"A wonderful, eye-opening debut." —The Times of London

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OF THE

LUCY ASHE

READING DISCUSSION GUIDE

Introduction

A novel about obsessive love featuring two ballet dancers—identical twin sisters Olivia and Clara Marionetta—with a terrifying climax set in the world of ballet in pre-war London.

Topics and Questions for Discussion

- 1. Clara and Olivia are identical twin sisters and some characters struggle to tell them apart. They are also ballet dancers, working every day on a discipline that expects each dancer in the corps de ballet to move as one—identical mirror images of each other. What did you think were the differences between the two sisters? And in what ways were they similar? Did their differences get in the way of their relationship and their love for each another?
- 2. The twin sisters have very different motivations and desires. How did the way you related to each of them differ? Was there one sister you found yourself drawn to more than the other?
- **3.** Samuel, the pointe shoemaker apprentice, is obsessed with Olivia. However, his feelings for her change throughout the novel. How would you describe these changes? By the end of the novel, how does he feel about her? How did your opinion of Samuel change as the novel progressed?
- 4. Nathan used to be a child star, praised and adored by everyone. He struggles to cope with the change in his status and feels that he is overlooked by some key members of the ballet world. To what extent do you feel his unusual childhood and his subsequent loss of fame impacts the way he behaves throughout the novel?
- 5. The dancers are rehearsing for the ballet *Coppélia*. The ballet is the story of two young lovers, Swanilda and Franz, who are to be married the next day. Swanilda, however, is jealous of the way Franz appears fascinated by a beautiful young girl named Coppélia, who sits in the window of the house of Dr. Coppelius—a mysterious inventor—reading her book all day. So Swanilda and her friends decide to break into Dr. Coppelius's workshop and meet this girl for themselves. But what they see when they get inside is not at all what they expected. Coppélia is a lifeless doll, not human at all. To what extent did you see this story mirrored in the plot of the novel? How was Nathan influenced by seeing Clara dressed as the doll when she was posing for some photographs on the stage?
- 6. Many of the characters are obsessed with the idea of creation and art, and about whether their artistic endeavors will be recognized and appreciated. Samuel wants to make the tutu that he has designed; Nathan wants to be a successful musician again; Olivia and Clara, each in their own way, want to be famous dancers. How does this obsession impact on the decisions they all make? And to what extent are they living in the realm of fantasy rather than reality, and does this change for any of the characters during the novel?

- 7. Ballet provides rhythm and routine for Clara and Olivia: they go to daily ballet class, rehearse, perform, endlessly darn and sew ribbons onto new pairs of pointe shoes. However, they also worry about making enough money and finding employment out of season. What did you find most interesting about life for a ballet dancer in the 1930s? And what interested you about the historical setting?
- 8. The sisters' mother is sick and is a permanent resident at Colney Hatch mental hospital. How do Clara and Olivia cope with the challenge of visiting their mother, especially when she places such high expectations on them and their dancing careers? What do you think their mother finds most appealing about her daughters being ballet dancers? Or do you think she has always struggled with being a "ballet mother"?
- **9.** All of the dancers have little routines and rituals that give them luck before a performance or help them to focus before a day of rehearsals. What did you think about their choice of the well beneath the theatre as the location for these superstitions? Why do you think so many performers turn to these types of rituals?
- **10.** We know that Clara has an offer to go to America and pursue her dancing career in new and exciting ways. How do you think the sisters will find living apart? Do you think they will struggle or are there any ways in which they might flourish?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

- 1. Go to the ballet or watch a recorded performance of a ballet on TV or online with your book club. Can you see evidence of the toil and grit and pain beneath the poise and grace of the dancers?
- Read the short story that inspired the ballet *Coppélia*: E.T.A. Hoffmann's 1816 story called "Der Sandmann." See if you can spot ways in which *The Dance of the Dolls* draws on elements of both the comedy ballet and Hoffmann's gothic short story.
- Explore the skill and technique that goes into making pointe shoes. Watch the excellent videos on the Freed of London website and social media to learn more about this process.
- Learn more about the history of the Royal Ballet. I highly recommend Dame Ninette de Valois's 1957 memoir *Come Dance with Me*, a book that tells the story of the early years of the company.



A Conversation with Lucy Ashe

Tell us about the inspiration behind The Dance of the Dolls.

When I was training at the Royal Ballet School, I developed a fascination for not only the stories of ballets, but also the history of their creations. *The Dance of the Dolls is* a novel emerging out of years of research and personal experience and I sometimes feel as though I have pulled together the threads of what I love most in my life to create my debut novel.

My novel reimagines the early years of the Vic-Wells Ballet company at Sadler's Wells theatre, and the story is immersed in ballet history featuring famous historical figures such as Ninette de Valois, Lydia Lopokova, Constant Lambert, Alicia Markova, and Nicholas Sergeyev. I loved engaging with this important time period when British Ballet was starting to grow, integrating historical details into my fictional story.

How did your experience at the Royal Ballet School inform the research behind the novel?

My eight years first as a junior associate and then at White Lodge, the Royal Ballet's School in Richmond Park, had a huge influence on the novel. To spend those years living and breathing ballet, to define myself entirely as a ballet dancer, was both wonderful and challenging in equal measure. There was an intensity to those years that I will never forget.

Ballet training has much repetition and routine, and none more so than the preparation of pointe shoes. The rhythm of sewing, preparing, and replacing these shoes is familiar to all ballet dancers. It is a relentless cycle, and I found myself drawn to this when planning the novel. I always wore shoes made by Freed of London, and so I researched the company and was fascinated by the story of Frederick and Dora Freed and their pointe shoe workshop. I have worn hundreds of pairs of Freed of London pointe shoes, and I spoke with Sophie Simpson, the senior manager at the pointe shoe manufacturer, when I was researching for my novel. It was lovely to hear that she remembered when I was fitted for my very first pair of pointe shoes at eleven years old at the Royal Ballet School in Richmond Park.

Our pointe shoe fittings always took place in a beautiful dance studio called the Salon that looked out over the park. I will never forget that first fitting, how exciting it was to step up *en pointe*. The older girls taught us how to darn the ends and sew on the ribbons, as well as the best tips for protecting our toes from blisters and bruising. They taught us how to break in our shoes and how to prolong their life with shellac, though I still managed to get through two or three pairs every week; I was fortunate to have a kind sponsor who covered the cost of my pointe shoes.

Ballet is more than just the steps performed in class and onstage. There are many routines and rituals, passed down from one generation to the next. I loved recreating this world in my novel.

What drew you to setting the novel in 1933?

The early 1930s was a very important time for British ballet. Ninette de Valois set up the Vic-Wells Ballet at Sadler's Wells Theatre, the company that later became the Royal Ballet. In my research, I was delighted to see that they put on a production of *Coppélia* in 1933, a ballet that I love and that inspired the plot of my novel. I danced scenes from *Coppélia* many times during the years I was training at the Royal Ballet School. It is a ballet of which I have very fond memories, and so it was an easy decision to set the novel during the rehearsals and performances of a historical performance of the ballet.

Why did you choose to weave the ballet Coppélia into your novel?

Swanilda is a brilliant character, a determined, playful, and mischievous young woman who challenges both her fiancé and the mysterious Dr. Coppelius into accepting the futility of placing all their adoration onto a lifeless doll. Although *Coppélia* is a joyful, comic ballet, it is inspired by E.T.A. Hoffmann's 1816 short story "Der Sandmann," a much darker, more sinister story of a man named Nathanael who falls in love with an automaton doll, Olympia. *In The Dance of the Dolls*, I have drawn on elements of both the comedy ballet and the gothic Hoffmann story. In fact, I took the names of two of my characters directly from Hoffmann's work.

Who are your favorite novelists?

An almost impossible question to answer, as the list would go on and on. However, I can narrow it down by talking about which of my favorite writers and books inspired my novel. There is *The Little Stranger by* Sarah Waters; *The Foundling* by Stacey Halls; *Burning Bright* by Tracy Chevalier; *The Essex Serpent* by Sarah Perry; *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. I am drawn to novels with dark and atmospheric settings, stories where the depths of human desires can be exposed.

What are your favorite novels about ballet?

I have read *Ballet Shoes* by Noel Streatfeild so many times, and there is something timeless and magical about the relationship of the three sisters, Pauline, Petrova, and Posy Fossil. When I was a child, I read all of the Lorna Hills Sadler's Wells series. They were wonderful books and I must have read *A Dream of Sadler's Wells* about the brilliant Veronica Weston countless times. I also enjoyed *Listen to the Nightingale* by Rumer Godden, about a ballet dancer named Lottie and her King Charles spaniel, Prince. A recent favorite is the adult fiction novel about ballet by Maggie Shipstead called *Astonish Me*. It's set in the 1970s and is all about obsession and the fear of mediocrity. Her understanding of dancers' obsessions with their body, and how their entire identity is so often based around their success or failure as a dancer, spoke very true to my own experiences of ballet.

Do you still dance?

After school, I left intensive ballet training and went to the University of Oxford to study English literature. Although it was a very difficult decision, I knew that I wasn't going to find fulfillment and success in the way I wanted it if I continued on my path as a professional dancer. However, I could not stop dancing and I trained as a dance teacher with the British Ballet Organisation. Gaining my diploma in dance teaching was hugely rewarding and deepened my understanding of ballet, the body, and the science behind the movements. I taught ballet to students at Oxford and continued to dance and perform as a freelance dancer. However, once I started working as an English teacher in a full-time capacity at a very busy boarding school, daily ballet training was simply not possible.

Now, I dance when I can, taking open class at studios such as Steps on Broadway or Ballet Arts Center in New York City, or in London I go to Pineapple Dance Studios or Danceworks. I love these classes, how welcoming they are to everyone no matter your level. Professional dancers stand at the barre next to men and women in their eighties who have never hung up their ballet shoes. Ballet is a wonderful way to keep the body strong and supple. I hope I will dance for the rest of my life.

What impression of ballet do you hope readers will take from reading your novel?

Often people think of ballet as either pink frills and tutus for little girls, or psychological horror and trauma because of the success of *Black Swan*. And yes, it can be both of these things: it is lovely seeing little girls and boys getting excited about their first ballet class or a pretty costume, and I agree that ballet provides the perfect setting for a story of obsession and pain. But it is also far more normal than that, a routine, hard work, a job that pays the bills. In the story of Clara and Olivia, I hope readers will see two young women who have desires, dreams, insecurities, and fears, just the same as everyone else, ballet dancer or not.

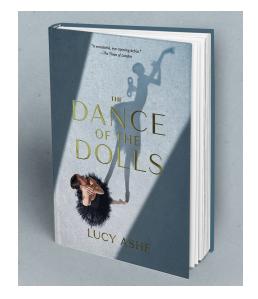
Most of all I hope that readers will find themselves intrigued by ballet: that my novel will provide a springboard for people of all ages to try ballet themselves, to go to the ballet, and to learn more about this beautiful, painful, magical art form.

Praise for The Dance of the Dolls:

★ "Ashe's persuasive behind-the-scenes ballet sections lend heft and authenticity to what could otherwise be mere window dressing, and she transitions her narrative from charming slice of historical fiction to pulse-pounding suspense at an expert pace. It's a fiercely memorable debut from a writer to watch."

-Publishers Weekly (starred review)

"Ashe trained with the Royal Ballet School, and she is fascinating on the detail of the girls' lives; on the pain and the bloodied feet that underpin the perfection of the dance, on, as Samuel says, 'this mad life you all live, always on the edge of pain and exhaustion.' A wonderful, eye-opening debut."—London Times



About the Author

Lucy Ashe is an English teacher. After training at the Royal Ballet School, she decided to change career plans and go to university. She studied English literature at St. Hugh's College, Oxford, before receiving her teaching qualification. Ashe's poetry and short stories have been published in a number of literary journals, and she was shortlisted for the 2020 Impress Prize for New Writers. She lives in New York City.



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