

GAE POLISNER

on writing

THE SUMMER OF LETTING GO

As a kid, although I was graceful, I was never athletic. I couldn't catch or hit a ball to save my life. Despite a brief stint as a gymnast in my childhood, I never viewed myself as an athlete, never played team sports, and was always picked last for the team in gym.

I carried that view of myself—the nonathlete—into adulthood: that I was not physically capable or strong. Sure, I did stuff to stay in shape: yoga, Pilates, swimming in my backyard pool. But those activities didn't change my view of who I was.

In 2009, on a whim, I joined a group of open-water swimmers who venture out daily into Long Island Sound. I had no idea what I was doing. My first day, I remember heading toward the water in my wet suit and goggles, cold and terrified, wondering what I, a middle-aged nonathlete, was doing amid these marathoners and triathletes. It was late May and the water was Cold (yes, with a capital C, especially considering I was used to swimming in an 86-degree pool). In addition, there were currents and waves to deal with, not to mention jellyfish and bunker boils to watch out for, the latter signaling the presence of swarms of feeding (biting) bluefish. Every cell in my body screamed out that it wasn't for me, but I was determined to reinvent myself and be brave.



GAE POLISNER

is the award-winning author of *The Pull of Gravity*, also for young adults. She is a family law mediator by trade but a writer by calling. She lives on Long Island with her husband and two sons. When she's not writing, she can be found in a pool or, in warmer weather, in her wet suit in the open waters of Long Island Sound. *The Summer of Letting Go* is her second novel for teen readers.

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We waded in and the rest of the group rocketed ahead, leaving me alone in the rough, swirling waters. I probably made it half a mile before another swimmer came back for me, told me I had likely done enough for my first day, and I headed back to shore. I slept for two hours when I got home.

I went back the next day and the day after that, and by the end of July 2009, I'd swum in my first 5K. By the end of last summer, I'd completed a five-mile swim. The churning water had reshaped my view of myself, polishing who I could become.

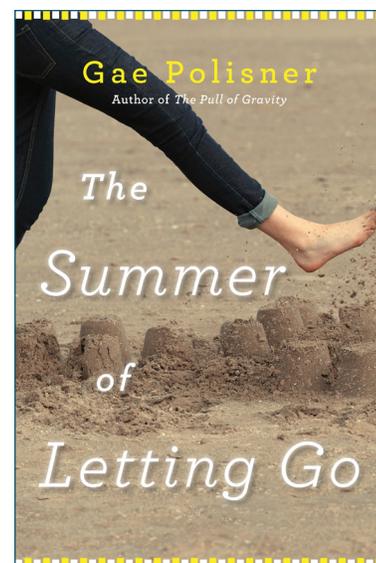
The open water has become synonymous with bliss for me, freedom, a place—the only place—where I always feel ageless and weightless and carefree. The water heals and restores me, even though I am also acutely aware and reverent of its power. Last Fourth of July, a storm hit and a boat capsized in the waters where we swim. Several of the people on board drowned, including three beautiful children.

When I set out to write *The Summer of Letting Go*, I knew I wanted to explore a few themes: friendship, first love, spiritual questioning, issues of loss and forgiveness (especially the ability to forgive oneself), and, yes, the fury and healing power of water. In my head, the book became my “swimming book,” the book where water would both take away and restore.

So, I set Francesca's story primarily at the Hamlet Dunes Country Club pool, where she first meets toddler Frankie Sky when he dives into the water thinking he can swim. Francesca, who has spent the past several years afraid of the water, and afraid to really live her life, as a result of past tragedy, is instantly drawn to Frankie and his fearlessness, and soon enough she starts to think he may be the reincarnation of her brother. But if she's going to be Frankie's mother's helper for the summer, then she must brave the water again—and literally and metaphorically relearn how to swim.

I guess in some ways I wrote this book as my ode to water. I really wanted the reader to feel the water like I do, the way it slips open around us to let us in. The cool, silky, buoying sensation of a pool swim on those days Francesca wades in and lets the water envelop her. And the merciless force of it as she recalls how it swept her brother away. Through Francesca's friendship with Lisette, her intense crush on Bradley Stephenson, and her memories of her brother, Simon, I wanted to lay bare some of the spiritual and ethical questions I've mulled over in my own life about love, friendship, death, and what might come after.

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