



## At Swim, Two Boys: A Novel

By Jamie O'Neill

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Praised as “a work of wild, vaulting ambition and achievement” by *Entertainment Weekly*, Jamie O’Neill’s first novel invites comparison to such literary greats as James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and Charles Dickens.

Set during the year preceding the Easter Uprising of 1916—Ireland’s brave but fractured revolt against British rule—*At Swim, Two Boys* is a tender, tragic love story and a brilliant depiction of people caught in the tide of history. Powerful and artful, and ten years in the writing, it is a masterwork from Jamie O’Neill.

Jim Mack is a naïve young scholar and the son of a foolish, aspiring shopkeeper. Doyler Doyle is the rough-diamond son—revolutionary and blasphemous—of Mr. Mack’s old army pal. Out at the Forty Foot, that great jut of rock where gentlemen bathe in the nude, the two boys make a pact: Doyler will teach Jim to swim, and in a year, on Easter of 1916, they will swim to the distant beacon of Muglins Rock and claim that island for themselves. All the while Mr. Mack, who has grand plans for a corner shop empire, remains unaware of the depth of the boys’ burgeoning friendship and of the changing landscape of a nation.

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## At Swim, Two Boys: A Novel By Jamie O'Neill Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

### Amazon.com Review

You may have read the hype. Irishman Jamie O'Neill was working as a London hospital porter when his 10-year labor of love, the 200,000-word manuscript of *At Swim, Two Boys*, written on a laptop during quiet patches at work, was suddenly snapped up for a hefty six-figure advance. For once, the book fully deserves the hype.

In the spring of 1915, Jim Mack and "the Doyler," two Dublin boys, make a pact to swim to an island in Dublin Bay the following Easter. By the time they do, Dublin has been consumed by the Easter Uprising, and the boys' friendship has blossomed into love--a love that will in time be overtaken by tragedy. O'Neill's prose, playing merrily with vocabulary, syntax, and idiom, has unsurprisingly drawn comparisons to James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, but in his creation of comic characters (such as Jim's pathetic but irrepressible father) and in the sheer scale of his work, Charles Dickens springs to mind first. But Dickens never wrote a love story between young men as achingly beautiful as this.

In the character of Anthony MacMurrough, who is haunted by voices as he pursues his illegal and dangerous desire for Dublin boys, O'Neill has created a complex and fascinating center to his novel, rescuing the love story from mawkishness, and allowing a serious meditation on history, politics, and desire. For as Ireland seeks its own future free of British government, so Jim, Doyle, and MacMurrough look back to Sparta to find a way to live. As Dr Scrotes, one of MacMurrough's voices, commands:

Help these boys build a nation of their own. Ransack the histories for clues to their past.  
Plunder the literature for words they can speak.

In this massive, enthralling, and brilliant debut, Jamie O'Neill has indeed done just that: provided a nation for what Walt Whitman calls, in O'Neill's epigraph, "the love of comrades." --Alan Stewart, *Amazon.co.uk*

### From Library Journal

Published last year in Great Britain, this novel has been compared to works by James Joyce (or Flann O'Brien, whose *At Swim-Two-Birds* the title plays on), but it has more in common with the film *Chariots of Fire* in its painterly depiction of male athleticism and relationships. The sheltered son of a pro-British shopkeeper, 16-year-old Jim develops a doting and eventually homosexual relationship with Doyler, a bright boy from an impoverished family, as the two train for an ambitious swim across Dublin Bay on Easter 1916, a date that happens to coincide with a planned Republican uprising. Both become entangled with McMurrrough, scion of wealthy Irish gentry, who is back in Dublin following imprisonment in England for indecent behavior. Jim is too naive and Doyler too politically sophisticated for their years, while McMurrrough is typecast as an Oscar Wilde figure. Still, these are rich characterizations, and together with the playfully rendered Irish dialect they outweigh the book's imperfections. O'Neill also offers gorgeous descriptions of the Dublin environs and remarkable details of the period. Recommended for most fiction collections. Reba Leiding, James Madison Univ. Lib., Harrisonburg, VA  
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### From [Booklist](#)

**\*Starred Review\*** This powerful debut novel, which took Irishman O'Neill 10 years to write, has a truly exhilarating style as the author rhythmically bends language that is, at times, of his own making. It is the story of two boys--scholarly, reticent James and cocksure, poverty-stricken Doyle--and their tragic involvement in the 1916 Easter Uprising. Despite the novel's broad canvas--it tackles class, religion, and patriotism--at heart it is a deeply moving love story. James and Doyle strike up a friendship at Forty Foot, a

local beach, and make plans to swim to Muglins Rock far out in Dublin Bay on Easter Sunday a year hence. As the two draw closer and eventually fall in love, they must contend with disapproval of their relationship from peers and from the church and the jealousy of upper-class Anthony MacMurrough, who has served time in jail for sexual misconduct. James plans to attend college on scholarship and become a schoolteacher, but Doyle, bitter over his own lost chances, is hell-bent on revolution. Over the many pages of his novel, O'Neill creates a stunningly vivid world ("a strange land of rainshine and sunpour") in a language all his own. (See the Read-alikes column, opposite page, for other examples of high Irish style.) *Joanne Wilkinson*  
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