

Young adult readers are often fascinated by the competitive world of ballet. They also love to read about romance. Whether readers are dancers or not, they'll embrace a story when a young dancer struggles with her identity against the backdrop of grueling rehearsals and intense competitions while trying to embrace friendship, romance, and daily life away from the tights and pointe shoes.

When an author adds to this mix, dynamic issues such as a possible career-ending injury or an eating disorder, it makes for an exciting and worthwhile read. If the book is well-written, it provides positive take-aways for the young readers to apply to their own lives. *84Ribbons* by Paddy Eger is such a novel.

Two current ballet books on the market for young adult readers are: *Bun Heads* by Sophie Flack and *Audition* by Stasia Ward Kehoe. Both books are set in contemporary times with heroines who dance in prestigious ballet companies, one set in Manhattan and the other in Jersey City. Nineteen-year-old Hannah in *Bun Heads* and sixteen-year-old Sara in *Audition* are trying to achieve perfection in their ballet careers (although Sarah is miserably failing) while struggling in the pursuit of their romantic lives. *Audition* is more sexually explicit than *Bun Heads*.

Although *Bun Heads* and *Audition* are descriptive in bringing to light the emotional and physical drains on a dancer, they shy away from the more dynamic issues such as eating disorders and possible career-ending injuries—they only touch on these issues. *Bun Heads* has been described as “sweet and understated”, which can work for and against a book in this market. The romantic interest, Jacob, is lackluster and leaves the reader wanting more in his character development.

Two authors expanded their debut novels into second books. Miriam Wenger-Landis, author of *Girl in Motion* by Miriam has a follow-up story in *Breaking Pointe*. She follows Anna into her dance future. Paddy carries Marta's story forward into *When the Music Stops* as Marta works to rebuild her dance career. Both authors create realistic journeys for their heroines.

The ballet story market includes biographical books such as *Dancing on My Grave* by Gelsey Kirkland, which is among the first books to examine the dark side of the ballet world. Even though her story shares her teen years, it is aimed at a mature reader who wishes to delve into sexual and drug-related adult situations.

Two books, *A Dance of Sisters*, by Tracey Porter and *Melting Season* by Celeste Conway focus on a young dancer's loss of a parent and how it affects their lives as dancers. *84 Ribbons* heroine, Marta shares their sadness when she speaks of missing her father and their shared love of classical music.

There is one humorous ballet novel on the market—*Dancing in Red Shoes* by Dorian Ciccone, but it's limited in its scope. Lynne Meadows, as Marta's best dancer friend provides a lightness in *84 Ribbons* as well as a steadfast friendship.

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Most ballet stories on the market share common themes of competition and varied intensities of disappointment and success, health issues and single friendships. Marta is fortunate to have a calm, supportive mother and cadre of friends within and outside the world of ballet. She relies on their caring to see her through her disappointments and her successes.

Media beyond books also share ballet stories. The movies *Black Swan* and *Turning Point* shared frantic dancers and overly involved parents. Readers' interests are turning toward stories that share day-to-day dancer routines, personal relationships and dance performances. The popularity of the television series *Breaking Pointe* and *So You Think You Can Dance* are examples of that shift. Like *84 Ribbons*, they follow their central character's life beyond their performances.

84 Ribbons is set in the 1950's, which brings to light the world gone-by of traditional ballet, but the issues it presents are timeless. Marta is an ordinary girl with extraordinary talent. She is accepted into a ballet company that every girl can dream about dancing with—it's not unrealistic nor is it prestigious.

The young reader will find herself rooting for Marta as she must decide if dance is a strong enough motivator in her life to pull her away from romance and the normalcy of living a balanced life. She also opens up and develops a friendship with a fellow dancer while enduring intense competition and she faces tragedy when another dancer fights a serious eating disorder. The reader will also appreciate Marta's quiet determination in coping with a possible career-ending injury.

84 Ribbons has a strong plot that pulls in the young adult reader, but it does not shy away going deep through a variety of characters. And although the author avoids including a psychotic ballerina or a highly strung stage mother, she doesn't pull away from gritty issues that exist in the competitive world of ballet. As a former dancer, Paddy is able to bring to life the all-consuming world of dance without fudging on any of the details!

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