



Raising the Barre: Big Dreams, False Starts, & My Midlife Quest to Dance The Nutcracker

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Like generations of little girls, Lauren Kessler fell in love with ballet the first time she saw The Nutcracker, and from that day, at age five, she dreamed of becoming a ballerina. But when she was twelve, her very famous ballet instructor crushed those dreams—along with her youthful self-assurance—and she stepped away from the barre.

Fast forward four decades. Lauren—suddenly, powerfully, itchy restless at midlife—embarks on a “Transcontinental Nutcracker Binge Tour,” where attending a string of performances in Chicago, New York, Boston, and San Francisco reignites her love affair with the ballet—and fuels her girlhood dream.

What ensues is not only a story about The Nutcracker itself, but also an inside look at the seemingly romantic—but oh-so-gritty—world of ballet, about all that happens away from the audience's eye that precedes the magic on stage. It is a tale told from the perspective of someone who not only loves it, but is also seeking to live it. Lauren's quest to dance The Nutcracker with the Eugene Ballet Company tackles the big issues: fear, angst, risk, resilience, the refusal to “settle in” to midlife, the refusal to become yet another Invisible Woman. It is also a very funny, very real look at what it's like to push yourself further than you ever thought you could go—and what happens when you get there.

Raising the Barre: Big Dreams, False Starts, & My Midlife Quest to Dance The Nutcracker Details

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From Reader Review Raising the Barre: Big Dreams, False Starts, & My Midlife Quest to Dance The Nutcracker for online ebook

Kristyn Calhoun says

Raising the Barre.

The first 5 chapters can be summed up by one paragraph from chapter 8.

"I've delved into the murky depths of why I want to do this. I've ferreted out the fears and anxieties and bolstered myself with the collected wisdom of others. I've got my you-can-do-it affirmations and mantras all lined up. I know more about the origins and permutations of The Nutcracker than any person not completing a doctoral dissertation on the subject."

Some of the facts are interesting. But I could have gone without all the insight into the authors personal psyche surrounding her new goal. Maybe I'm too young of a reader to appreciate all the self observations. Honestly I just wanted to dive right into the journey to dancing The Nutcracker and found chapters two through five boring. Chapter one was good and I enjoyed her endeavor to see the Nutcracker all over the US, and her character which ultimately led to her deciding to do something that sounded crazy! If it wasn't for the enjoyment of chapter one I might not have gotten through the next 4 and called it quits on this one.

Chapter 10 kinda a little disappointment there. The author starts a timeline format to, what I feel like, rush through some of the months and the process. Where's the detail I was getting used to? Maybe she did this to mimic the chapters title, the bulls eye, to show how much emphasis she needed to put on her dancing. Maybe she just didn't have as much detail about these days. To me it feels more like we're halfway through the book maybe I better speed things up. I would have gladly seen the non-existence of the boring chapters in exchange for more of her dance related experiences she was going through.

The rest of the book was exactly what I expected and the reason I bought it. I enjoyed the authors adventure through preparation and training and rehearsing to dance in the nutcracker with her local ballet company. Maybe this book was geared more for older women and gave more self help and insight into the struggles of what they go through mentally. Which is maybe why I didn't enjoy it as much as I was expecting buying it just for the love of dance and the dream we all have of being able to accomplish something we wish we could have done earlier in life.

Kathleen Gray says

Thanks so much to Edelweiss for the ARC of this awesome book which resonated deeply with me. If you're a "midlife" woman thinking about change and renewal= and if you ever liked ballet- this is the book for you. Kessler hit a real nerve as she finally fulfilled her ballet dream which was quashed when she was a child. (My mother was the one who killed mine by telling me I just wasn't graceful enough). At the same time, her exploration of our need to be perfect made me think about my own situation. AND for those of you who have taken dance exercise classes- I've been in that barre class with the lithesome 20 year olds- READ THIS BOOK! Kessler does all of this with a light voice and a great sense of humor, especially about herself. Incredibly readable, Highly recommend.

Iskellyk says

I was just curious to read this book because I am a former ballet dancer who hasn't danced in maybe 4 years now. It's so daunting to figure out how to get back in. Ballet requires tremendous discipline and a very high level of physical condition even if you're no longer performing but just taking class at a professional level. And that's exactly why I fell out of it. My career as a software engineer became so demanding that I was missing classes, and when I did find time to take a class I was just too exhausted mentally to make it count for much. And now I find myself a few years down the road in no shape to be able to jump back in at the level I was at. The traditional path for those like myself is to go back to elementary and beginner level classes, to re-train the body and rebuild stamina. After injuries I have had to go this route and with a lot of work I got myself back to advanced level again, but I just don't have that kind of time anymore. So I was curious how a midlife former dancer managed to not only jump back in, but actually regain the ability to perform on stage again.

Alas, that's not at all what the book turned out to be about. The author is an immersion journalist, and she was allowed to attend company classes, but she was never able to do more than the barre. She was given a role in the Nutcracker as an elderly aunt in the party scene. I wasn't terribly disappointed when I realized this about half way through because she takes the world of dance very seriously, is super respectful and observant. It really just reinforced why I'm where I'm at right now (LOL). And it reminded me (not that I needed it) what dance has meant to me, how it has formed me and benefited me even beyond my life in the dance world.

I highly recommend this book for anybody who is interested in knowing what it's like to be a professional dancer.

Grier Cooper says

Such a fun read...courageous, humorous and inspiring. I love the way Kessler writes, and as a former professional dancer, I can say that she's done her homework...I even learned a few new things about ballet. This is a perfect gift for ballet fans, adult ballet students, or anyone who's ever harbored the secret dream of becoming a dancer.

Carin says

My friend Sarah once told me a cool story about how her mother danced the lead in the Nutcracker, on pointe, in her 50s, as a part of a troupe of older ballet dancers. I thought that was amazing. I took ballet as a kid, for many many years, despite having no talent, an uncooperative body (falling arches, inflexible, no turnout), and always being a half beat behind the music. But I loved it and it worked for me, until I needed to actually have some skill or talent to continue. In college, I stopped. I was good at one thing--going on pointe. I tried it again last year even though my old pointe shoes didn't fit anymore, and I still could do it, no problem.

I was captivated the minute I saw this book in a bookstore. However, I didn't read the description and I

assumed it was something like what Sarah's mother did, and that misunderstanding meant I liked the book a little less, although that's no fault of the book.

Instead, Lauren was like me and took ballet as a child. Unlike me, she had dreams of being a professional that lasted beyond first grade. But then she quit before I did because, at the time she needed to dramatically increase her ballet immersion if she were to pursue a professional career as an adult, instead her teacher told her mother that Lauren had no hope of that, mostly due to her body type. Unbeknownst to both of them, Lauren overheard the conversation which hurt her deeply. She quit that day.

But she still loved the ballet. She saw many, but especially the Nutcracker which she saw every year in her hometown of Portland, OR. And one year her husband went off to Paris on a long business trip in December without Lauren, and she decided to splurge and see a half dozen Nutcrackers all around the country. But that wasn't enough. She wanted more. So she spoke to the president of the company that performs Portland's Nutcracker every year and got her to agree that Lauren could dance a role in the next year's performance.

Well that's a little crazy. It's never mentioned but surely she partly agreed for the publicity angle, otherwise there's zero reason to agree to let a stranger, middle-aged, slightly overweight, not in ballet shape, who hasn't danced in about 30 years, do this. But she does. And Lauren then spends the bulk of the book procrastinating, doing exercising she knows is wrong, and pre-pre-pre-preparing for ballet. I have a quibble with how late she finally took adult ballet, considering how much faith the company was putting in her and how remarkable this opportunity was. She then spent a lot of time complaining about her body, especially her arms, while not apparently doing much about them, and while talking about how awful it is when women complain about their bodies. Sigh. But then she got up to when she was rehearsing with the company and I really enjoyed that. She got to know most of the professional dancers and they all had fascinating stories (I wish, in fact, she'd gotten into that more.) I loved the history of The Nutcracker, which is kind of kooky (and meant I got a trivia question right later that week!)

Overall, while the book was uneven, I did enjoy it. It's great for any former ballet students who once had aspirations that have since been dashed. It's for the former snowflakes and former soldiers everywhere (yep, those are the roles I had in the junior ballet in my youth.) I wish she was a little less obsessed with "leos" (is that really how people talk about leotards today? It sounded affected.) and partly, the narration might have impacted how I found her to be somewhat self-obsessed and smug. Maybe print would have been better. But I still am glad I read it.

Jessica says

This is another book I got from my ballet teacher, and really, I should have loved it - it's about a "middle-aged" woman attempting to dance in the Nutcracker, for pity's sake (my ballet class is currently deep in rehearsal for a Nutcracker performance in December).

But there was something about simultaneously self-deprecating and self-satisfied tone of the book that grated on me. Also, it's halfway through the book before the author even steps foot in a ballet studio, and even then she starts skipping ballet classes in favor of Pilates and something called "Barre3". I kind of thought: if you're as in love with ballet as you claim to be, how are you not actually dancing every chance you get?

The parts that did resonate with me were her body-image issues (yes, it's hard to see yourself reflected in a wall of mirrors while wearing a leotard), her struggles with achieving the grace and transcendence of ballet

instead of just stumbling over your own feet, and what it's like to actually be a performer - namely, the repetition, the tedium, the cramped dressing rooms, the cold stages, the general, lengthy discomfort before the relatively short period of time you actually get to *perform* (I know it from ballet and especially from playing in a band. It's not a glamorous life.).

Akeating2003 says

This was hard to rate. If I was just rating her story starting with attending 6 different shows and the months up to her dancing on stage, I would have made this 4.5 stars. The behind the scenes details were fascinating and Lauren was very funny in her descriptions of the classes that she tried and her nervousness/awkwardness. Unfortunately, I had a hard time in reading the parts that didn't relate to ballet because they seemed to go on for too long and were repeated too many times throughout the book. I ended up flipping past a lot to get back to her story of her journey to her actual performance, which then strangely seemed cut short.

Greta Faith says

This book was very different than I expected it to be. I enjoy almost anything having to do with dance, but most dance books are too dark and depressing for me. I expected *Raising the Barre* to be a lighthearted story about a woman's desire to perform the Nutcracker in her fifties. This is partly accurate, but this story was much less lighthearted than I expected. Many chapters deal with body image, success, failure, and fulfillment. I'm definitely not saying this was a bad thing, but just be aware that these are the kind of things you will encounter in the story. That said, this book was pretty enjoyable. I learned many things about the inner workings of a professional ballet company and some interesting insight into the mindset of some of the most famous dancers of all time. The story did drag a bit at some points (mainly the motivational bits), but overall it was a very interesting book.

Terry says

This is a perfectly pleasant book. It reads quite like a very long *O, The Oprah Magazine* article, which isn't exactly a criticism. It's breezy, accessible, self-deprecating. Kessler makes side trips into musing on middle age (which occasionally also veers awfully close to shilling territory for her recent anti-aging book), women's body image issues, and perfectionism--all of which are relevant to my interests (ha), but sometimes it felt like she was padding *this* particular story to make the book longer, and in the end, I felt like she gave her experience of the actual performing of the ballet--which is supposed to be the whole point of the book!--oddly short shrift.

Edited to add: I had a hard time, too, with Kessler not acknowledging her enormous privilege of being able to spend up to six hours a day exercising, in very expensive classes. Call it "immersion journalism" all you want, but it's also a kind of journalism open only to people who can afford (in terms of finances and time) to do it in the first place, so don't pat yourself on the back TOO hard, there.

Liralen says

Kessler is an academic/writer, not a dancer (this is important, but lest you forget, she'll remind you every page or so). She's also older than your average dancer (again, she'll remind you). But she still held one of her childhood dreams: to dance *The Nutcracker*. Luckily for Kessler, the artistic director of the local ballet company was willing to give her a shot at a minor role.

Most of the book covers Kessler's preparation for actually dancing, which is to say it's about yoga and Pilates and *not* running and finding leotards that fit people who aren't professional dancers and learning to apply makeup and worrying—more or less constantly—about not having the body of a twenty-something dancer. One of the things that most interested me about the book, though, is the way the cogs are visible. Not the cogs of ballet; I've read plenty of other behind-the-scenes books about dance/performance. Rather, we see a lot of Kessler's process of research and writing. I'm not convinced that it was a stylistic choice and not entirely convinced it worked—I could have used a little less 'and then I looked *this* up on the Internet and here's what I learned, and here's a snarky comment to go with it' and a little more seamless integration of research—but in a way it mirrors the behind-the-scenes sense of the ballet.

There's so much self-doubt and negative self-talk that it's hard to tell how well Kessler did in *The Nutcracker* (on an objective, performance-only level—on a personal-fulfillment level it sounds pretty satisfying), although that might be in part because there's not all that much about the performances themselves. *But* there's never any hint from the professionals that there were insurmountable problems, and according to the Internet* she returned to dance the same role the following year. So...sounds like a success, and now I rather want to read Full-Court Press.

*Yes, I am a hypocrite.

Tara Corpuz says

An inspiring read of a woman forgoing "good sense" and taking back the passion she'd had as a little girl of the world of ballet, enough to train and dance the nutcracker.

I really enjoyed the candid view of the modern dancer's everyday struggles, the insight into famous past dancers' stories, and even the introduction on the overwhelming affect the nutcracker has had on the world.

I found myself getting really tired, however, of how hard she was on herself--berating her performance and her body with startling consistency. Maybe I'm just tired of women being so awful to themselves in general, but her joking manner of her hurtful comments towards herself got old, quick.

Whitney says

A middle-aged woman dancing in one of the most classic ballets seems a bit far-fetched to some, especially when you find out she hasn't danced a day since she was a wee pre-teen. Sheer determination and will to find enjoyment in something that was solely hers drove Kessler to concur the odds and get out on that stage.

Were there missteps? Sure. Bumps and bruises of the ego, not just the physical. But everything Kessler

mentioned was something we ALL can relate to. And she worked through it. Nothing about this memoir is showy or preachy and that may be what was the most motivating part of it. She knew her limits, acknowledged her errors and still kept on trucking. At no point did I feel like she was telling me "look how perfect this can all turn out if you just follow these simple steps!" It was more like, "look how hard you work but you can still fall on your ass... and get back up."

This was a joy to read. Light, funny and inspiring, Kessler made me want to bust out my ballet slippers and head straight to class.

Amie says

An amazing story about a woman who decides she wants to shake up her life and dance in The Nutcracker. This book is about overcoming obstacles and pushing yourself to accomplish things you thought were out of reach. She's funny, relatable, and you'll cheer for her until the very end.

Marlathemom says

A 45 year-old-woman revisits her childhood dream of dancing in The Nutcracker? I was immediately intrigued! But this book would have been a better series of articles in Rolling Stone - their detailed accounts of behind-the-scenes life keep us hungering for more. This book had lots of repetitive details and not enough juicy ones. A decent read for a true Nutcracker lover, but save the money for a ballet class instead.

Robin says

Lauren Kessler proved it's never too late to follow your dreams. She was a devotee of the Nutcracker so despite a busy schedule as a mother, university professor, and writer, Kessler devoted herself to getting in shape to dance in her city's yearly ballet production. This is a perfect book for those of us in our midlife years yearning to realize our dreams of roller derby participation or of learning to execute a double Axel in figure skating--OK,so at age 63 I'm a little beyond "midlife" years, so I'm not about to court broken bones by derby racing or learning to ice-skate, but it's nice to know it's a possibility.
