

# **Swimming Between Worlds**

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?