Young Woman and the Sea: How Trudy Ederle Conquered the English Channel and Inspired the World by Glenn Stout

Product Description
In 1926, before skirt lengths inched above the knee and before anyone was ready to accept that a woman could test herself physically, a plucky American teenager named Trudy Ederle captured the imagination of the world when she became the first woman to swim the English Channel. It was, and still is, a feat more incredible and uncommon than scaling Mount Everest. Upon her return to the United States, Trudy of America became the most famous woman in the world. And just as quickly, she disappeared from the public eye. Set against the backdrop of the roaring 1920s, Young Woman and the Sea is the dramatic and inspiring story of Ederle's pursuit of a goal no one believed possible, and the price she paid. The moment Trudy set foot on land, triumphant, she had shattered centuries of stereotypes and opened doors for generations of women to come. A truly magnetic and often misunderstood character whose story is largely forgotten, Trudy Ederle comes alive in these pages through Glenn Stout's exhaustive new research. A Q&A with Glenn Stout, Author of Young Woman and the Sea

Q: What attracted you to the story of Trudy Ederle? How did you first hear about it?
A: I stumbled across her story nearly a decade ago while working with the late David Halberstam on the collection we did together, The Best Sports Writing of the Century. Although a story about Trudy did not make it into that volume, I was nevertheless intrigued by the brief account I read. Despite the fact that I had previously written a great deal about women's sports figures and sports history--writing profiles of pioneers such as Eleanora Sears and Louise Stokes, and ghostwriting biographies Mia Hamm, the tennis-playing Williams sisters, skater Tara Lipinski and others--Trudy's story had somehow eluded me. Over the next five or six years, as I fulfilled other commitments, I periodically researched her story until I was able to determine there was enough for a book; no one had ever written a biography of her before. You know, when she swam the Channel she was only nineteen years old, the first woman to do so. Only five others--all men--had swum the Channel at the time, and Trudy beat the men's record by nearly two hours! That stunned me, particularly after I learned that fewer people have swum the Channel than have climbed Mount Everest. Even today, swimming the Channel is one of the most difficult athletic feats on
the planet. So I started poking around at the story. Even a cursory look at old newspaper accounts convinced me of its importance, because Trudy and her achievement are groundbreaking: in the mid-1920s there were virtually no female athletes. In fact there was still considerable debate over not only whether women had the right to compete as athletes, but whether they were even physically able to do so. When Trudy swam the Channel two hours faster than a man, she blew that argument right out of the water, forever and for all time. I cannot think of a more important female athlete—no even Babe Didrikson or Billie Jean King is comparable. She's a terrific role model for any young woman—or, for that matter, anyone of any age or gender.

Q: In the book you provide a very detailed account of Trudy's swim that, in a sense, allows the reader to accompany her across. How were you able to do that?

A: That was a real challenge. All I could do was try to steep myself in research and then combine that with my own life experiences in an attempt to gain access to hers. I knew when I started the book that I somehow needed to give the reader a feel for what it was like for her to spend fourteen-and-a-half hours in the Channel. Fortunately, at about the time I began working on the book I started spending a great deal of time on the water myself. I'm not much of a swimmer, but I live on Lake Champlain in Vermont and have kayaked hundreds of miles in all sorts of weather conditions, giving me some sense of what it was like for her to be tossed about the Channel for so long. I've also been a runner for thirty years and have some empathy for individual athletic challenges. On the research side, I read accounts of other Channel swimmers, scoured old newspaper stories about Trudy, looked at photographs and film footage of her swim and others, spoke with swimmers, and read every interview with her I could find. Eventually, I collected more than six thousand clippings. In that way I was, in a sense, able to "inhabit" her experience and—I hope—present it with authenticity. I created not only a timetable for the actual swim, so I knew where she was at each moment, but also a detailed list of every impression or sensation she ever mentioned experiencing while in the water. As I re-created her crossing, I used press bulletins as checkpoints for her journey, and thus re-created not only the facts of her journey, but, as much as possible, the experience itself. And I think I did. I recently received an unsolicited e-mail from a reviewer, an experienced Channel swimmer. She wrote, "You really were able to capture open-water swimming and what it is all about." That's the best review I could ever ask for.

Q: Is this book just for swimmers or athletes?

A: Oh, my gosh, no, although I think anyone who swims or competes in anything will obviously find Trudy's story personally meaningful. But really, I think Young Woman and the Sea is a universal story, one that naturally will be particularly appealing to girls and women, as well as to students of
history and readers drawn to stories of inspiration, adventure, and perseverance against the odds. It is also thoroughly modern—swimming the Channel was probably the first “extreme” sport. And the story takes place in the 1920s, which is a particularly rich time period to write about. In many ways Trudy was emblematic of the age, of the transition from the Victorian era to the Roaring Twenties. She was a girl of her time. She wore her hair in a bob and liked to dance, drive fast, and listen to what she called “hot American jazz.” In fact, while she swam the Channel, the boat played recordings of popular songs on a gramophone to help her fight boredom and keep pace. It was her version of an iPod. As much as any suffragette, Trudy was a true pioneer. When Trudy tried to swim the Channel she was going headlong against the conventions of the day. She had failed in her first attempt to cross, and near the end of her second, successful attempt, much of which took place in a gale that kept most of the Channels boats in port that day, her trainer tried to convince her to quit. Trudy asked, “What for?” and no one had an answer to that. She was determined to succeed, no matter what; it was that simple. In that sense her story is inspirational for anyone who has ever been told her or she could not do something--the whole world was telling Trudy she could not swim the Channel, yet this nineteen-year-old girl believed in herself and swam the Channel anyway. While she was keenly aware that she would become the first woman to do so, it was also personal to her. She was partially deaf and felt a bit out of place in the world, but in the water she felt completely at home. There, she wasn’t disabled. For her, swimming the Channel was like staking a claim to her own identity, a way to find her true self. She had a spiritual connection to the sea, once saying, “To me, the sea is like a person--like a child that I’ve known a long time. It sounds crazy, I know, but when I swim in the sea I talk to it. I never feel alone when I’m out there.”

Q: Wha

My Personal Review:
Glenn Stout took a story I had never heard about, and a subject matter in which I had very little curiosity, and made it interesting, captivating and relevant. His in-depth research equipped him with the information to present a fascinating and detailed account of Ederle’s historic tale, making readers feel like we are there with her as she is swimming, giving us insight as to the challenges that surrounded her and her motivation from within. Stout has already established himself as a successful writer, especially on the topic of sports, so I wasn’t surprised by his mastery in providing such engaging commentary... but I was surprised by how quickly and completely this book drew me in and carried me along, much like the sea did for young Trudy Ederle. With cleverly transitioned segues and several pivotal "aha!" moments, Stout earned my interest, kept my attention and delivered an intriguing narrative that gives perspective on the importance of Ederle’s accomplishments and sheds much needed light on her legacy and the overdue recognition it deserves.