



The Nutcracker Chronicles: A Fairytale Memoir

Janine Kovac

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The memoir The Nutcracker Chronicles is filled with a dancer's unique insights into one of the world's most famous ballets.

A work of singular focus, Janine Kovac's memoir *The Nutcracker Chronicles* details her time as a ballerina, with *The Nutcracker* as the focal point around which the rest of her life story spins.

During her El Paso childhood, Kovac developed an interest in ballet that caught fire upon watching a local performance of *The Nutcracker*. Raised in the dance world, she contended with jealousy, body image issues, and strict instructors in order to succeed. Later, she lived away from her family in a dorm and experienced first love on her way to becoming a professional ballerina who worked in Europe and San Francisco.

Fed by her experiences with dancing—including her relationship to a dance instructor, Ms. Heuser, who was hard-nosed and often abusive and whose attention and lack thereof dominated the futures of her students—there was an element of obsession present in all areas of Kovac's life. Later, she taught ballet herself. She saw her story come full circle when her child performed in *The Nutcracker* too:

Ballet was both a feeling and a shape, simultaneously a process and a goal. In any given moment, a dancer was both the eye of the hurricane and the turbulent winds. If my students could grasp these contradictory ideas and reach for the heavens while still acknowledging the pull of gravity, they would never falter.

In the end, the book's most pivotal moments center on *The Nutcracker* ballet and Kovac's feelings surrounding it. At some points in her career, she interpreted *The Nutcracker* in terms of personal or family triumphs; at other times, her role in the show was a vehicle for reflection on her perceived personal failings, feelings of distrust, and hardships. Still, though they seemed omnipresent, self-doubt and fear of failure had to be tamped down in order for Kovac perform at a high level. Her complex feelings about ballet result in tension throughout.

The prose is straightforward and accessible, though in the process of avoiding flourishes, its most emotional scenes are too often oversimplified and distant. Even stories that are rife with drama tend to fall flat as a result. Further, those around Kovac are too often underdeveloped, present most as accessories to her successes and failures. Even Ms. Heuser, who is a recurring source of antagonism, is without dimension, with the book focusing most on her credentials; she "put Ballet El Paso on the map." Glimpses at others' experiences of dance are rare—with the exception of an early classmate of Kovac's, whose personal motivations during a performance are well shown.

Filled with a dancer's insights into one of the world's most famous ballets, *The Nutcracker Chronicles* is a ballerina's intriguing memoir.

AHLIAH BRATZLER (August 16, 2024)

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