

Author of *A Different Sun*  
ELAINE NEIL ORR

# Swimming Between Worlds

*a novel*

"A perceptive and powerful  
story told with generosity and  
grace."—*New York Times*  
bestselling author  
Charles Frazier



# BOOK CLUB KIT



Dear Reader,

I imagine us at a way station, between destinations. The location could be anywhere, though in my mind, it's probably West Africa. The station is a cool mud and plaster building with open windows and a tin roof. Maybe we arrived by camel or on horseback, or perhaps we were transported by a reliable Peugeot station wagon. We still stay the night. After dinner, we sit at a table with a hurricane lamp. And you or I—one of us—pull out a book. The other asks: "What have you got there?" The other will begin to read aloud.

This is the atmosphere I want to conjure when I write: the intimacy of a shared story on an evening when two people who have not known each other before meet for the first time.

I want to stop a while with you and tell you my story.


And I want to talk about it. Is it a worthy story? What struck you as you read? What in your own life does my story bring to mind? Will you tell me?

*Swimming Between Worlds* is about three Americans converging in a small town. They tell each other their stories, their secret harms, their fears, their aspirations.

One of our greatest needs as human beings is to hear and tell stories. Books are the brilliant invention of our ancestors, devised for sharing stories long distance, across space and time.

I'm grateful that you are going to read mine. I hope it reaches you where you live, in your neighborhood; at a favorite café; in a garden; at your church, synagogue, or mosque; or a library. I hope you feel a connection. As if we were together at that way station. Maybe this book will light your way.

My warm regards,  
Elaine Neil Orr



# Discussion Questions

1 Chapter One begins with the line “Tacker Hart came home from Nigeria to discover a town he almost knew.” Do you think Tacker ultimately understands the town more or less by the end of the novel? What are the factors that shape his changing consciousness?

2 Tacker and Kate meet Gaines on the same day but respond to him in very different ways. How does each character see Gaines initially, and why? How does this view of Gaines change over the course of the novel? Whose friendship surprised you the most?

3 The novel’s title, *Swimming Between Worlds*, emphasizes the important role that water plays in the story. How does water shape the lives of the main characters? What significance does the act of swimming hold in relation to the novel’s themes?

4 Why is a grocery store such a surprising yet likely setting for the unfolding of this particular story? How do houses and architecture play a role in all of the characters’ destinies?

5 In many ways, this is a coming-of-age story—we see Tacker, Kate, and Gaines searching for their places in the world. What one thing does each character seek most dearly, and why? Has each character achieved his or her goal at the end of the novel? Did their wants and desires resonate with your own memories of being a young adult?

6 Tacker experiences the minutiae of day-to-day life in both Nigeria and North Carolina. In what ways does each place fulfill the idea of “home” for Tacker? Do you think he would be happier living in one place over the other?

7 Tacker and Kate’s romantic relationship undergoes numerous ups and downs. What did you think of their courtship and its challenges? Did their romance develop the way you expected? How did each character have to grow and change to achieve a loving relationship?

8 Throughout the novel, the reader is invited back to experience the full backstory of Tacker’s time in Nigeria. How does Tacker’s experience in West Africa frame his perception of the emerging civil rights movement? Have you read any other work that connects West Africa and American civil rights in this way?

9 Examine the scene in which Kate nearly faints and is helped to the lunch counter by Gaines. Why do you think this is the moment when her beliefs and perceptions truly change? What is its significance?

10 Discuss the ways in which Kate changes over the course of the novel. How does photography enable her to come to terms with the past and her choices for the future? Consider the line “This seemed, finally, the clear truth of the camera: that the eye sees what it expects to see.” How is this true not only for Kate, but for other characters in the novel?

11 Tacker’s choice of whether to design the bathhouse places him at the center of a difficult moral dilemma. Do you think he ultimately makes the right decision? What would you have done in his place?

12 What did you think of the novel’s ending? Were you surprised by Kate’s decision at the conclusion of the book? What do you think her future holds? Do you anticipate that her friendship with Gaines and Valentine will endure?

13 How would this story be different if it were set in the Winston-Salem of today? What similarities exist between then and now?

Also by **ELAINE NEIL ORR**

**“As lyrical and passionate a novel as has ever been written, *A Different Sun* shines in the mind like a rare gem. . . . A memorable and altogether original story.”**

—LEE SMITH,

*New York Times* bestselling author of *Fair and Tender Ladies* and *The Last Girls*

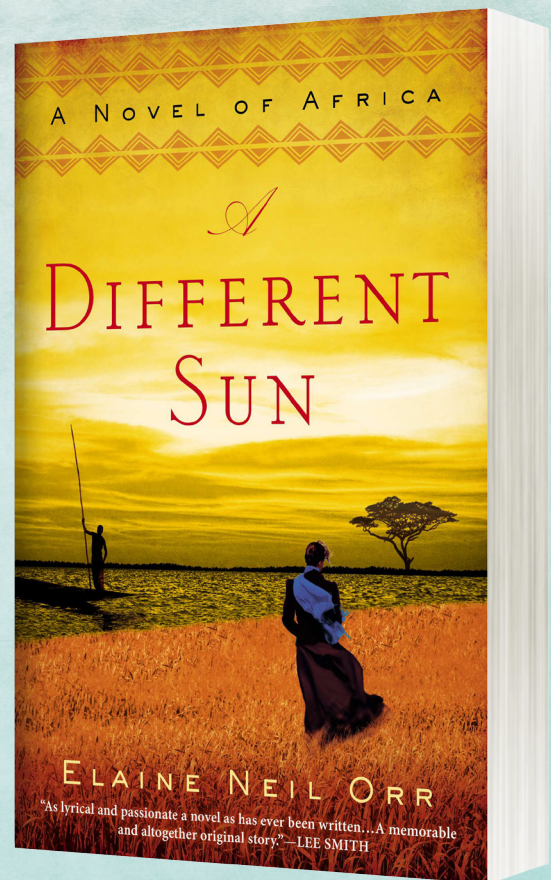


Photo by Elizabeth Galecke Photography

**ELAINE NEIL ORR** is Professor of English at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, where she teaches world literature and creative writing. She also serves on the faculty of the low-residency MFA in Writing program at Spalding University in Louisville. Author of *A Different Sun*, two scholarly books, and the memoir *Gods of Noonday: A White Girl's African Life*, she has been a featured speaker and writer-in-residence at numerous universities and conferences and is a frequent fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. She grew up in Nigeria.

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