shapton (*Swimming Studies*). He is at varying stages with these authors in organizing swimming dates.

To illustrate Taylor’s galloping mind, ask him how to find his house buried deep in the hills. Instead of directions, you will get the story of his life, with many detours. So, it is best to contact Dale. She will send you perfect directions all nicely organized in an email attachment. Dale is the more grounded, sensible Wendy to Rick’s high-flying, wild swimming Peter Pan.

So, why does Rick Taylor swim so much? It started as a child summering at the family cottage at Norway Bay. As a teen he discovered the Pacific Ocean



and surfing. He was hooked forever.

“Swimming is my psychology, physiotherapy and religion all at once because it has all these aspects in it. It gives me tremendous relief. It reduces stress. It keeps me fit.”

Taylor often employs erotic imagery to describe his swims. He terms his swim in all 30 lakes of the Val-des-Monts federation a “promiscuous” act, as if he was, one by one, deflowering 30 virgins.

“Oh, yeah. It’s mysterious, erotic, frightening, beautiful, sexual, sensual. It’s the whole thing. It’s the only thing you can get inside when you’re totally alone with your own consciousness and your own brain and you’re thinking and when you swim, you never really get there. You’re always kind of going and reaching.”

In Taylor’s world, swimming wild water is akin to creating literature. Some of his pals, the dead authors, think similarly. His book, *House Inside the Waves: Domesticity, Art and the Surfing Life*, begins with this quotation from F. Scott Fitzgerald: “All good writing is swimming underwater and holding your breath.” And Taylor does know how to hold his breath.

