

the  
**original**  
mermaid



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ffc australia  
FOR FILM AND TELEVISION

STUDYGUIDE

ISSUE 31 AUSTRALIAN SCREEN EDUCATION

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he courageous long distance swimmer, Annette Kellerman, was born in 1886 in Sydney (Australia). In the early years of the twentieth century, she became renowned for impressive swims down rivers all over the world (and her attempts to swim the English Channel). Annette Kellerman originated an early form of synchronised swimming, toured as a vaudeville underwater performer and featured as a silent screen film star. She scandalised Boston, too, by sporting a one-piece bathing suit! She was a woman ahead of her times in both physical prowess and expressive creativity.

*The Original Mermaid* (Michael Cordell 2002) presents Kellerman's life story and exploits and reflects on her free spirit as a swimmer and artistic performer. It features archival footage and stills sensually woven together by imaginative editing of abstract reconstructions of underwater diving and swimming.

This documentary offers material for discussion and analysis by students in higher secondary and lower tertiary levels, especially in: women's and gender studies, sports journalism, social and cultural studies, history, sociology, performing arts and cinema studies.

This study guide identifies some of the significant themes in, and key questions to arise from, the documentary and provides references to print and Internet sources for students to explore. Quotes from the documentary script appear in boxes.





## A LIVELIHOOD

Annette Kellerman's father designed a lucrative future for the 16-year-old swimming champion after an economic downturn and the collapse of her mother's music business. In the first stage, he helped established her as a fearless long distance swimmer.

*Dad decided we needed to do something drastic to attract public attention.*

She swam down the Yarra in 1904 and then the muddy Thames. Next she managed to position herself third in a race down the Seine against seventeen men!

*I was the first woman to race against men on the River Seine.*

But the English Channel beat Annette Kellerman three times over.

*It was the most terrible ordeal I ever went through.*

Contracted by the *London Daily Mirror* in 1905 she fought icy seas to repeat Captain Mathew Webb's famous 1875 feat. Few appreciate her audacity as well as Alison Streeter, the current 'Queen of the Channel', who has performed this crossing forty times, but nowadays at a point in history when she already had encouraging role models and the benefits of modern techniques.

*It was desperation, determination and guts.*

After she had become well known for her courageous swims, Annette Kellerman was attracted to the top dollars awarded vaudeville performers. Many of her and her managers' career decisions show a careful strategy of moving from one lucrative niche to another.

*It was to Dad that I owe much of my success ...*

Her father provided a critical support, one assumes especially against her male detractors. After her father died

she proposed to her press agent and producer, Jimmy Sullivan, and in 1912 they embarked on a committed and successful lifelong marriage together.

There is dispute over who manipulated whom in these business relationships and performing enterprises. One way of sifting through the evidence and points in such arguments is to identify the needs and desires of all the contributing parties. What do you think they each wanted and what did they manage to get?

Although many current champions capitalise on the opportunities associated with champion status to gain other forms of income, a generation ago Shane Gould decisively created another life for herself at around the same time as the older Dawn Fraser had to deliver groceries to earn her keep. (For print

references, see the section in this study guide subtitled **Competitive Australian Women Swimmers**.) Swimming, like other sporting and performing activities, remains an unstable profession.

If you were a swimming champion how would you pay to demonstrate and develop your swimming talents and plan for your future? What are the ethics and disadvantages of choosing one strategy over another?

## SELECT HISTORICAL BACKGROUND DETAILS

From the outstanding women from the Annette Kellerman period, mentioned here are two, Isadora Duncan and May Gibbs, who are relevant to her creative and aquatic performances. Both were born in 1877, ten years earlier than Annette Kellerman. Isadora Duncan was born in San Francisco, and while May Gibbs was also born overseas she migrated and became known as an Australian. Both their lives show certain similarities with the experiences and achievements of Annette Kellerman, whose many activities included writing for children (*Fairy Tales*



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of the South Seas: and Other Stories, Sampson Low, Marsten and Co., London, 1926). In particular they represent the heights of female creativity and imagination in the formative period of Kellerman's life.

Isadora Duncan, who pioneered creative self-expression through dance, like Annette Kellerman became an international sensation for defying the expected behaviour of a woman. Duncan railed against the contained physicality of women and established an integrated sense of being in her performances. For both Duncan and Kellerman sexuality was part of their expressive ability and character. Neither perceived sexuality

May Gibbs (www.maygibbs.com.au) used words directly to show that women are capable of fabulous imaginations that extended far into aquatic locations. Her *Gumnut Classics: the Famous Gumnut Adventures* (Angus and Robertson Publishers, North Ryde, 1985) has earned her a place in world children's literature. Her best known works include two water adventures: *Little Obelia and Further Adventures of Ragged Blossom, Snugglepot and Cuddlepie* (87–131) and *Little Ragged Blossom and More About Snugglepot and Cuddlepie* (41–86). Neither of these stories feature mermaids or mermen but rather 'fish folk'. Their tails are appended like extended spines above rather human seeming feet (Slender Long Tom and Mrs Butterfish illustration: 61) and the cherubim-human Ragged Blossom became their queen. In the illustration (79) of the laundry that Ragged Bloss-

som and Snugglepot managed there are mermaid tail costumes hanging on the clothes line.

Mermaids and mermen have been used in various ways as sexual symbols and androgenous metaphors amongst many cultures and throughout history. Some associations with mystical sea folk are constraining, others are liberating. Do you know the recent history of the famous national mermaid sea sculpture of the Danes?

What other films use mermaids or mermen as significant characters, symbols or references? How does their use enhance these stories and contribute to a separate mythology of sea folk?

#### THE 'PERFECT WOMAN'

In 1910 Dr Dudley Sargent of Harvard University nominated Annette Kellerman unique amongst women of her time. He claimed in his physical fitness study of literally thousands of women that Annette Kellerman was 'the closest to physical perfection'. Primary evidence was that she had almost exactly the same measurements as those estimated for the ancient female icons: Venus de Milo and Diana.

*She is almost exactly the same measurements as the estimated ones of the statue of the most perfectly formed woman of ancient times. Venus de Milo.*

What do you know about Venus de Milo and Diana? What did they represent in their times and how have they appeared in various periods since? What is perfection? What are the common and contrasting qualities of physical capacity, stamina and beauty?

#### INDIVIDUAL ACHIEVEMENT AND THE COLLECTIVE MOVEMENT

Many refer to Annette Kellerman's achievements in the context of the women's liberation movement of the twentieth century. Indeed Annette Kel-



as deviance but rather a natural demonstration of health and wellbeing. Annette did not die like Isadora in a road misadventure but she did go to court on more than one occasion for speeding in her open-air vehicle.

Peter Kurth in *Isadora: the Sensational Life of Isadora Duncan* (London, Little, Brown and Company, London, 2001: x) points out that she was perverse: 'I hate dancing ... I am an expressioniste of beauty. I use my body as my medium, just as the writer uses his words. Do not call me a dancer.'



A black and white photograph of a ballerina in a sparkling tutu, captured in a dynamic pose against a dark, textured background. The ballerina is wearing a sleeveless, sequined bodice and a full, feathered tutu. She is in a crouched position, with her head tilted back and her arms extended. The background is dark and appears to be a wall with a rough, textured surface. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the shimmer of the sequins and the texture of the tutu.

... a woman ahead of her times in both physical prowess  
and expressive creativity

lerman makes an interesting case study to reflect on the distinction between individual achievers and radicals leading a movement for collective ends, for all women. In dismissing what was considered 'proper' and going her own way, was Annette Kellerman a 'real' feminist or women's liberationist?

*I am going to be wonderful and everybody is going to admire me.*

On the one hand throughout history there have been exceptional and eccentric women who have achieved as individuals and made themselves public names in the process. On the other hand, another breed of women have consciously and conscientiously sought collective, social and political advances for all women.

While any discussion of this distinction revolves around the impossibility of neatly separating the two ends of the spectrum, Annette Kellerman's abuse of the 'perfect woman' ideal later in her life is a good example to highlight the distinction. In the film we hear her admit that being identified as the 'most perfect woman' had definite drawbacks.

*I complained bitterly to Jimmy that I didn't want to be known as a dummy with no brains. Mother thought it was awful.*

After she became an acclaimed swimming champion and silent screen film star, Annette cashed in on her fame by providing distance health and physical education for housewives. At this point Annette Kellerman advertised references to herself as the 'perfect woman' to encourage all those with less impressive measurements to enrol in her school. Her programs were demanding: she sternly recommended walking five to ten miles per day and just two meals.

*There is nothing more liberating than swimming ... All life's shackles are washed away with the waves.*

Annette Kellerman pointed to her own story to convince other women to aspire to be like her. She promised them results provided they changed their lifestyles and followed her routines. In this way she could be seen to be exploiting and

heightening women's sense of inferiority as much as helping them overcome their feelings of worthlessness.

*... they called me the Diving Venus, the perfect woman ...*

Annette Kellerman spread a philosophy of the fundamental importance of water to the spirit and soul. Clearly these thoughts were based on her own experiences and sense of the significance of swimming and diving. She referred to physical 'evidence' of an evolutionary connection between humans and water. At the same time, she conflated health, beauty and happiness. See for instance one of her works—*Physical Beauty: How to Keep It* (Doran, New York, 1918)—that is kept at the State Library of Victoria ([www.statelibrary.vic.gov.au](http://www.statelibrary.vic.gov.au)).

Those enrolled in history, gender and women's studies might like to contemplate and discuss whether it is reasonable to conclude that Annette was more interested in creating an individual impression than in furthering the collective interests of women as worthy of the rights already given to men? One can follow Annette Kellerman's story scene by scene and discuss how this proposition fares at each stage of her life, in her distinctive performances and other activities.

#### COMPETITIVE AUSTRALIAN WOMEN SWIMMERS

Over the last fifty years Australia has continued to produce far more than its fair share of international women swimmers, women like:

- Dawn Fraser ([www.dawnfraser.com.au](http://www.dawnfraser.com.au))
- Shane Gould ([www.ShaneGould.com.au](http://www.ShaneGould.com.au))
- Susie O'Neill ([www.susieoneill.com.au](http://www.susieoneill.com.au))

For profiles of elite athletes and swimming legends, see the web site of Shane Gould's manager Rob Woodhouse—[www.elitesports.com.au](http://www.elitesports.com.au)

Many women swimmers have faced similar opportunities and prejudices as

Annette Kellerman. However, they dealt with their fame and fortune in a variety of ways. Their different perceptions of their achievements and futures and the life-changing decisions they have made cannot be explained simply by history or culture. In this section we point to a few examples and instances that inform any discussion of *The Original Mermaid* in terms of themes relevant to philosophy, history, sociology and performance.

Dawn Fraser, born in 1937, won thirty Australian championships and thirty-nine world records, twenty-seven in individual events and twelve in relays. She won the highest number of Olympic medals of any Australian athlete. Like Annette Kellerman ([www.herspace.com](http://www.herspace.com)), she gained notoriety by being charged with misconduct that included refusing to wear an uncomfortable swimsuit. In Dawn Fraser's case it resulted in a ten-year ban and expulsion by the Australian Swimming Union (ASU). She was charged with disobeying the team manager and the ASU for not wearing an official swimsuit and for marching in the opening ceremony against instructions at the Olympic Games in Tokyo in 1964. The details are provided in her autobiography and biographies: for instance, one by Anthony Sedunary *Dawn Fraser: Australian Swimming Legend* (Reed Elsevier, Port Melbourne, 1996). Do you think this kind of response might still happen? Are representatives of the media and sporting associations still preoccupied by the dress and the behaviour of women and sportspeople? If so, in what ways?

The dust jacket of Dawn Fraser's autobiography—*Dawn: One Hell of a Life*, Sydney, Hodder, Sydney, 2001—reads:

*A multiple gold medal winner over three consecutive Olympics, a constant record breaker, a rebel, campaigner, National Living Treasure, Swimmer of the Century, international sports ambassador, Australian icon, publican and politician. Dawn has lived a remarkable life and done most of it the hard way.*

Shane Gould, born in 1956, made her name at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich. She was the first woman to win three individual swimming gold medals

in world record time and at one point held every world record from 100 metres to 1500 metres. She had become famous at thirteen but by sixteen she concluded that life had to mean more and retired to have a family and wholly alternative life. Now she has re-integrated her sporting talent into her life ([www.ShaneGould.com.au](http://www.ShaneGould.com.au)).

In his foreword to *Tumble Turns: an Autobiography* (HarperCollins, Sydney, 1999) Michael Wendon describes Shane Gould's impact and various sides:

*Her swimming career was like a high-decibel concert that had such an impact it left your ears ringin... She was half of a courting couple, she was a commercial entity. She was also, in time, a married person, a parent, an adult, a homemaker, an income earner, an aware inhabitant of our fragile planet, a spiritual being and a friend. These roles held much more attraction than the role of swimmer in the black-lined, chlorinated environment from which she had emerged.*

The 1995 Telstra Swimmer of the Year, Susie O'Neill, was born in 1973. Once she had won a gold medal in the 200 metres butterfly at the 1998 World Championships in Perth, she became the first Australian woman to have won gold medals at the Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games, Pan Pacific Games and the World Championships. Later that year, by the end of her races in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), she had earned more gold medals (ten) than any other person in the history of the Commonwealth Games and carried the Australian flag at the closing ceremony. But she was painfully shy and tended to find performing more stressful than exhilarating. She has recently retired from swimming.

*Susie was 14 years old when she gave her first television interview. It was one of the most uncomfortable experiences of her life. She was dazzled by the bright lights and could only manage three short answers: yes, no and thank you. The interview was over in seconds, and the television station later called the timid youngster 'Shy Susie'.*

Anthony Sedunary in *Susie O'Neill* (Young Achievers series, Heineman Library, Melbourne, 2000).

The preoccupation of competitive swimmers with training regimes and diet is highlighted in Anita Selzer *Swimming* (Australian Sportswomen series, Macmillan, South Yarra, 2000). How many ex-Australian women swimmers have taken up healthy lifestyle education to earn an income? How 'healthy' is this?

certain sports and sporting activities? Has increased mobility—globalisation—altered these natural national advantages? What other national factors influence the development of elite athletes?

Compare a 1986 46-minute documentary, *Women in the Surf* with some more recent examples of surfing achievements by women. Search in film catalogues, for instance in the National Collection of Screen and Sound on the ScreenSound Australia

POSSIBLE CAPTIONS



#### AUSTRALIAN BEACH CULTURE

In the driest continent on earth, coastal settlement, public ownership of beach strips and low costs for camping has made seaside locations community gathering places.

*'In today's beach culture, hedonistic, anarchic, irreverent, healthy and fun, Kellerman is writ large.'* (From the synopsis for *The Original Mermaid*, Hilton Cordell Productions—[www.hiltoncordell.com](http://www.hiltoncordell.com))

If this beach culture offered a democratic opportunity for the talent of Australian youths to demonstrate and develop their swimming talent, did it mean that ordinary Australians were any closer to elite competitive swimmers?

How do distinctive natural environments predispose different nations to

web site ([www.screensound.gov.au](http://www.screensound.gov.au)), for more recent film footage and on the web site of Malcolm Gault-Williams ([www.legendarysurfers.com](http://www.legendarysurfers.com)) for more information. What has, and hasn't, changed over the years?

#### PERFORMANCE

Vaudeville was against the sensibilities her French musical mother, but Annette Kellerman had always wanted to be 'a first class actress'.

*Even as a child she loved to make a grand entrance and hoped everyone held their breath.*

Vaudeville gave Annette Kellerman the chance to transform freak underwater acts into artistic performances. She began her London Hippodrome acts by playing instruments and dancing,

then built up to underwater ballet after removing her frock to reveal her frilly suit and making a dive ...

*She was provocative. She was sexy. And that was the image she wanted to create.*

Soon entertainers from the USA called for Annette Kellerman. She became a veritable strip 'tease' and a lofty image of the desired, not just admired, woman.

Vaudeville provided live audiences that she missed when she turned to screen roles in *Neptune's Daughter*, *Venus of the South Seas* (1924) and so on.

Annette Kellerman from *A Daughter of the Gods* ([www.silentsmajority.com](http://www.silentsmajority.com)). If her state of dress/undress was a way to attract attention, it is clear she wanted admiration not seduction.

*She was trying to expand the artistic boundaries of cinema ...*

For twenty-five years Annette Kellerman toured the world in stage shows. She nominated as the highlight of her stage career an impersonation of Anna Pavlova as the dying swan supported by a ninety piece orchestra at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. It was one of the few performances that she believed would make her mother proud of her.

## STORIES AND STYLES

*The Original Mermaid* is an exceptional documentary in that the autobiographical script is ordered chronologically and it is structured and interrupted by commentators like Esther Williams, Annette Kellerman's sister and 'Queen of the Channel' Alison Streever. The remarkable aspect of the documentary is the sensual illustration of Annette Kellerman's life through reconstructed abstract sequences with special editing effects.

The film-makers might have adopted different styles to frame and influence the story. For instance, the reconstructions might have been deemed unnecessary and instead the existing archival footage might have been treated with imaginative editing techniques of various kinds—suggest some. Also, imagine retelling this story in different ways. Think of different genres that might have been used as frameworks for highlighting distinct themes and arguments.

A current day champion tells the story of her swimming career in a book simply called *Susie O'Neill* (Pan Macmillan Australia, Sydney, 2000) and comprising over 140 annotated photos. Imagine using these stills as the basis for a documentary. What impact would this style of presentation make on an audience? How might you add atmosphere and interest to the story?

To wide acclaim, the well-known actress Esther Williams starred as Annette Kellerman in the *Million Dollar Mermaid* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1952). As a result of this MGM production that is widely available on video today, the cinematographer George Foley was nominated for an Academy Award in 1952. Esther Williams comments on Annette Kellerman, the production of this biopic and her own performance in the documentary, *The Original Mermaid*. According to her sister, Annette was disappointed in the portrayal of her husband in this screen version of her life. However, Ester suggests Annette felt uncomfortable with her own portrayal too. There is evidence for this argument in the documentary: 'Esther was more beautiful than I but I concede nothing from the waist down.' Interestingly the autobiography that Esther Williams wrote with Digby Diehl was called *The Million Dollar Mermaid* too (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1999).

Biopics are a challenging genre. The award-winning *Shine* (Scott Hicks, 1996) inverts the usual tale of talent being recognised and provides an interesting contrast with the Annette Kellerman story. Search in film catalogues, for instance in the National Collection of Screen and Sound on the ScreenSound Australia web site ([www.screen-sound.gov.au](http://www.screen-sound.gov.au)), for other biopics like *Dawn!* (Ken Hannam, 2000) based on Dawn Fraser, to compare with the *Million Dollar Mermaid*. Make contrasts with documentaries about Australian swimming champions and vaudeville performers.

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*Nothing beats the feeling of a thousand eyes staring at your every move.*

However there are indications that she helped to create the concepts and cinematic styles of the films she was asked to perform in and, if this is true, silent film performances provided a further avenue for creative self-expression. Apparently her influence made her the quasi-hero of certain adventurous films in which she drove the action. *A Daughter of the Gods* (1916) was a veritable extravaganza: a one million dollar budget paid for over 20,000 extras and for sets kilometres in length. The Silents Majority web site includes four stills of