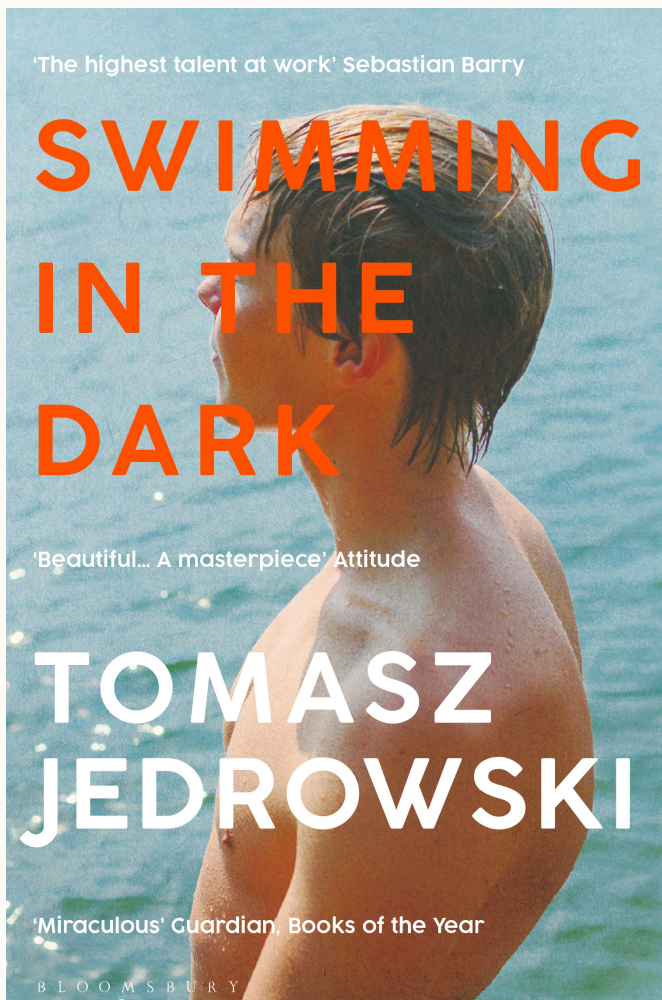


Dua's Monthly Read
SERVICE95
BOOK CLUB

Swimming In The Dark



by **TOMASZ
JEDROWSKI**

Discussion Guide
May 2024



Tomasz Jedrowski was born in West Germany

to Polish parents and studied law at the University of Cambridge and the Université de Paris. He speaks five languages and currently lives in France with his husband. *Swimming In The Dark* is his first novel. It has been translated into 18 languages and was a finalist for the Polari First Book Prize (2021).

Synopsis

Poland, 1980. Anxious, disillusioned Ludwik Glowacki, soon to graduate university, has been sent along with the rest of his class to an agricultural camp. Here he meets Janusz and, together, they spend a dreamlike summer swimming in secluded lakes, reading forbidden books – and falling in love.

But with summer over, the two are sent back to Warsaw, and to the harsh realities of life under the Communist Party. Exiled from paradise, Ludwik and Janusz must decide how they will survive; and in their different choices, find themselves torn apart.

Lyrical and sensual, immersive and intense, *Swimming In The Dark* is an unforgettable debut about youth, love, and loss – and the sacrifices we make to live lives with meaning.



Why we *loved* it



“My May Monthly Read is *Swimming In The Dark* by Tomasz Jedrowski. It’s a beautiful coming-of-age love story set against the brutal political backdrop of Communist Poland in the 1980s. Young lovers Ludwik and Janusz spend an idyllic summer wild camping and swimming in lakes, but when the time comes to return to Warsaw, the moral compromises they will have to make to continue their forbidden romance become apparent. At the same time, the country is suffering its own identity crisis – Communism is beginning to crumble, and Ludwik and Janusz find they are not the only ones living a lie.

“Taking the form of a love letter from Ludwik to Janusz, reading *Swimming In The Dark* is a bit like peering into someone’s most intimate moments of self-discovery. It’s poetic and tender, burning with a quiet rage at the persecution the LGBTQIA+ community in Poland has suffered for decades – and continues to fight against today. It’s a beautiful story – I hope you love it as much as I do”

— Dua Lipa

What others say

“Politics and intimacy collide constantly in Tomasz Jedrowski’s enthralling debut, which locates Ludwik and Janusz’s search for sexual and emotional liberty against a wider backdrop of a country struggling to define its own identity”

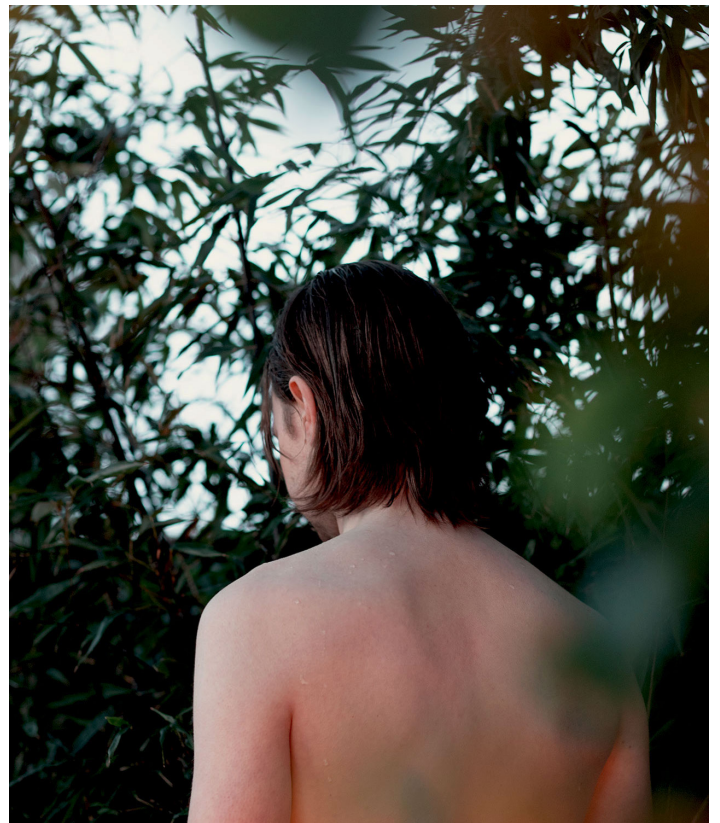
– Tash Aw, *TLS*

“Imagine *Call Me By Your Name* set in Communist Poland and you’ll get a sense of Jedrowski’s moving debut about a consuming love affair amidst a country being torn apart”

– O, *The Oprah Magazine*

“This is a lyrical exploration of the conflict between gay love and political conformity. Jedrowski is an authentic new international star”

– Edmund White



From Communism To Democracy: The Evolution Of LGBTQIA+ Rights In Poland

Mark Lynas



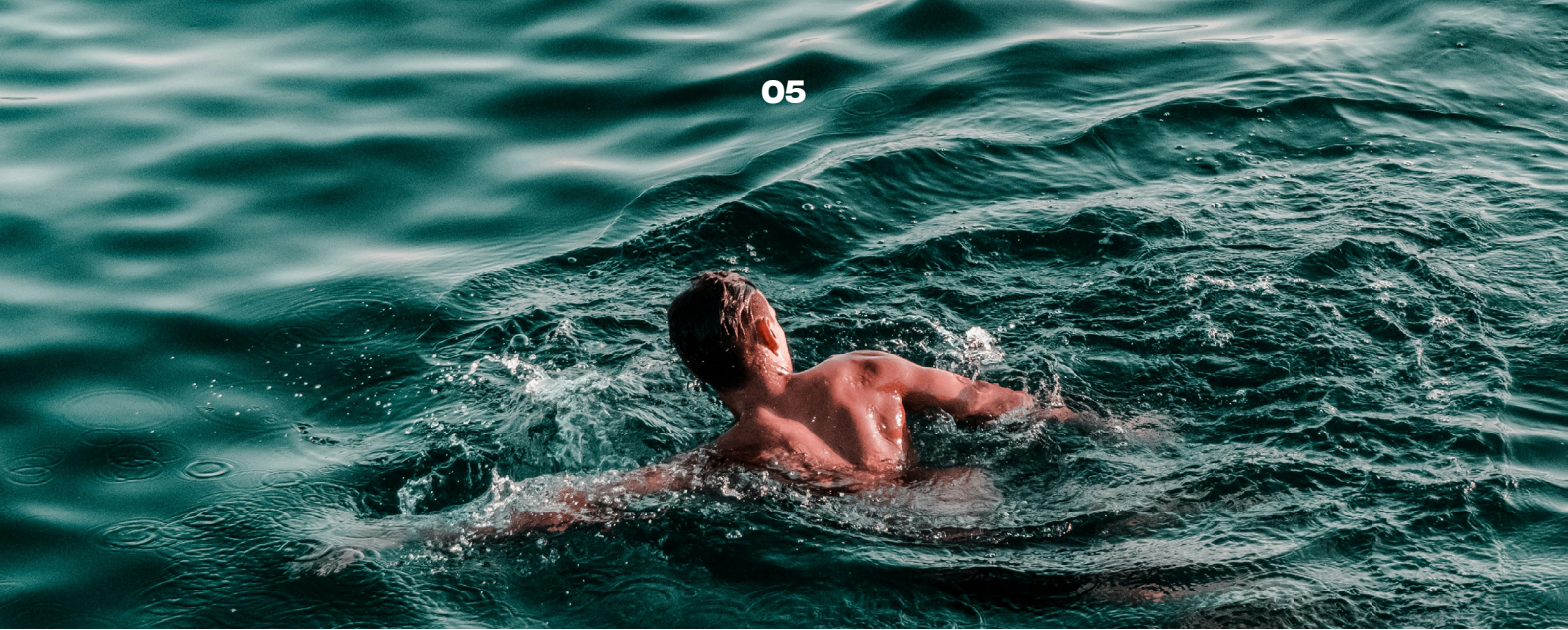
By the 1980s, virtually no-one in Communist Poland still believed in Communism. The Polish People's Republic, an Eastern European puppet state established by the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin in the aftermath of the Second World War, was by then several decades old. As part of the Warsaw Pact of 1955, Poland found itself on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain, and life for ordinary people was severely curtailed. Media was censored, the secret police listened in to phone calls, and basic goods were rationed. As much of Warsaw had been destroyed by bombing in the war, many people lived in Soviet-style drab tower blocks.

This pervasive gloom born of political and economic stagnation forms the backdrop of Tomasz Jedrowski's novel *Swimming In The Dark*, a masterful coming-of-age story about gay life in Cold War Poland. The story illustrates how ordinary people were forced to lead double lives, outwardly pretending to believe in the Communist system despite its widespread corruption and the knowledge that living standards in the capitalist West were much higher. Like Jedrowski's protagonists Ludwik and Janusz, many citizens – including gay people – lived in constant fear of arrest, blackmail or worse.

While LGBTQIA+ activity was never officially illegal, the combined conservatism of the Communist authorities and the Catholic Church, the predominant religion in Poland at the time, made open same-sex relationships impossible – a tension that forms the main narrative drive of the book.

Swimming In The Dark also references the political opposition that was beginning to mobilise in Poland at the time, with workers' strikes and the rise of the pro-democracy trade union movement [Solidarity](#). By the 1970s, the state was bankrupt and forced to borrow from the West, leaving Polish currency increasingly worthless. As a result, there were constant shortages of basic goods and medicine. In 1981, the Communist government [proclaimed martial law](#), driving Solidarity underground. But efforts to crush the opposition failed and by the late 1980s, nationwide strikes and marches forced the Communists to allow Solidarity into government as a political party. The regime officially ended with the first free elections in June 1989. That year also brought revolutions, which led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Communism across Eastern Europe.

In the new democratic Poland, the situation for LGBTQIA+ people improved as society became more free, but there have also been serious setbacks. Pride marches have been opposed by politicians, and in just the past decade, the ruling ultra-conservative Law and Justice Party made opposing "LGBT ideology" one of the centrepieces of its political campaigns. Many regions and towns declared themselves "[LGBT-free zones](#)" in a conservative backlash encouraged by Law and Justice. However, [Law and Justice lost](#) the most recent elections in October 2023, which brought a more liberal government led by Donald Tusk to power. The new government has [made efforts](#) to promote marriage equality and to integrate EU human rights laws that the previous government had refused to implement. Same-sex marriages are still not recognised, however, and there is a long way to go until LGBTQIA+ people have truly equal rights in Poland.



Questions

Here are a few questions to help you think about the book from different angles, whether you do that on your own, discuss them with your friends or take them to your local or virtual book club.

1. “This wasn’t distraction or entertainment: here was a book that seemed to have been written for me,” says Ludwik. How does James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* anchor and shape this story?
2. The book opens with Ludwik in Manhattan as martial law is declared in Poland. In what other ways are Ludwik and Janusz exiled from one another?
3. “I don’t know whether I ever want you to read this, but I know that I need to write it.” What effect does this letter form have on your reading experience?
4. Initially Ludwik talks of his sexuality in terms of “shame”, whereas Janusz sees a practical solution in Hania. How is queerness under Polish Communism explored in *Swimming In The Dark*?
5. At the work education camp, Comrade Leader Belker tells the graduates, “Obedience is the key.” How do Ludwik and Janusz each negotiate “obedience” in *Swimming In The Dark*?
6. “We just need to mind our own business. Avoid risks, be smart,” Janusz tells Ludwik. Can you understand Janusz’s actions?
7. “What’s wrong with dreaming about freedom?” Ludwik asks Janusz. How does Jedrowski combine the struggles of sexual and emotional freedom with a nation searching for its identity?
8. Do you feel for Hania as well as Ludwik and Janusz?
9. Ludwik shows us that history is written on the Warsaw streets. How do the secrets of the past loom over the present in *Swimming In The Dark*?
10. “I came to a new country, a new city, and decided to leave my loneliness behind.” Do you think Ludwik achieves this?

Interviews with Tomasz Jedrowski



Read

[*Swimming In The Dark* Captures Love And Rebellion Among Men In 1980s Poland – Jezebel, 2020](#)

Tomasz Jedrowski on why he writes in English, his past life as a corporate lawyer and ‘coming out’ as a writer.

[On Writing The Story Of Polish Queerness – Literary Hub, 2020](#)

Tomasz Jedrowski returns to Warsaw: “A small part of me still believed that Poland wouldn’t want me or my story about two young men falling in love under Communism.”

Listen

[Tomasz Jedrowski’s Debut Novel Tells A Teenage Love Story In ’80s Poland - NPR, 2020](#)

Tomasz Jedrowski talks to NPR’s Ari Shapiro about his relationship with his parents and learning about Poland’s history through their experiences.

Further Reading

[*Giovanni’s Room* by James Baldwin.](#)

Groundbreaking in its treatment of queer relationships and the stigma surrounding them in the 1950s, Baldwin’s concise masterpiece focuses on David and Hella’s separation in Paris and David’s subsequent entanglement with the passionate Giovanni.

[In Poland, The Home Of ‘LGBT-Free Zones’, There Is Hope At Last For The Queer Community – The Guardian, 2023](#)

Roch Dunin-Wasowicz writes about hope for Poland’s LGTBQIA+ community following the recent election and change of government.



[A Walk Around Warsaw With Tomasz Jędrowski \[Spacer po Warszawie z Tomaszem Jędrowskim\] – Vogue Polska, 2020](#)

The author guides us around night-time Warsaw – contemporary and 40 years ago. In Polish.