

CHAPTER SAMPLER

The Water you're Swimming In

Rachel Schwartz Fagan

The Water you're Swimming In

Rachel Schwartz Fagan

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

Copyright © Rachel Schwartz Fagan 2026

Published in Canada and the United States in 2026 by Orca Book Publishers.

All rights are reserved, including those for text and data mining, artificial intelligence (AI) training and similar technologies. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system now known or to be invented, without permission in writing from the publisher. The publisher expressly prohibits the use of this work in connection with the development of any software program, including, without limitation, training a machine-learning or generative AI system.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: The water you're swimming in / Rachel Schwartz Fagan.

Other titles: Water you are swimming in

Names: Schwartz Fagan, Rachel, author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20250179989 | Canadiana (ebook) 20250179997 |

ISBN 9781459840775 (softcover) |

ISBN 9781459840782 (PDF) | ISBN 9781459840799 (EPUB)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS8637.C593 W37 2026 | DDC jc813/.6—dc23

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025934019

Summary: In this moving middle-grade novel, Noah tries to be the perfect kid to keep his parents happy and his anxiety at bay after his teenage brother runs away, but he finds himself foundering and sets off to find his brother himself.

Orca Book Publishers is committed to reducing the consumption of nonrenewable resources in the production of our books. We make every effort to use materials that support a sustainable future.

Orca Book Publishers gratefully acknowledges the support for its publishing programs provided by the following agencies: the Government of Canada, the Canada Council for the Arts and the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

Cover artwork by Brady Sato.

Design by Rachel Page.

Edited by Sarah Howden.

Author photo by Johnny Lo (Tsun Yip).

Includes lyrics from the following folk songs: “The Mermaid,” “Farewell to Nova Scotia,” “Crocodile Song,” “Peggy Gordon” and “Fish in the Sea”/“Windy Old Weather.” As these songs have been passed down over generations, the lyrics can vary widely.

Printed and bound in Canada.

29 28 27 26 • 1 2 3 4

 **CERTIFIED CANADIAN PUBLISHER**



ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS
orcabook.com

To Mom—thanks for the ocean waves and the good books.



1

No Outside Shoes

It wasn't a big pool, but when I was swimming, it felt like the ocean.

If you stuck your head underwater while kids jumped into the deep end, it sounded like crashing waves. And if you shut your eyes when the lifeguard blew her whistle, you could pretend it was the squawk of a seagull.

Sometimes kids tracked sand and dirt onto the deck, and the lifeguard would blow her whistle and yell, "No outside shoes!" But I wished they'd track in so much sand we could all build sandcastles under the fluorescent lights.

Four to six p.m. was lane swim, where we'd all line up and take turns with our breaststroke and butterfly and backstroke and sometimes even sidestroke. But you can't win races with the sidestroke.

So, like I said, from four to six p.m. kids, and sometimes an adult or two, would line up and practice their strokes. Most people would come and go. Do a couple lanes, then get a soda or candy bar from the vending machine. But I always stayed the full two hours.

And when the lifeguard blew her whistle and yelled, “Lane time is over for today, folks!” we’d all get out, and the moms and their babies would come in for the Lil’ Dippers program, the pool filled with splashing and laughing and crying. Sometimes one of the little kids would poop right there in the pool, and everybody would have to get out.

I always stayed and watched for a few minutes. The kids and their floaties almost turn the whole pool into a real beach, with their dirty feet and their inflatable toys. I can almost feel the sand squish between my toes. If I reached down, I could probably grab a clamshell.

Of course, living in Bible Hill, Nova Scotia, it’s just a cool forty-minute drive to the ocean. But I don’t go there much anymore, now that Jamie isn’t around.



2

Why We Don't Go to Christian School

The Scotia Pool Society runs the pool in my town. It's a modest five lanes, twenty-five meters long. The Scotia pool is nothing like the big pool in the Truro community center across the way. But it's what we've got.

My town sits on the bank of the Salmon River, and the Salmon River leads into the Bay of Fundy and out into the ocean. We're a small town, just five thousand people. We have one elementary school that goes from kindergarten to fourth grade, one junior school for eighth and ninth grades and one Christian school where kids can go from kindergarten to twelfth grade. So what do you do if you aren't Christian and need to go to grades five, six, seven or high school? You have

to go to Truro or Valley, because Bible Hill just doesn't have enough kids to put all the schools here.

There's an unspoken rivalry between the public schoolers and Christian schoolers. Snowball fights rage all winter, and as soon as summer hits it's a full-out water-balloon war. If you don't keep your eyes open at all times, sooner than later you're going to get a ball of ice square in the back or a water balloon splat in the face. Or, if you're really unlucky, one of the bolder kids will put a snowball right down your jacket or just dump a bucket of water on you if you get too close.

Jamie always used to watch my back, but he never needed any help. He was the fastest runner and the boldest of us all. Once, when he was in eighth grade, he jammed fistfuls of snow down two twelfth graders' jackets. Before they could even turn around, he had booked it over the fence, and we could hear him laughing all the way down the road to our school.

I'm in eighth grade now, but I'd never be that brave. I guess it's lucky that kids mostly ignore me. I've gotten it once or twice, of course. But more often than not, other kids act like I'm invisible. Sure, I say hi to people in the halls sometimes. Or they say hi to me. But I never get invited to birthday parties or other kids' houses or anything like that.

"You just wait 'til you get into a great university, and those kids are left sitting on the sidewalk picking their noses," Dad always says every time the neighbors start putting up streamers and balloons. Or he used to say it anyway.

And every time he did, it would make Jamie get up quickly and slam the door to his room.

These days Mom and Dad are usually out on a drive. Or making quiet phone calls in the bedroom. Or sometimes I walk in on them deep in conversation, and they'll stop at the sound of the door.

Dad still says, "Hiya, kiddo," when I walk in. But the words sound unnatural in his mouth, and his smile isn't real. And I've started doing my homework in Jamie's room. Under the disapproving eyes of his band posters.

"Keep that up and you'll get a boring job and a nice house," Jamie used to say as he hopped out of the window. "You're heading straight for a white picket fence, Noah. Mom and Dad couldn't be happier."

Me and Jamie are public school kids. When my parents enrolled us, my Granny Hazel said to my dad, "Matthew, those kids are going straight down, down, down if you don't see that they get a proper Christian education." My dad just smiled and nodded and sent us right to public school anyway.

That was a big difference between my mom's family and my dad's family. My dad's family came from a long line of devout Christians. They spent their Christmases at church and baptized every single baby. But Mom came from a long line of fiddling herbalists—the Rafferty clan.

My grandma's grandma was a midwife. And when she wasn't delivering babies, she was making special herbal remedies for the early inhabitants of Bible Hill and other towns throughout the county and beyond. "From Shubenacadie to

Tatamagouche,” as Mom liked to say proudly when she told people about her great-great-grandma’s herbal remedies.

And when my great-great-great-grandma was all done with her work, she would fiddle the nights away. And so it went, right down the line to Mom. And that’s why we don’t go to the Christian school.

Mom wanted to pass down all the traditions to her children, along with the family name. And Dad didn’t object either, although I don’t think his family was too happy about it. But that was neither here nor there for Mom, who wrote Rafferty on my and Jamie’s birth certificates without any hesitation. And Dad just looked on and smiled, or so I’ve been told.

Mom works as an accountant now, but when me and Jamie are sick, along with our doctor’s prescription we get special teas and wild honey. Mom likes to say she has one foot in the present and one foot in the past. She can do your taxes on her brand-new Mac computer and then put on her apron and cure your earache with wildflowers.

And Mom’s got the fiddler gene too. In the evenings she’ll take her fiddle out and play a tune, with Dad on the piano. She tried to teach me when I was younger, but after I had broken many strings and cried many times, she threw up her hands and said, “This boy wouldn’t know a tune if it danced buck naked on his nose.”

Jamie, on the other hand, can play the fiddle like lightning. All the classic Celtic tunes and new ones too. Have you ever heard Nine Inch Nails played on a Nova Scotia fiddle? Mom

—CHAPTER SAMPLER—
THE WATER YOU'RE SWIMMING IN

used to cover her ears and holler that our great-great-great-grandma was rolling in her grave, but you could see the smile in her eyes.

Those evenings when Mom and Jamie would get their fiddles out and Dad would sit right down at the piano were full of laughter and music. And I'd always sit on the floor laughing and clapping and stomping along with the three of them. Trying not to break the spell 'cause it wasn't often that they all just smiled together without fighting.



3

The Coolest Kid in Bible Hill

There are four styles of stroke officially accepted in competitive swimming: breaststroke, backstroke, butterfly and freestyle. Of course, different competitions have different rules, and every competition has rules about which strokes you can use.

I compete in the eighth-grade category in Bible Hill. And I'm really good. I know everyone says stuff like that, but when I say it, it's true. I've swum in nine whole swimming competitions since I was in fourth grade. I came first place in five, second place in two, and third place in one. I know, I know, that leaves one out. But I wasn't feeling well that day, and I came in last.

I guess I have to say that these are dinky little swimming competitions, usually against about six kids. I really only have

one big competitor, Jessica. She's one of the strongest swimmers in our whole school. Her parents even have a pool, so she can practice whenever she wants. Every time I've come in second place, Jessica came in first. Every swim meet, I see her eyeing me the way I eye her. If a kid can have an archnemesis, I'd say mine is Jessica. Not that we've ever fought or even talked to each other. But I know as sure as I know my own name that at every swimming competition, we are both trying to outdo each other.

The Scotia Pool Society hosts the competitions a few times a year to raise money for the pool. They sell tickets and everything. But it's mostly just parents and siblings in the audience.

Jamie's come to every single competition of mine. He sits in the stands and screams cheers like "NOAH, NOAH, HE'S OUR KID, IF HE CAN'T DO IT, THIS THING'S RIGGED," and sometimes "NOAH'S GOT SPIRIT, YES HE DO, NOAH'S GOT SPIRIT, AND HE'S BETTER THAN YOU!"

That's one of the great things about Jamie—he doesn't care about looking dumb. He just does whatever he wants, and everybody thinks he looks real cool anyway. If you hadn't guessed it already, Jamie is my big brother. He's the coolest, and the fastest, and the baddest kid in Bible Hill. He's a real legend in our town.

When Jamie was three years old, and I was just a bump in my mom's stomach, he toddled away from her at the grocery store one day. Just as she was picking out the nicest, shiniest

apples, my mom noticed that her little three-year-old wasn't holding onto the grocery cart anymore.

Of course, my mom immediately screamed, and the manager rushed over and they made a big announcement and the whole grocery store started looking into carts and under fruit stands and even in the big walk-in refrigerator, but there was no sign of Jamie.

So the grocery-store manager called the police, and soon the whole town was looking. At the playground and in the school, and in all the bushes and parks, and someone even drove out to the highway. But there was no Jamie.

Then the fire department came and had a serious talk with my mom and dad and said we better go and organize a search party to walk through the river, and my mom turned white and fainted right there. My dad caught her and looked real serious and started talking quietly to the fire marshal while he held my mom up with one arm.

So the whole town went down to the Salmon River, real grim and somber, to look for that missing three-year-old who maybe could have drowned. And when they got to the river, there was Jamie, standing knee-deep in the water with a big, glittering salmon lying by him on the bank.

When my mom and dad rushed over to take their son in their arms and kiss him and scold him and ask him what the heck he'd been doing, Jamie just beamed up at them and said, "Yayaya, say hello, fishy." No one knew how a three-year-old could have caught that salmon without even a fishing line to help him, but for the rest of Jamie's childhood all the adults in

Bible Hill used to holler at my parents when they saw them with Jamie, “Hey, Katherine, hey, Matthew, can you get your little boy there to head out to the river and catch us a nice fish for dinner?”

You’d think that would be enough fame for a lifetime, but Jamie was just getting started. When he was only seven years old, he dragged his toboggan all the way up to the top of the big hill by the schoolyard in the dead middle of a winter snowstorm. Now, lots of kids had gone down this hill on a toboggan before. But when the winter snowstorms came, so much snow piled up that it made the hill twice as steep and added huge speed bumps of snow all the way down. When that happened, everybody would have snowball fights at the bottom until some of the snow melted and it was safer to go sledding again. But not Jamie.

Little Jamie took his toboggan and dragged it all the way to the top of the hill, with just about every kid in town standing at the bottom hooting and hollering and wondering out loud if he was going to die. Jamie took one quick look at the crowd below, saluted and jumped on his toboggan.

Everything went pretty well for Jamie until he got about halfway down. Some big drifts of snow had piled up high and made a sort of shelf. When Jamie’s toboggan hit this bump, it went flying. Neither Jamie or his toboggan touched the ground again until they both crash-landed at the bottom of the hill. He came out with a broken wrist and a reputation that followed him all the way to high school.

When high school rolled around, Jamie was ready for it. You know how I said there was an unspoken rivalry between the public-school and Christian-school kids? Well, a lot of that is because of Jamie himself. Of course, there was always a little bit of competition even before. Christian-school and public-school kids compete together at all the sports events. And public-school kids make fun of Christian-school kids' uniforms, and Christian-school kids make fun of public-school kids for getting worse grades than them, even though we all know that the Christian school grades easier. But up until that point, there weren't the snowball fights and squirt-gun fights or anything like that.

On Jamie's first day of high school, he walked out of the building as some Christian-schoolers happened to be walking by on their way home. When they saw Jamie, one kid turned to the other and made a big show of telling a joke real loud.

"Hey, how many public-school kids does it take to change a light bulb?"

"Guess we'll never know 'cause they all flunked out."

Then they both burst out laughing like it was the funniest thing they had ever heard in their lives.

Well, as you might have guessed, Jamie wasn't a kid who took insults sitting down. So that night he came up with a plan. The next morning, halfway through first period, Jamie's homeroom teacher started to hear, "Ohhh, ugghhh," coming from the back of the class. When she looked up from her book, there was Jamie, hunched over and clutching his stomach.

"Jamie, whatever is wrong with you?" she asked, alarmed.

“Uggghhh, Miss, I think I ate some bad scrambled eggs for breakfast. My stomach hurts real bad.”

So, of course, Jamie's teacher told him to just go on home until he felt better. But Jamie didn't go home. He marched straight over to the Christian school. Public-school kids were allowed to go home for lunch. But the Christian-school kids all had to bring their lunches and eat at the school. Don't know why. That's just the way it was.

So all the Christian-school kids would bring lunch bags with them and hang them on hooks outside their classrooms. Now here's where the story gets fuzzy, 'cause no one quite knows how Jamie managed it. But somehow, between first period and third, Jamie stole every single lunch in that school.

And he didn't just take the lunch bags, either. He opened each one, removed its contents and put it right back where he'd found it. So when all the Christian-school kids sat down in their lunchroom and opened their lunch bags, “Man, where's my lunch?” could be heard from about a mile away.

Rumors got around quickly, and soon it was all anyone could talk about. Jamie got called back in to the school, to meet with the principal. But he wouldn't say anything, and nobody had any proof he'd stolen the lunches. So that was that—they had to let him go scot-free. But when we all walked home from school that day, Christian- and public-school kids alike, dozens of apples and grilled cheese sandwiches, and carrot sticks, and chocolate bars, and juice boxes, were bobbing up and down in the Salmon River like ducks in the spring.

After that Jamie was pretty much famous all over Colchester County. Kids would whisper when he walked by or give him sticks of gum or candy bars just so they could say they were his friend. Jamie acted like it was no big deal, which made him that much cooler.

You'd think that would have been enough for the kid. Famous all over the county. But no, Jamie's biggest act was yet to come. For his last legendary feat, at sixteen years old, just twenty-eight days before I'm telling you this story, Jamie ran away from home, all the way to Halifax. He didn't leave Mom and Dad a note or anything, just packed up all his stuff and hopped out the window one night when we were all sleeping.

There was a note for me, though, tucked into my fist when I woke up. These days I wonder if I could have stopped him. If I'd just woken up when he was putting that note into my dumb sleeping hand, I could have made him change his mind. But he wouldn't have wanted me to. I bet he doesn't even miss us.