

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

# SYNCHRO BOY

by SHANNON MCFERRAN

*"A sports novel with so much heart, Synchro Boy dives deep into a pool of assumptions, cruelty, and other people's expectations, and emerges victorious and hopeful."*

—Karen Rivers, author of *Love, Ish* and *The Girl in the Well Is Me*



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**Bart is a teenaged boy drawn to synchronized swimming, which puts his masculinity—and worse—his own expectations into question.**

Sixteen-year-old Bart Lively desperately wants to feel comfortable in his own skin. Being a jock doesn't mean he isn't the target of gay jokes, and the macho culture of his swim team is wearing him down. When he gives in to his curiosity and tries synchronized swimming, he discovers he has a natural talent—not to mention a spark with one of the girls. So when Erika Tenaka asks him to swim the mixed duet with her, he commits to taking them all the way to the Olympics.

But judges' scores and Erika's sudden decision to quit the duet threaten to derail Bart's dream and kill what made the sport so liberating and alluring in the first place. And it doesn't help that as he falls in love with Erika, he's falling in lust with her frenemy ... not to mention a cute boy in the diving club.

Ultimately, Bart will have to give in to his intuition as it leads him to realize there are many ways to be a boy. If he doesn't, he'll lose not only his friendship with Erika but also his new Olympic dream—and the joy he feels as he dances in the deep.

**SHANNON MCFERRAN** studied writing at the University of Victoria and earned an MFA in creative writing from the University of British Columbia. She has published short stories in Canadian literary magazines and a YA anthology. *Synchro Boy* is her first novel. She lives with her husband and daughter in Victoria, British Columbia.



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## Praise for **SYNCHRO BOY**

"I love *Synchro Boy*! I think it is very true to the sport of synchronized swimming. Thank you so much for writing this!"

—**Bill May, synchronized swimming champion**

"*Synchro Boy* is a funny, bittersweet story of a teenaged boy's self-awareness and acceptance, set within that ultimate crucible of teenage lust: the swimming pool. By joining synchro, Bart pushes against the narrow cage of masculinity, only to discover just how hard the bars will push back. Armed with perseverance, hope, and some edifying relationships, he finds the courage to follow his synchro dreams. Readers will come to know and appreciate the challenge and camaraderie of synchronized swimming."

—**Douglas Davy, author of *Switch***

"*Synchro Boy* is the kind of book the world needs more of: a book that challenges readers to think more deeply about gender and gender expression. Bart's story—of a boy who has never fit easily into a gender stereotyped box, who has endured years of gender policing, who is bravely determined to find his own path in both sports and relationships—is an important and powerful one. Readers will cheer Bart on as he swims his way towards 'living a different kind of maleness.'"

—**Robin Stevenson, author of *Pride: Celebrating Diversity & Community***

"With sparkling dialogue and outstanding, believable supporting characters, Shannon McFerran has crafted a captivating debut novel with Olympic-size heart and depth about a young man who bucks gender stereotypes to follow his own path to happiness. *Synchro Boy* will have you cheering and leave you breathless. Dive in! "

—**Warren Firschein, author of *Out of Synch***



# SYNCHRO BOY

Q&A with the author

SHANNON MCFERRAN

*“Know your kid and follow their lead, even when their choices don’t line up with what the dominant culture expects.”*

**Q: A love and appreciation for synchronized swimming as a complex and athletic sport is at the heart of this book. Can you say more about your relationship to the sport?**

A: As a swimmer, but not a synchro swimmer, I appreciated the complexity and challenge involved in the sport when I watched my daughter start out in it. Her club had national-level swimmers who always practised at the same time, and the more I watched them perform, the more the sport grew on me. It’s like any dance—on land, or ice—it’s an emotional performance, with human movement set to music. But this dance is submerged in water; you have to hold your breath—it’s a whole other level of difficult. These swimmers need the athleticism of high-performance racing swimmers and gymnasts to pull off what they do. The hours upon hours of practice to get just the shortest clip of choreography down isn’t something you see when you go to a watershow or you watch synchro on TV—but it was there in front of me for four years. The more I watched, the more I empathized with the struggle of athletes in this sport that’s so under the radar—it doesn’t have half the recognition it deserves, frankly, for men or women in it. And then when I got in the pool and tried it myself, and found that even the most foundational, basic movements take so much work, my appreciation for it tripled.

**Q: You’ve said elsewhere that you wrote this book, in part, to show that “there are many ways to be a boy.” Can you say more about masculinity and sports culture and how that is changing (or how you hope it might change)?**

A: Just speaking for synchro it’s been so strongly gendered female for so long now. Those guys who didn’t care about the stigma and pursued it anyway were rare, but now it feels like we’re hearing more and more stories about boys joining. FINA’s introduction of the mixed duet event at the world championships opened a door there. And I think the generation who are competing in age-group swimming now have a lot fewer biases. Many of these kids are growing up with a new understanding of gender and that’s fantastic—and hopefully it will translate into swimmers of all genders being able to compete at a high level once their generation is the one making the call.



photo by Callie O

Q&A with Shannon McFerran continues on the next page ...



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**Q: At one point in the book, Bart, frustrated with the idea of labelling himself (and the way others label and perceive him), asks his parents: “Why can’t I just be?” How do you think (or hope) parents can support their children as they face pressure to define who they are (or will become) along gendered (and other) expectations?**

A: Know your kid and follow their lead, even when their choices don’t line up with what the dominant culture expects. I can think of the time my daughter was told she should grow her hair out so she could wear a bun for synchro performances when she was in 10 and under competitions. She dutifully grew her hair long over the next year and a half, then right before her next competitive year, she asked to have it all cut off super short—so off we went to the salon. She was so happy, and she didn’t care at all that she was the only kid in a cap during her competitions!

**Q: The book explores the concept of “sexual fluidity.” In a world where we might label ourselves as part of a quest to belong or find our “people”—straight, gay, queer—what possibilities does a sexually fluid identity (or an understanding of sexuality as fluid) open for us?**

A: It frees us. One of Bart’s struggles is to free himself from his own idea that his sexuality must be strictly defined. The idea that you might have sexual preferences that change over a lifespan isn’t something that we hear a lot, but wouldn’t it be a relief to know that that’s okay, that you don’t have to tick off a box and have that always be the only box that applies to you? On one side of that “finding your people” coin you have a positive sense of belonging with a group, but on the other, what happens when you fall in love with someone, or find someone sexy, but their identity challenges that box you ticked for yourself?

**Q: There is a moment in the book where Chelsea and Bart agree that they wouldn’t be where they are athletically (and emotionally) without the support of their moms. In a lot of YA books, parents are portrayed as obstacles to teen characters’ independence or dreams, or, to another extreme, they are absent from the narrative entirely. Was it important to you to include parental dynamics in *Synchro Boy*?**

A: Absolutely—to be believable, there must be a supportive caregiver behind a high-level competitive athlete in a YA story. The demands just aren’t something teens can meet entirely on their own, so Bart couldn’t pursue this independently of *some* adult support—if not a parent. If you think about it, none of the age-group competition scene would run without their caregivers. Athletic clubs basically run on parent labour and sports grants.

From a story perspective, if YA stories are all about teens solving their own problems, it does stand to reason that fictional parents need to be either preoccupied or disposed of—otherwise the narrative would be over pretty quickly. Like why didn’t Bart just have a super supportive dad who would pay for all his synchro training? Well, if a kid protagonist encounters trouble, then gets lots of help from a caring parent, suddenly, there’s no Act 2. But I’ve seen parents in YA I’ve read recently who are supportive yet still stay out of the way enough for the teen protagonist to pursue their goal and learn from their own choices—like Starr’s parents in Angie Thomas’s *The Hate U Give*. Or they’re supportive—but that support *itself* provides conflict for a teen character’s ill-conceived attempt to gain independence, like Rafe’s parents in Bill Konigsberg’s *Openly Straight*. **END**

