

# The write stuff

**Marianka Swain** asks readers for their favourite examples of dance in literature in time for World Book Day on March 6

**“L**et us read, and let us dance; these two amusements will never do any harm to the world.”

Voltaire

What unites Shakespeare, Edward Lear, *Pygmalion*, Jane Austen and the Bible? Dance pervades our most popular and enduring works, and will always have a key role in literature, from novels and non-fiction to poetry and plays. Why? It's a vital narrative tool, providing a climactic event at which multiple characters are brought together, or illustrating a rite of passage, developing romance, conflict, class differences, tribal

conventions or social boundaries – or escape from them.

Allegorically, dance can express personal growth, liberation, community, connection, joy or sheer abandon. Take the uplifting conclusion of Lear's nonsense poem *The Owl and the Pussycat*: “And hand in hand, on the edge of the sand,/They danced by the light of the moon.” It's the literal celebration of a happy union, but also suggests transformative bliss.

Similarly, Shakespeare employs dance as setting or action (Romeo and Juliet's fateful meeting; multiple plot strands colliding in *Much Ado About Nothing's* masked revels) and to reflect

tone, using the Renaissance convention of capping drama with entertainment by concluding his comedies with a rousing jig. All's well that ends well.

Dance can be the goal, the culmination of dreams, whether romantic, like *Cinderella*, or vocational, like *Ballet Shoes*; a method of getting what you want – Salome's seductive Dance of the Seven Veils; a critical social test – Eliza's ball in Shaw's *Pygmalion*; a display of womanly charms – Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* or the May Dance in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*; a form of therapy – Matthew Quick's ➤

## Read all about it: your picks

“Elizabeth and Darcy at the ball in *Pride and Prejudice*. All that suppressed emotion. The frocks. The uniforms. Say no more!”  
**Claire Saul @Ritealot**

“New graphic novel *Polina* by Bastien Vives is well worth a look.”  
**Dan L @utterbiblio**

“*Gone with the Wind*, when Rhett Butler bids to dance with Scarlett. Dr Meade says she won't because she's in mourning and she cries ‘Yes, I will!’”  
**Karen Hall ➤**

## THE WRITE STUFF

*The Silver Linings Playbook*; or an apposite punishment – Hans Christian Andersen's moralistic *The Red Shoes*.

Our readers' clear favourite, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, shows the importance of dance as a bubble of intimacy in a strictly controlled society. Much of the courting is done through movement, and characters' attitudes to it are illuminating, from Darcy's reserve to Lydia's over-exuberance. Lizzy finds Mr Collins a trying dance partner, but Darcy surprisingly good – dance

is a key test of compatibility. It's also a creative way for storytellers to keep emotion in subtext, particularly important for authors restricted in what they could refer to openly.

Evoking a physical, visceral art form in a written one without constraining it is undoubtedly challenging. Noel Streatfeild crisply documents the hard work and craft of dance alongside the elation of performance, and strong non-fiction works like Brian Winter's *Long After Midnight at the Niño Bien*

are adept at putting dance in social and historical context, as well as conjuring up the magic of the moment.

The most successful translations occur when the writer understands that dance is so much more than movement. Capturing the steps is one thing, but it's what lies between the steps that really matters. ●

**What's your favourite passage about dance? Let us know, by post, email, Facebook or Twitter.**

### Your picks continued...

"First thing to pop in my head was *Ballet Shoes*, of course, as well as Eva Ibbotson's *A Company of Swans*."

**Giulia Di Lorenzo @GiuDilorenzo**

"*Tarantella* by Hilaire Belloc."

**David Braziel @Braziel33m**

"Nick's dance with Thatcher in *The Line Of Beauty*."

**Sophie Coulombeau @SMCoulombeau**

"*Heart of Tango* by Barcelo and *Golden Earrings* (flamenco) by Belinda Alexandra."

**Tiff Lomas @UK\_Booklover**

"I remember loving Joan Selby-Lowndes' *The Conti Story* as a child."

**Martha Dunlop @MarthaDunlop**

"Theodore Roethke's poem *My Papa's Waltz*."

**VV Freaks @ibidetall**

"Have a look at *Eating Air* by Pauline Melville."

**Blackwell's Oxford @blackwelloxford**

"Thomas Hardy brought dancing into quite a few of his novels, especially the ordinary country folk scenes, like dancing round the maypole in *The Return of the Native* and the barn dance in *Far from the Madding Crowd*."

**Alison Pedley**

"*Falling* by Flemish author Anne Provoost."

**Hilde Devoghel @HildeDevoghel**

"*Ballet Shoes* by Noel Streatfeild, the Sadler's Wells books by Lorna Hill, and the *Drina Dances* series by Jean Estoril."

**Sinéad @RunSingLaugh**

"There are two pivotal dance sections in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, and I recently read a fun chick-lit book: *Strictly Shimmer* by Amanda Roberts."

**Jenny Hale**

"Nora dancing the tarantella in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*."

**Hazel Hay @Salemkyecpa**

"I loved that Brothers Grimm fairy story – *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*."

**Lorna Harris**

"*Vazlav* by Dutch author Arthur Japin."

**Niken Priyono @NikenPriyono**

"Colum McCann's *Dancer* comes immediately to mind, a fictionalised account of Nureyev's life."

**Foyles Bookshop @Foyles**

"Natasha's first ball and dance with Prince Andrei in *War and Peace* is an old favourite of mine."

**Layla Tango @LaylaTango**