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A behind-the-curtains look at the rarefied world of classical ballet from a principal dancer at the New York City Ballet

In her charming and self-effacing voice, Jenifer Ringer covers the highs and lows of what it's like to make it to the top in the exclusive, competitive ballet world. From the heart-pounding moments waiting in the wings before a performance to appearing on *Oprah* to discuss weight and body image among dancers, *Dancing Through It* is moving and revelatory.

Raised in South Carolina, Ringer led a typical kid's life until she sat in on a friend's ballet class, an experience that would change her life forever. By the age of twelve she was enrolled at the elite Washington School of Ballet and soon moved to the School of American Ballet. At sixteen she was a professional dancer at the New York City Ballet in Manhattan, home of the legendary George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins.

Ringer takes us inside the dancer's world, detailing a typical day, performance preparation, and the extraordinary pressures that these athletes face. Ringer shares exhilarating stories of starring in Balanchine productions, working with the famous Peter Martins, and of meeting her husband and falling in love at the New York City Ballet. Ringer also talks candidly of Alistair Macauley's stinging critique of her weight in his 2010 *New York Times* review of *The Nutcracker* that ignited a public dialogue about ballet and weight. She unflinchingly describes her personal struggles with eating disorders and body image, and shares how her faith helped her to heal and triumph over these challenges.

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From Reader Review Dancing Through It: My Journey in the Ballet for online ebook

Madeline Garland says

This was a book that was really eye opening for me. Jenifer Ringer explains in detail the struggles she faced with eating disorders in her dance career. This book allows you to laugh and cry at the same time.

Emma says

As a fan of memoirs and dance movies, I was initially very excited to find this book. The inside cover led me to believe that the book would entail the ups and downs, the triumphs and difficulties, in the life of professional ballerina Jenifer Winger. And it did...

However, her retelling of her years as a dancer seemed short and glib at times. The chapters flitted around from topic to topic as though the memoir was concocted from a bullet-pointed list of all the questions she was expected to answer in the book's pages.

But what I found the most disagreeable, something that I was not prepared for by the lengthy blurb on the inside cover, was the amount of space devoted to discussing her faith. She seemed to go on and on about being a Child of God, which is all well and good to a point. But in a very few number of pages, I no longer felt like she was sharing her faith journey but was instead proselytizing. The look inside professional dance culture and the day to day activities of a dancer was completely overshadowed. In the end I felt this book should have been marketed as a religious memoir and shelved in the 248s, not the 921s.

Amanda says

I thought this was a good book about the journey through the world of professional ballet. I was hooked through about 60% and then it got a bit disjointed for me. The beginning flowed really smoothly but towards the end there were whole chapters that were about performances she fell in and then performances where the music was messed up and they had to adjust. There was also a chapter about her favorite ballet she performed in. While I think any ballerina who has performed in that ballet would appreciate her description, I just couldn't relate. I was more interested in the experience as a whole and not so much the specifics. It just seemed like it got to the point where it was like "oh and this one time...." She did address her eating disorder she had early on in her career and she also addresses the article in the New York Times where her weight was criticized, resulting in appearances on the Today Show and Oprah.

I think anyone who has experienced the inside world of professional ballet would really enjoy this book and I think it's also a good read if you're just curious to find out some behind the scenes information on this world that is rarely discussed. A decent part of this book also focused on her journey to bring God back into her life and so I think people who like religious, uplifting stories would enjoy this book also, whether they are interested in ballet or not.

Diane S ? says

Girls and ballet, was not immune to the admiration Infelt for these very elite dancers, their practices, dedication and all theta gave up on the name of dance. Body image and weight became a focal point along with the deep, faith Miss Ringer felt and brought to her craft. Surviving and thriving through all she did is a testament to her beliefs and her love of her craft. Disjointed at times but honestly written an interesting look at the ballet scene and the constant juggling of their weight and body image.

ARC from MetGalley.

Laura says

I found this memoir to be pretty good--not thrilling, but rather nicely written (better in that regard, I'd say, than the other recent, high profile ballet memoir, "Life In Motion," by Misty Copeland; I'm not putting that book down; it was interesting and engaging, but was somewhat less coherent, with less accomplished prose, and more editorial, proofreading mistakes).

Ms. Ringer states upfront (in the forward, I believe) that she will be putting some substantial emphasis on her Christian faith, and I think she does a good job of making us understand how fundamental that is to her, and how it has helped her to overcome pain and challenge, most particularly her difficulties with weight and eating (trying to keep them both down), and the emotional issues she finally had to confront and work through, to emerge whole and healthy.

It's almost painful to read her accounts of frequent, apparently uncontrollable episodes of bingeing, seeking comfort, or seeking something she couldn't seem to identify, all the while knowing it was leading her to a kind of hell, her banishment from dancing and everything she thought she knew and cared about. These bouts of chaotic overeating serve to pull her into a dull, lethargic state, in which her physical ballooning and the spectre of probably losing her job and identity as principal dancer with New York City Ballet, loom darkly, as a seemingly inevitable, unavoidable, slow-motion disaster.

That spirit of lethargy seems to pervade the recounting of all this too, in that it rarely delves deep into what emotional issues or dynamics were really at the root of her self destruction. But I got the feeling that that is perhaps how it felt to her at the time: a kind of sleepwalking (nicely paralleling one of her star roles with NYCB). The picture becomes clearer, with more depth and color, as she slowly emerges from this somnambulant funk, first getting to know herself as a person outside of dance. She then takes on challenges apart from that career, achieving some satisfying accomplishments, reconnecting with her religious belief and practice, learning to embrace a healthier life in all regards, and then, tentatively, recognizing anew her love of dance. Gradually embracing it, she works steadily to a point where she is welcomed back into the company she loves.

There's some nice romance woven in there, too, though I definitely wanted a bit more detail and clarity on that! (Ms. Ringer and her fellow dancer and frequent partner, who becomes her husband, seem maddeningly timid and restrained, even after it's become clear that they have a special, deep connection with one another. It is nice, seeing how he fulfills a kind of Prince Charming/heroic knight role, encouraging and facilitating her rejuvenation as a dancer. Very sweet. Ultimately, I cared about Ms. Ringer, and felt joyfully happy for her, as she fought through and triumphed.

One other element that is so worthwhile and was a favorite part of the book for me, was her fairly detailed description of Jerome Robbins' masterpiece, "Other Dances." She clearly knows the ballet intimately, having begun dancing one of the roles while still very young and new to the company, chosen for that honor by Mr. Robbins, and then having learned all the other female roles, performing almost all of them, over the years. She gives us a glimpse into the company's preparation for performances of it, and imparts some sense of what it's like, dancing it for an audience. Especially of interest are her descriptions of working personally with Mr. Robbins on the ballet. "Other Dances" continues to play a satisfying role in Ms. Ringer's life, as she travels far and wide, helping to set and coach the piece on other companies, with younger dancers, now that she has made a graceful exit from her dancing career.

Work like that clearly brings her joy, as does nurturing her family; she has given birth to two children, working back into performing condition after both pregnancies, and managing somehow to organize and keep running a household, family and ballet career, with help from her husband and a part-time helper. And, of course, embarking on a potentially promising career as a writer. Brava, Jenifer Ringer!

Amy says

2.5 stars. I agree with those who felt this was more a Christian story than an autobiography. I enjoyed some of the ballet parts very much, and while I could relate to her struggle with body image disorder, I couldn't relate at all to the ever-present Christianity and skimmed a lot of those parts. I would have preferred it if she'd chronologically included some of her dance bio thoughts rather than saving so many of them until she'd documented her Christian journey. I think this book is mainly for either ballet enthusiasts (me) or Christian believers.

Emily says

This memoir is as much about the author's experience with eating disorders and her faith as it is about ballet, but for her these things are closely connected.

Raised in a Southern evangelical family that relocated to NYC partly for her dancing, Ringer joined the New York City Ballet as a teenager. Her family moved away soon after, leaving her alone in a high-pressure situation. She became hyperfocused on minute hints of negative feedback and developed a bingeing habit, sneaking out to delis to buy junk food and to gyms to do grueling workouts on top of her full-time dance schedule. After several years of this, she was fired from NYCB due to her weight gain, and hit rock bottom. "I was twenty-four years old, and I felt utterly worthless. I had failed at everything that had been important to me my entire life. I was supposed to be perfect and successful: I had been fired. I was supposed to be

beautiful: I was overweight and gross. I was supposed to be smart and in control: I couldn't eat a meal without overeating until I felt sick. I was supposed to be funny and friendly and loving and generous: I'd shut out all of my friends and family. I was supposed to be a Christian: I still hadn't made God the priority of my life." By quitting dance for a while and taking a part-time job at her church where she was surrounded by supportive people who didn't care about her looks, she got her feet back under her. She attributes her new attitude to having reconnected with God in a new and more mature way. Without any intent of performing professionally again, she began to dance, at first just in classes, then in small performances during the off-season. Eventually, she rejoined NYCB and reached even higher levels of achievement as a professional.

There was some good writing about dance in this book--I especially liked the section about what happens when dancers blank out in the middle of a ballet and forget their choreography. Ringer also gave a good sense of what it's like to be in a ballet company, day to day and year to year. You can't help but root for her during her comeback and I found her attitude generally uplifting. I think someone who shared her religious convictions would like this book a lot and find it really inspiring.

Esty says

You can read the full review and more on my blog.(:

Wow. What a book.

As you'll see in my little about me, I've been a dancer for longer than I haven't been in my short teenage life. So besides the incredible story and writing, this book really struck a chord with me.

Jenifer walks you through the humble beginnings of every little girl who puts on pink tights, through the moving around, progressing in the dance school, apprenticing in the company and climbing the ranks. You go through the amazing times and the rough ones, and she never once glorifies herself. Honestly, you have to keep reminding yourself that no matter how humbly she says it, she must be amazing to have been chosen time and time again over the others.

I can tell you that on a much smaller scale, I related to her SO MUCH. I'm telling you this not only because it is a must read for every dancer, but to tell you how REAL and unexaggerated this was. The insanity and excitement that goes on behind stage, how dance can potentially and probably will consume your life when you're not on guard. How you develop perfectionism, and how your view of yourself physically and self-esteem change as you dance more.

Truly, read this book! It is a coming of age story, as well as the story of a courageous and talented young woman overcomes the obstacles society and then eventually herself have put in her way. There were themes of health and happiness that I think anyone can relate to. I was hooked. I will warn you though- Jenifer is a Christian and it is her religion she credits her success to. Her faith is a thing of importance and a running theme in her book, but as a religious non-Christian I can assure you it was not messianic in any way or a bother at all.

Shay VanZwoll says

Jenifer Ringer is a Principal Dancer at the New York City Ballet, and *DANCING THROUGH IT* is her memoir. It is not, however, strictly a memoir or autobiography of a dancer, it is also a Christian inspirational story. Unfortunately, there are times throughout the story that dancing plays second fiddle to her constant mentions of God and Faith. Religion is not bad in and of itself... but using a book about ballet to preach is a little frustrating to the reader, especially since this book is not labeled as Christian or under Spirituality. There amount of religious references in this book are overwhelming at times, especially in the first half of the book where you can barely read a page without a mention of God.

The blurb for this book also leads you to believe that it will go through Jenifer's struggles through the competitive world of ballet... And yet the book lacks any competition, instead glossing over the stories of her relationship with the other dancers, making it seem as if everyone is one happy family. In fact, Jenifer's rise as a ballerina almost seems too easy: She quickly becomes a top student at her ballet class growing up, is accepted at more than one ballet school in the Washington area, later joins another school in NYC, and then quickly becomes an apprentice at the New York City Ballet. She becomes a soloist early in her career, and then - after a year's absence from the ballet due to weight issues - she is accepted back with open arms and shortly after becomes a Principal Dancer. It's almost too easy to be believable, and part of that is because Jenifer rarely if ever mentions the actual physical and emotional hardships of being a ballerina.

In the end, I was disappointed with this book. While it has some good sections and the author has some great points regarding the dance world and eating disorders, the overall thread of the book skips over what would actually be interesting to most readers and instead sugar-coats any difficulties the author had during her career.

Thank you to the publisher and Netgalley for providing me with a free copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Brenda says

As a lifelong lover of dance, I'm always up for a ballerina memoir. ***Dancing Through It: My Journey In The Ballet by Jenifer Ringer*** is a personal and engaging insider's look at the New York City Ballet. A strong dancer from an early age, Ringer was thrilled to be accepted into the School of American Ballet (or, as I know it, the real-life *Center Stage*) in New York. She joined City Ballet at sixteen. Aside from a few leaves of absence, Ringer continued as a company member and eventual principal dancer until her retirement just this month at the age of 40. The book is full of funny anecdotes, stories about her most memorable ballets, and reflections on working with famous choreographers like Jerome Robbins and Peter Martins.

However, for me, the real meat of this memoir is in Ringer's faith testimony and unflinching discussion of her struggle with eating disorders. In her late teens, overworked and underequipped for adulthood, she fell into a brutal cycle of binging and purging. After gaining so much weight that she was fired from the company, she was forced to build a new life and sense of self-worth. Only when she found a better sense of balance was she able to return to a healthy weight and start dancing professionally again. This personal background became public in 2010 when a *New York Times* reviewer criticized her weight. Due to "Sugarplumgate," Ringer was invited onto a number of shows (including Oprah) to discuss body image in the dance world as well as her own history. She felt strongly that God had given her an opening to talk about these issues and potentially help others. I can relate to a sense of being called to share about painful parts of your past, and think it was really brave of her to do so.

Two things about Ringer's story pleasantly surprised me. One, she achieved real success in the ballet world without having to compromise her Christian faith. Two, she met her husband at City Ballet... a straight male professional dancer who's also a Christian. Let that sink in for a minute.

Some have criticized the lack of narrative structure toward the end of *Dancing Through It*, but that didn't bother me. My only issue was that Ringer's consistent earnestness and gushiness got a little wearisome. I watched some videos of her dancing after finishing the book, and I think if I'd done so beforehand, I would have had a more sophisticated mental picture of her.

Overall, this is a solid read for anyone who enjoys memoirs by people in the arts!

Maureen says

This was a stretch for the third star but what the heck, I will be generous. There were parts of this book that were very good and parts that I just said what? The layout of the book is odd and makes for disjointed storytelling. Also, while I have zero reason to doubt Ms. Ringer's faith, the constant references became tiresome and insincere. On that note I am pretty sure God has better things to do than cure a heel spur on this gal's foot. It seemed to me that she uses her faith as a crutch. For me it was a "he who protesteth too much" sort of situation. That said, good story about the NYC Ballet. Didn't love it, didn't hate it.

Elizabeth says

I have a lot of respect for Ringer after reading this. It's a very honest book and quite unflinching in its assessment of the ballet world. The pressure to look and behave a certain way as a classical dancer can be almost claustrophobic in its linear nature. It's not a forgiving place. For a dancer to learn to be kind to herself throughout that journey is a testament to her strength.

Jeanne Grunert says

I really enjoyed this book! So many reviewers complained about the Christianity running through it, but I thought that's what set this memoir apart from so many others. Jenifer Ringer's journey is that of a professional ballerina and someone seeking a sense of self outside of her all-consuming work. Any artist can recognize their own journey there. Being a Christian is an integral part of her sense of self, and vital to the narrative. If you're looking for "dirt" or "gossip" on the ballet world, look elsewhere. If you're looking for an inspiring story, it's a good read.

Liralen says

Ringer had a long and successful career as a ballet dancer*, leaving her with plenty of stories and anecdotes - but also, for the sake of this book, something of a problem, as there was, what, a fifteen-year gap between her struggles and the (moronic) review that (most likely) spurred on this book? Most of the relevant story takes place pre-1995; after Ringer's return to ballet, the narrative loses tension. It does so for a really good

reason -- she was, at that point, healthy emotionally and physically, and she'd grown enough in age and confidence to have more perspective -- but the structure of the book kind of fell apart for me at that point.

Ringer's good about keeping the focus of her ballet talk on dance -- this isn't a tell-all, and she's not interested in dissecting other dancers or ballet-world power figures. I didn't get a great sense of who the other people around her were, though, and I wonder whether she went too far in trying not to step on anyone's toes. She was still dancing while writing the book -- it came out at about the same time she retired -- and considering that a career in dance doesn't necessarily end with retirement from the stage, I can understand and respect wanting to be negative. Hey, I can understand and respect that *without* the career in the mix. At the same time, though, she's talking about problems that I am sure are endemic in ballet, and the book stays too close to the surface of things to delve into that.

I came away feeling as though this was meant to be a fairly close look at one facet of her life -- ballet, and the eating and body-image problems that plagued her for the first part of her career -- but didn't go deep enough to flesh out a whole book, so other stories pad the primary one. Whole long sections on falling and blank moments? They're funny anecdotes but come without tension or a real place in the greater narrative.

I'd had read it anyway, because at heart there is still part of me that is five and wants to be a dancer**, and I had a wonderful time looking up on Youtube some of the dances she mentioned. I didn't expect Pulitzer-level writing, and I love that she was willing to open up about a topic that much of the dance world would probably prefer *didn't* get discussed. So -- kind of expected, but interesting.

*Wikipedia tells me that the word *ballerina* was traditionally used only for the most exceptional female soloists; I'm inclined to say that a principal at the NYCB should be given the title, but I'm really not qualified to judge...

**I don't think I ever wanted to be a dancer when I was little. I took a ballet class once, and I was super awkward. But hey, revisionist history.

Melinda Elizabeth says

Sometimes I feel that books need to come with warnings. This one should have made it a bit clearer that it was going to weigh in heavily on religion and faith. If I'd known that going in, I might not have read it. That's not to say that I disagree with anyone's chosen faith, but I feel a little let down when books begin to skew more towards theological discussion than what the book implies it will be about.

I appreciate that she lost and found her faith and this was an important journey in her life, but I was more interested in reading more along the lines of "black swan".

The technical discussions regarding ballet can be a little dry if you have no knowledge of the dances and the techniques used in the dance. I skipped over a few of these types of chapters as it became a little too bogged down in details that I wasn't equipped to understand.

Jenifer is otherwise an engaging author who provides truth and clarity around issues that are often considered to be a ballerina's lot - competitiveness, weight issues, and injuries.

Go in forewarned about the christian slant and if you're down with a bit of that, then this is an interesting

insight into the professional ballet world.
