

# The Guardian

## Against the Tides review – extreme swimming doc is all at sea

★★★☆☆

The story of aquatic athlete Beth French's courageous oceanic quest is sunk by an unexpected turn of events.



Audacious ... Beth French in *Against the Tides*

This non-fiction feature recounts the attempt by British aquatic athlete Beth French to swim the Oceans Seven marathon, an extreme endurance trial that parallels mountaineering's Seven Summits challenge. A single mother from Somerset in her late 30s who was once a wheelchair user in her teens when chronic fatigue syndrome (or ME) set in, French sets herself an audacious target to do a crawl through seven open water straits or channels around the world, ranging from a few miles to over 20 miles long.

Each leg of the challenge presents different dangers and adversities. One stretch has extremely cold water and jellyfish, while another presents warmer seas but massive swells to contend with. And she can't swim when she's menstruating because of sharks. Moreover, French must manage and motivate the team of coaches and advisers supporting the adventure, and navigate the logistics of each trip, including the fundraising. On top of all that she faces hard choices when her son, who has autism and whom she home-schools, becomes increasingly anxious about her safety and starts hiding her swimsuit.

Sometimes you just get a sense that this documentary didn't turn out the way the filmmakers were expecting. The story bobs along for a time, with a plucky underdog protagonist carting with her an intriguing backstory and likable ancillary characters

such as her lovable little boy. But then, oops, the film turns out to be a different sort of story altogether, which can't be explained without spoilers. Unfortunately, the film-makers were unable to create a satisfying version of the film they didn't realise they were making.

The whole thing resolves into a study in maddening ellipses, unexplained motivations and murky dramas that happen off-camera. At least the drone shots and underwater footage dazzle and delight, providing the vicarious thrills you want from extreme sports films.

By: Leslie Felperin