**Dancing on the Page: Award-Winning Dance Instructor Turned Award-Winning Author:
(19 Books during COVID-19 by a Grandma-Mom-Daughter Team)**

As a dance instructor in March 2020, I’d open the dance studio’s doors so my adult ballet students could avoid touching the handles. We wouldn’t use barres or do floor stretches. A few folks had already hunkered down, so there were only a handful of folks left, and we’d always had the space to ourselves in the mornings. It felt pretty safe, and I planned to teach as long as anyone showed up. (I understood and refunded absent students.) But soon, it wasn’t up to me and my students. I was banned from the studio as the world shut down.

My daughter was still a Professional Division (PD) student at Pacific Northwest Ballet (PNB). The teens in the program had joked they would be the last to leave, “Company members, go spend time with your families; kids and adults, sorry your safety is paramount; PDs, we’ll see you at 8:30.” This proved true for a while, and it made sense—it would be a hard decision to scatter teens who mostly lived on their own in a new town without cars or resources.

Then there was a PNB COVID-scare and even their world shut down. Many of the PDs travelled to their parents, where months later, they would rejoin their peers on zoom. Some waited locally to see what would happen next—I asked my daughter to check in on the stragglers.

My daughter drove from her apartment each day, and we’d take a ballet class together, first from YouTube then on zoom. We had both breathed ballet for as long as we could remember. As well as classes, there were performances almost every weekend. Even my son danced. It was ballet all the time, and now there was a huge ballet void.

With extra time on our hands and a desire to keep housebound folks moving, we created dance videos for both kids and adults. We named my daughter *Ballerina Konora*, wanting to create something beautiful from **Corona**virus. But some videos were copyright blocked and others did not get many views. Wishing we had a wider audience, we switched from videos to books hoping to reach more kids. We took pictures and started writing a book.

I tried to make the book using InDesign, but couldn’t figure out how to create a new document. I bought how-to books and watched YouTube tutorials. There’s a scene in *The Matrix,* where Neo says, “I know Kung Fu.” I’m the opposite—after three months studying InDesign, it felt like all I could say was, “I know how to open a document.”

I asked a few folks to look at the book and incorporated their feedback, while researching self-publishing. So many things to figure out: how to find an editor, ISBN numbers, Amazon metadata and keywords, copyrights, setting up a business, etc.

I joked the book was cursed in the beginning. There were so many challenges, I thought about writing another book just about the tribulations of a new publisher! First, I lost the Word document. Then I lost the InDesign draft. Just as I finished the first draft, the main font became unavailable. After a few books were published, Amazon pulled them all from their shelves, telling me, “Don’t use keywords for the author’s name.” (They were republished, but only weeks later after back-and-forth correspondence and my sending my business license as proof.) My website completely disappeared. An ampersand symbol in some metadata on the copyright site was translated to ‘and’ and the book title no longer matched, so I couldn’t publish the book (of course, neither I nor Amazon knew what the issue was at the time). One book had technical issues uploading; the problem escalated three levels up the Amazon customer service hierarchy. Then there was some tax issue. To top it all off, a few months later, my computer crashed, and I lost a full book layout, as well as a few other key files. Everything felt like such a battle, like I was fighting the book-gods and losing. But I’d managed to set up a business, publish a book, and create a website.

*Ballerina Konora’s* auditions had all been cancelled that spring, but she got a couple trainee offers (downgrades from her current program, but one was interested in hiring her so it was a worthwhile switch). She’d moved out of state in October. I started creating a second book around pictures we’d already taken. *Konora* reviewed drafts over zoom. We got my mom involved with the editing, so now we were three generations working on the book from three states, which was kind of neat.

No one bought the first book beyond my mom and a few friends. I could identify every purchase. It was very disappointing. I thought Amazon would recommend new books to people interested in the topic, but this has proved not to be the case.

I learned more about book publishing—everyone said you have to keep publishing. Well, okay, then—book two was already in process; I started on books three and four.

I felt like an imposter. I wasn’t an author. I wasn’t even dancing any more. I felt like I knew nothing about dancing or books. Then, one night months into the journey, I updated the *Once Upon a Dance* bio, which had up-to-that-point focused on Konora’s dance career. I started noting my own contributions:

* decades of work with young children in dance—I even had an award from my city council for my work with young dancers
* photography classes, serving as high school and college yearbook photo editor, and a successful photography business
* mom of two with one voracious picture book reader
* college classes in design and marketing
* graduate coursework in education
* work in early childhood
* work with non-profits helping kids
* I even taught English at a university in Africa for two years as a Peace Corps volunteer.
* Oh, and there was a 9-month certification program working with kids in the arts.
* I had breathed ballet and dance from every imaginable angle, including Board Member.

Wow, that was a lot of related experience. It was like a dope-slap to the forehead—my whole life was leading up to being a kids dance author and having a book biz! I could totally do this! It was an epiphany.

From then on, I was all in and running. I figured out how to hire illustrators. We created the books I wished I’d had when I was a mom of a little girl and teaching dance to young kids. The *Dance-It-Out! Creative Movement for Young Movers* series was born, as was *Konora’s Shapes*. We also made a couple of journals and a calendar.

The indie author journey was still a much more arduous one than I ever imagined. ‘Celebrate the small successes’ became my mantra.

My daughter would have adored these stories had they been available when she was young. And I would have loved to sit on the couch and see her put on a show. Most of the books include an option for reader-child interaction. For example, in *Petunia Perks Up,* Petunia gives her mother a hug and kids are asked if there’s someone with whom they’d want to share a happy feeling. The books are very sweet.

And if I’d had these books when I was a child, I’m pretty sure the cassette tape would have snapped from overuse, and the books’ pages would be worn through. I bet I would have enjoyed the books targeting younger kids, too (even when I was older). Since I was an only child with working parents, my cat would have been the audience for my choreographed story performances.

Each new book was a little better, and I was learning more every day. I wanted the books in the hands of housebound kids. Most kids had lost their afterschool sports and activities, and many (mine included) were sitting behind a screen at home instead of moving among hallways. Sales were still slow, so I started looking at ways to get the word out and stepped up Facebook and Instagram. I’m still trying to figure out how to get the books further out in the world.

This year, I’ve learned many new things outside of a dance instructor’s wheelhouse—BISAC (***Book Industry****Standards and Communications*) categories, how to get a LCCN (*Library of Congress Control Number*), HTML, and how to work around Print-On-Demand company quirks. I follow authors, ad specialists, and book publishing gurus. I’m like a new parent that was never around kids, craving knowledge and connection. Sometimes I have to stop myself and say ‘enough learning, get to work’.

Folks who have read the books have been very positive. I knew kids would love them after years of seeing children light up in my dance classes, but I wasn’t sure how the reviews would go. I’m ecstatic with the reception: parents, teachers, librarians, and reviewers have all praised the book as ingenious, heartwarming, accessible, fun, innovative, creative, whimsical, beautiful…

It boggles my mind that I can create a story, reach out to editors I’ve never met, find illustrators all over the world, create and upload a book. Random strangers (say, in Australia) can have it printed and shipped from Amazon in three days.

I always tell people I did all this because I needed a reason to get out of bed. (We donate all 2020/2021 book sales to non-profit organizations.) But I also feel lucky to keep this connection with my daughter. With books in every stage, we often do photo shoots and there’s a lot of laughter—those are some of my favorite moments. She listens and acts out the stories with no instructions as a test case. The look she gave me when I told her to *jump with her tongue* was particularly funny.

I love having a collection of Dance-It-Outs. We can highlight diversity in characters, movements, learning concepts, and bonus takeaways throughout the series. There are six published with another four coming out this summer/fall.

One of the books is based on grandma’s story, a present to my daughter when she turned six, and another is a collaboration with a local dance teacher creating a story-ballet. We think of each book as a dance performance, with different formatting, layout, and illustrators, just as a different show would have new sets, costumes, and choreography.

The six available *Dance-It-Out!s* include:

* *Joey Finds His Jump!*
* *Brielle’s Birthday Ball*
* *Princess Naomi Helps a Unicorn*
* *Mira Monkey’s Magic Mirror Adventure*
* *Petunia Perks Up*
* *Danny, Denny, and the Dancing Dragon*
* *The Cat with the Crooked Tail*
* *Belluna’s Big Adventure in the Sky*
* *Freya, Fynn, and the Fantastic Flute*

Next up is parts two/three of a trilogy about monkeys and fairy mischief, a squirrel superhero, and dolls that come to life.

People have asked about my process. The initial book structure is always a pretty physical one; I am still a dance teacher at heart. Picture me standing outside my house while someone’s working inside, because you know, the COVID thing. I made up all the movements for the upcoming *Mira Monkey’s Magic Mirror Adventure* on my front sidewalk. I’m sure the neighbors were like, “What the…?”

The other series, *Dancing Shapes: Ballet and Body Awareness for Young Dancers*, was more like putting a puzzle together—trying to figure out which pictures would go with each book and moving them around on the pages. We were honored that the first *Dancing Shapes* book was a 2021 Independent Press Award Winner. It was also a finalist in a few other contests, so now I can say I’m an award-winning author.

I was worried my daughter’s ballerina dreams might fade in covid’s shadow, but I’m happy to report she has a performing job for the summer and a separate contract for next season. Let’s just hope performers everywhere can all get back to doing what they love most.

In the meantime, we’ll keep creating. Now, I just need folks to know the books exist. My son gets embarrassed because I give books to random strangers I see with kids. But they are truly a labor of love, and we want them out in the world bringing children joy. If you have a theater or dance-loving kiddo in your life, please check the books out at [OnceUponADance.com](http://www.OnceUponADance.com), Amazon, or your favorite bookstore.