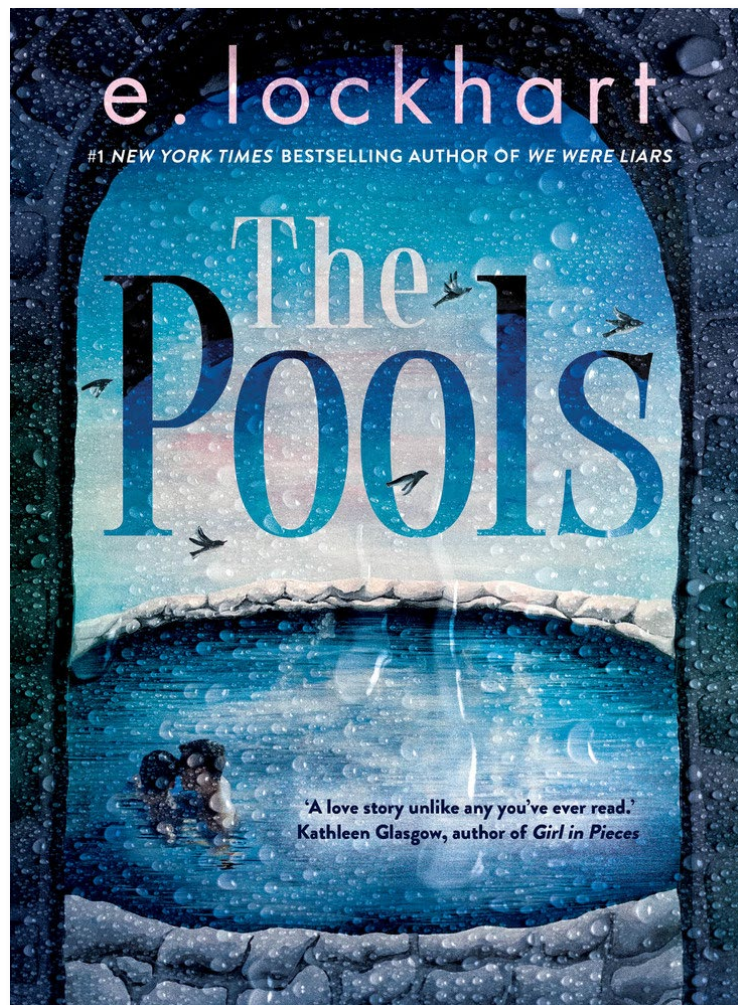




THE POOLS

Written by E. LOCKHART

RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 13–18

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SYNOPSIS:

Once, in a small New England town known for its hot springs, something terrible happened. Something that should have been a warning to stay away from the pools, if the stories were to be believed. But no one is afraid of the water anymore, even if they should be.

When new girl Lexie meets golden boy Chester, their chemistry is undeniable. She's running from a glittering life she won't speak about. He's hiding secrets of his own. Their connection feels bigger than both of them, despite their damage.

One frigid winter morning in that small New England town, five people go for a swim in the pools. Five people, including Chester. What happens there sends shock waves through the town – and changes life as Lexie knows it forever.

This sweeping love story is a modern literary tour de force told through short, poetic chapters that will take the reader to the edge of what's possible for true love.

Q&A WITH E. LOCKHART

What would you say is/are the main theme/s of The Pools?

'The book is the story of a community struggling with the terrible aftermath of a paranormal event. In that way, it's like the TV series *The Leftovers* or the film *Weapons*. It's also a love story where the barrier between the lovers starts out as a class difference and intensifies because both characters are keeping secrets from one another – but then with the paranormal event that happens, their love becomes completely impossible. It's the story of how they cope with their deep love for one another in an absolute crisis that keeps them apart.

'My books often deal with class differences and people who hide parts of themselves from one another – and they're often fairy-tale inflected, watery gothics. Those descriptors are true of *The Pools* as they are of the Liars universe books – but *The Pools* is a big swing for me, stylistically, and a big leap of the imagination, as well.'

Why did you decide to write a verse novel?

'I consider myself not a poet but a storyteller who hijacks a number of the poet's tools – line breaks, internal rhyme, rhythm and repetition, especially – to create effects in prose . . . [And] Because *The Pools* is a fairy tale of sorts, it seemed especially natural to me to tell the story in this way – the same way I would tell a story that is meant to be read aloud.

'A few of the chapters in [the] novel are indeed poems. It was too tempting not to have a go. but mostly, I am just storytelling, the best way I know how.'

What inspired you to write a book about a paranormal event occurring in a town with hot springs?

'I began this book during Covid. I had the idea of a spa town setting, a place where people spend lots of time in communal pools fed by mountain hot springs, after trips I've made to places like Calistoga or Saratoga, and also from a novel that I love: *The Philosopher's Pupil*, by Iris Murdoch. I felt there was a story I could tell in such a setting, but I didn't know what it might be.

'One night, my spouse and I were up on the roof of our building, having a glass of wine – because that was the closest we could come to going out together, during the pandemic. And I was telling him about the hot springs setting, and suddenly I got the idea that the hot springs would turn people into birds. Once I said that, a lot of the novel fell into place in my imagination.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

E. Lockhart is the author of the #1 *New York Times* bestsellers *We Were Liars* and *Family of Liars*, as well as the companion novel *We Fell Apart*. She also invented a superhero for DC Comics. *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks* was a National Book Award finalist and a Printz Honor Book. *Genuine Fraud* was a *New York Times* bestseller and a finalist for the LA Times Book Prize. She has a doctorate in English literature from Columbia University. Visit her online at EmilyLockhart.com, and follow @elockhartbooks on Instagram or TikTok.



QUESTIONS TO START DISCUSSIONS

THE COVER

- Look closely at the book's cover and describe the mood that its blue, white and grey colours create. What does the color scheme lead you to expect?
- What is the effect of the droplets of rain?
- The cover uses a framing device where it seems that the viewer is looking out a window or dark doorway at the pools. Why do you think the book's designer chose to do this?
- What do birds in flight signify to you?
- What do you notice about the two people in the pool? What might their relationship be, and what questions does the image make you want answered?
- If you picked up this book without knowing anything about it, what would you predict the story will be about? Which particular details on the cover led you to that prediction?

THE STORY

- In Part One, E. Lockhart reveals a great deal about both Lexie and Chester before either character directly explains themselves. What does the author tell us outright about them, and what do readers have to deduce from their actions, observations and inner thoughts?
- The story is told through an array of poetic devices, such as line breaks, repetition, its fragmented structure, internal rhyme and rhythm. How do these affect the pace, mood and emotional impact of the story? Does it require you to do more work as a reader, or less? Does it make you feel closer to the characters? Would you prefer a more conventional style of writing?
- Many love stories feature a barrier coming between two lovers, such as class differences or parental opposition. What barriers do Chester and Lexie face? Which obstacle do you think poses the greatest threat to their relationship at this point in the story and why?
- (a) E. Lockhart could have turned all five characters into the same kind of bird, but she deliberately chooses different species for Chester, Orly, Zuri and Paloma/Susannah. What connections can you see between each character's personality and the bird they become? Why might Chester be transformed into a swan rather than any other bird, and what does the symbolism of the swan add to your understanding of his character?
(b) Imagine E. Lockhart had swapped the birds around. Would the story change if she had transformed Chester into a chickadee, Orly an eagle, or Paloma and Susannah swans?
- Part Four is the moment when the novel shifts from a love story into something much more unsettling, and one of its most powerful ideas is that the characters are forced to confront whether identity survives transformation. When Chester, Orly, Zuri, Paloma and Susannah become birds, the people who love them must decide whether they are still the same individuals or something entirely different. Through the reactions of Lexie, Chester's parents

and the wider town, what does Part Four suggest about identity? At what point, if any, does a person stop being the person they once were?

- As the adults search for scientific explanations and practical solutions, Lexie turns to stories, legends and fairy tales for answers. Why do you think E. Lockhart places so much importance on storytelling in Part Five?
- When Chester becomes a swan, Marcus, Grant and Henry initially stay away, even though they care about him. What does their visit to the diner suggest about the strengths and limitations of friendship? What does Lockhart say about how people respond when someone they love changes in ways they don't understand?
- Although they can no longer share conversations, dates or even ordinary experiences together, Chester and Lexie continue to choose each other. What does the novel suggest about the difference between attraction, romance and love?
- What is the significance of the fairy tale about the seven brothers transformed into ravens and their long-suffering sister? Consider the librarian's interpretation of the story, Marcus's belief that humans try to impose logic on both science and magic, and Lexie's realisation that the story is really about sacrifice. What do these different interpretations reveal about the ways people respond to impossible situations? Which view do you think the novel ultimately supports?
- In different ways, Grant, Derek and Allen try to prove themselves through acts of risk-taking, control or protection. How does the novel challenge traditional masculine stereotypes, and what alternatives do characters like Chester and Marcus offer?
- How do you interpret Lexie's mother's decision to swim in the pools and become a bird (a cardinal)?
- At the end of the novel, Chester returns to human form when Lexie sings. Why?
- The novel has a strong gothic quality. What conventions of gothic fiction can you identify in the book? Which did you find the most compelling?
- What is it about fairy tales that fascinates us so much?

IF YOU ENJOYED *THE POOLS* HERE ARE SOME OTHER BOOKS BY E. LOCKHART

