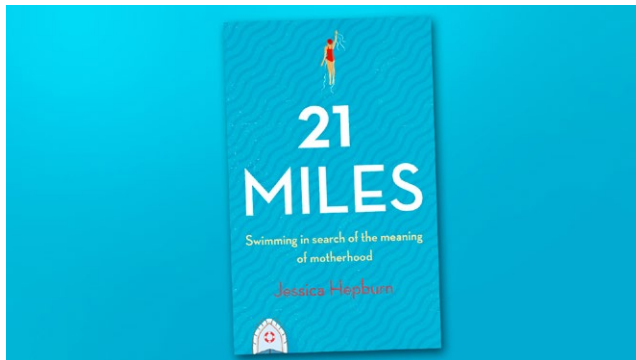


### Book Review

## 21 Miles: Swimming in search of the meaning of motherhood by Jessica Hepburn

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This book tells the moving and inspiring story of Jessica's decision and preparation to swim the English Channel. For many years she focused on her career and became very successful. She always believed that she'd one day be a mum. After eleven rounds of unsuccessful IVF treatment, she decides to do something which will be impressive and will also help her heal. Initially she describes herself as feeling 'like a rope playing tug of war with motherhood on one end and an alternative future doing something big on the other end', which might help her find the meaning in motherlessness. The author shows great strength and determination to fulfil her ambition to swim the channel, which will inspire many others.

Several years ago, whilst on holiday with her husband, she'd written a Bucket List Book. Number one on the list was to have a family. Also on the list amongst other things was her wish to swim the channel. At the time of writing the list she probably never thought this would one day become a reality, as she strongly believed that she'd be a mother. During a conversation at work, she recalls a colleague asking her what challenges she'd like to do to fund-raise and in that moment she recalls her Bucket List and begins making enquiries and preparing for the extremely challenging swim.

She movingly shares her feelings of sadness, shame and emptiness in relation to not being a mother. She talks about the pain of losing something which she never had. She lists the symptoms of what she describes 'the pain of never', which others in a similar situation will recognise and identify with. Weaving poignantly throughout the story is the sadness, pain and feelings of loss she feels as she reflects on her journey over the past few years. The impact which her experiences have had on her and of course the pressure it has had on her relationship with her husband are also reflected on.

There is also a sadness when she describes her experience of travelling alone on this swimming challenge and occasionally she reflects on these feelings of aloneness in comparison to being on the treatment journey which they did together as a couple. Through time she begins to recognise her own inner strength, she's survived multiple rounds of unsuccessful treatment, therefore she slowly begins to believe in herself more as she prepares for and over comes the challenges of training for the swim. She sounds brave and courageous as she learns more, not only about the swim but also about herself. She describes many of the risks and fears she encounters during her training.

In preparation for her swim she decides to contact 21 women who she's personally found to be inspirational. She describes her meetings and conversations with them and the personal impact these have on her. She needs to gain some weight prior to the swim, therefore she also describes her experiences of eating with the women as she gradually builds up her body fat. She asks each of them whether they think motherhood makes them happy or whether they believe they can have a fulfilling life without children. She also asks each woman for one word which they believe will help motivate her to keep her swimming. She recites these words as she swims the Channel.

Many others inspire and encourage her. During the training she begins to recognise the changes within herself and importantly what she's achieved. Interestingly she likens swimming the channel to going through fertility treatment, believing that no matter how hard someone tries, the outcome is not in their control, as there are forces at work which are beyond us, therefore no matter how good you are, how hard you train or however much you want something, you may not make it across. She recognises that she can either fail or succeed and is realistic in believing that there's a higher chance of failure. Therefore there are interesting similarities between her IVF treatment and swimming the channel and she recognises that once again nature is in control. She can't control her body and she can't control the sea.

The book is therefore both moving and inspiring and is also funny and sad. It's a very honest and open reflection of the challenges which the author has faced over the years and is a worth while book for others who face similar challenges to read. It will help encourage others to believe in themselves and hopefully find more meaning and a sense of achievement within their lives.

**Anne Chien**