

Dancing on the Inside

Glen C. Strathy

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Be yourself. Follow your passion. It's good advice that's not always easy to follow. It's especially challenging if you're twelve years old, extremely shy, and starting at a new school. That's what aspiring dancer Jenny Spark faces in *Dancing on the Inside*, an uplifting and insightful novel for tweens and teens.

Author Glen C. Strathy captures the pain and promise of preadolescence in one girl's quest to study ballet in spite of the stage fright that keeps her glued to the floor.

When we meet Jenny, she is on the floor beneath the ballet studio piano, peeking out at the confident returning students with their identical hairstyles and black leotards. Terrified and fascinated by the girls' talk of lessons, recitals, and costumes, Jenny hopes nobody will notice her dressed in all white. Of course, she is spotted, and thus begins her journey into the dance world.

This is not, however, the predictable story of a shy girl overcoming fears and learning to join in. Instead, it's about a dedicated ballet student who simply can't perform in public, so she gets creative about learning her craft. From forging doctor's notes allowing her to observe classes from the sidelines to volunteering to help younger students, Jenny devises myriad ways around the most basic assumption about dancers: that they dance.

Jenny's struggle seems real because Strathy creates characters that feel like people you know. By using quick, casual dialogue more often than straight description, Strathy makes each character instantly recognizable, without reducing any to caricature. When classmate Robyn tells Jenny she would rather be training in kung fu but her mother forbids it, we learn at least a couple of things: Robyn's mother holds conventional views, and Robyn most emphatically does not. Strathy is skilled at the art of "show, don't tell," only pausing for narration when it adds something critical to the scene.

Strathy's story moves along at a pace that might seem a little frantic to older readers, but hits just the right chord for youth. Full of energy, Jenny and her best friend, Ara, practice ballet nonstop, perfecting Ara's technique and Jenny's choreography skills. Strathy supplies authentic details about ballet training, but readers don't need to be fluent in *demi-pliés* or *arabesques* to get into the story.

The crescendo comes with the spring dance recital, choreographed by Jenny to showcase each student's special talents. Readers will wonder if this is the moment Jenny makes her stage debut, but it doesn't matter if she ever dances in public. Strathy's underlying theme is about finding the courage to express your true self, not the image others expect.

In a world troubled by school bullying and its repressive effects, the message in *Dancing on the Inside* is most welcome. Don't give in to peer pressure, Strathy seems to be saying to young people, because you are spectacular just the way you are.

SHEILA M. TRASK (May 23, 2013)

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