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KATHRYN WAGNER

About Kathryn Wagner | For Book Clubs | Q & A

Dancing for Degas

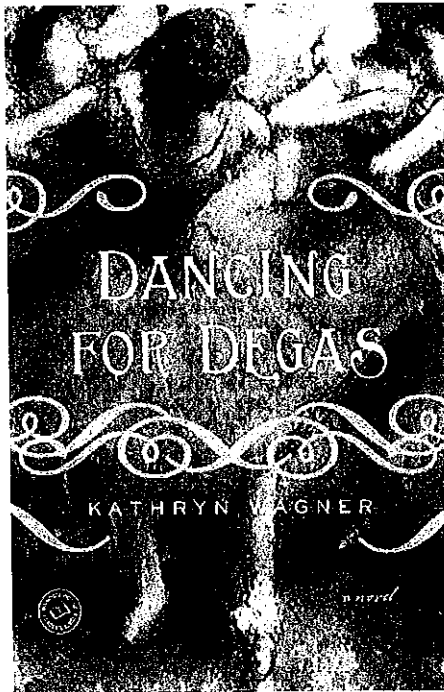
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Praise for Dancing for Degas:

"Like all good historical fiction, *Dancing for Degas* gives us a small sliver of reality during a different era, and its value is that it leaves the reader wanting to learn more about the subject." —*The Boston Globe*

"First-time novelist Wagner skillfully compresses the war into a series of brief letters in this engaging tale illuminating the dark side of French society high and low. With appearances by Degas' peers Cezanne and Monet, this fascinating visit to a bygone world of art and sex, war and love will draw many." —*Booklist*

"Wagner imagines how layers of meaning pervade works of art, but her real forte is detailing the sexual politics of poverty and evoking the rivalry among dancers, especially between stars and the newcomers who wish to replace them." —*Publishers Weekly*



Order This Book

In the city of lights, at the dawn of a new age, here is an unforgettable story of great love, great art—and the most painful choices of the heart.

Kathryn Wagner transports readers to an era of light and movement with this fresh and vibrantly imagined portrait of the Impressionist artist Edgar Degas as told through the eyes of a young Parisian ballerina. An ambitious and enterprising farm girl, Alexandrie enters the prestigious Paris Opera ballet with hopes of catching the eye of one of the ballet's wealthy patrons—thereby securing not only her place in society, but her family's financial future.

But her plan is soon derailed when she falls in love with the enigmatic artist whose paintings of the private off-stage lives of the ballerinas scandalized society and revolutionized the art world. As Alexandrie is drawn deeper into Degas's art and Paris's darkest secrets, she will risk everything for her dreams of love and of becoming the ballet's star dancer.

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Photo credit: Kevin Koski

About Kathryn Wagner

Kathryn Wagner currently resides in Washington, D.C. *Dancing for Degas* is her first novel. She holds a B.A. in journalism with a minor in art and has worked as a staff writer and columnist for several newspapers in North Carolina, Massachusetts, and Virginia. Imagining what has inspired great artists has been a longtime passion of hers. She is currently at work on her next novel.

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For Book Clubs

Book Club Questions

1. From Jane Austen's England to Alexandrie's France and all over the world, children were responsible for securing the futures of their families. Is that still the case? Why or why not?
2. Could you cultivate an ambition like Alexandrie's? Under what circumstances?
3. Alexandrie's larger than life mother pushes her to be the financial savior of her family. Why does her father play so conspicuously small a role in this narrative?
4. Alexandrie's mother was so hopeful that her daughter would be chosen as a lorette, but horrified by the idea of post-performances. To what degree do these roles differ? Is the morality in this book clean cut or more complicated? How do the consciences of the various characters—Alexandrie, Noella, Cornelia, Julien's mistress—differ, and why?
5. Did the structure of the novel—with its performance elements of acts, scenes, and intermissions—affect your reading experience? How so?
6. As a child at the market, Alexandrie dreamt of being a woman like Monsieur Belmont's wife. Did she succeed?
7. In the end, has Alexandrie found true love or simply the best possible choice? In her (dance) shoes, what would you have done? Would you have become Julien's lorette? Pursued Edgar? Married Mr. Taylor?
8. Why did Alexandrie flee the Louvre, and Edgar, at the end of the novel? Do you think Edgar would have recognized and understood her reasons?
9. In the introduction, *Coppelia* shows the audience that a woman with faults is better than a flawless doll. Which of the female characters in this novel fall into these categories? Which are successful in their chosen roles?
10. Having read *Dancing for Degas*, do you understand Degas' paintings on another level? How so?

Contact Information

Visit the [Random House Readers Circle](#) to request a phone chat with Kathryn Wagner for your next book club meeting.

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A Conversation with Kathryn Wagner

Kathryn Wagner sat down with Random House Reader's Circle to enjoy coffee. No removing of gloves was involved, but they did attempt to sip with Parisian elegance as they spoke about inspiration, obsession, dance and geographical contentment.

Random House Reader's Circle: What inspired you to write a novel about Edgar Degas? Was Degas your initial focus, or did Alexandrie come to you first?

Kathryn Wagner: I've always loved Degas' ballerina paintings and while taking an art history class in college, my professor pointed out that the man behind the curtain in "The Star" (L'etoile [La danseuse sur la scene]) was a "john." I've always thought of the ballet as very sophisticated, so I never would have guessed that—not that long ago—some ballerinas had an ulterior motive for dancing. It had always been a goal of mine to write a book, and when I started to seriously consider doing it, I was reading a lot of historical fiction at the time. I was drawn to the idea of filling in the gaps and speculating about what may have happened to great historical figures. I've always loved art history and I look at paintings less for the technical brushstrokes, and more for the story of what inspired the artist. I wonder about the artist's relationship with a model or about how he or she spent time at the landscapes that he or she chose to paint. When figuring out what subject to tackle, Degas' ballerinas immediately popped into my head. I thought the lives of the dancers would be the most interesting, so it was Alexandrie's story that actually came to me first. I really knew very little about Degas as a person. When I researched his life and found that he had shunned all relationships for his art, I knew that the story had to be about unrequited love. I wanted the character of Alexandrie to be strong and to want something more for herself than meeting a john behind the curtain. When I began the story I was about to turn thirty and was starting to seriously think about the future, so it was easy for me to relate to Alexandrie's struggle to choose the right path—minus her lorette vs. courtesan predicament of course.

RHRC: Do you think there's a connection between Degas' love life (or lack thereof) and the way he portrays men in his paintings?

Kathryn: That is a great theory. I think the way he portrays all of his subjects, men or women, shows a connection because Degas completely removed himself emotionally from his paintings and the final product is one of an observer. The relationships he portrays, such as in Absinthe, are not romantic or idealized, it's just two people sitting together looking kind of bored. I think it would be safe to assume that Degas had removed himself emotionally from the world in order to paint as a realist.

RHRC: What was the most surprising fact you learned about Degas while researching his life? Was there anything particularly juicy that you just couldn't find a way to incorporate into the story?

Kathryn: I was surprised to find out that he had struggled with his sight and went blind at the end of his life. It really struck a chord with me because he lived for his art to such an extreme that at the end of his life he couldn't even see all that he had accomplished.

I actually didn't find anything juicy or scandalous. I think Degas would be happy with what is written of his life because it's all about his career and there is virtually nothing about his personal life. There were a couple of themes that I would have liked to explore, but that just didn't work with the story. For example, he spent a lot of time painting race horses, because he liked capturing their movement. I think it would have been really interesting to learn more about that experience in his life and tackle some of the characters at the race track and explore the lifestyle of going to the races. But I needed this to be Alexandrie's story and incorporating his time at the race track would have taken the story away from her.

RHRC: Speaking of those details, what did you find to be the most challenging aspect of Degas' life to fictionalize?

Kathryn: I found it hard to fictionalize his relationship with Alexandrie and still be true to his life as it was recorded in history. Some readers might want a grand, sweeping love affair, but it would have just been really inaccurate to do that. I had to do a lot of revising to make sure that Alexandrie's character didn't

come off as pitiable in her unrequited love, and also so that Degas didn't come off as too harsh. There were a few areas that I took liberties with, using the research I did and making imaginative assumptions to aid the story. For example, it is not recorded that Degas' mother had an affair with her brother-in-law, Achille. I invented that to create a little more depth as to why the character of Degas in this book would shun relationships. Also, Degas did not have a heartbreaking relationship with a former model who ran off with his brother. I added that to the story because he had a habit of washing out figures from previous paintings and painting over them. I always imagined that it looked like he was trying to erase a lost love.

RHRC: It must be an exceptionally difficult choice to make when history doesn't quite give you the leeway you need in creating a story—rein in the drama or change history to suit your plot. How do you choose?

Kathryn: I think one of the joys of reading—and writing—historical fiction is that it is fiction. While it draws from real events, it also has the advantage of being free to invent new outcomes and interpretations. Two instances come to mind where I chose to incorporate important historical events but slightly altered the dates or circumstances to fit the story—they were small changes, but they were essential to the novel. The first is that the final phase of the Franco Prussian war, known as "the French Civil War," which lasted from March through May 1871, did not actually begin in front of the Paris Opera House as a protest against the war. But the war itself was an undeniably crucial event for my characters and for Paris itself, and this change really brought its impact closer to home.

The second is that the first Impressionist Exhibit was held in Nadar's photographic studio in 1874. Historically, although not well received, it was never canceled because of the war. However, Alexandrie's story follows Degas from 1865 through 1872. Again, the fact that Degas poured so much energy into arranging this exhibit that was ultimately a failure seemed important to the development of his character and his art, so I took the essence of that event and fit it to the scope of the story.

RHRC: Did you watch a lot of ballet as young girl? Or have you attended the ballet frequently as an adult? I'm curious what kind of research you did in order to describe the steps and movements of the ballet: Alexandrie's descriptions while she's dancing are very specific and energetic, which seems especially impressive given that you're not a dancer yourself.

Kathryn: Like a lot of little girls, I took ballet classes, so I was able to draw from my experience when Alexandrie was at Madame Channing's studio. I wouldn't say I frequent the ballet, but I love going when I get the chance. Each time it is such a beautiful experience, so as I was writing those scenes I tried to imagine what it would be like to see them from a different perspective (onstage rather than in the audience). I read a lot about the various ballets that were being performed at the time in order to capture the energy needed to tell each ballet's story. For the more specific descriptions of steps, I went online. It doesn't sound very romantic, but there were videos of different moves that I studied in order to try to put their spirit into words as Alexandrie performed them.

RHRC: You mentioned earlier that you've always thought of the ballet as sophisticated. Do you think readers will come away from your novel thinking about ballet in a different light? Were there any historical aspects that didn't fit with Alexandrie's story, that you chose to fictionalize?

Kathryn: I think readers will see that the ballet has its own history and has changed just as the role of women has changed over time. When I think of major changes throughout history I think of medicine, government, women's rights, but for some reason I think of the opera, theater, and ballet as always being the same. I wanted readers to realize that just because a girl was a ballerina in the late 1800's, didn't mean that she had any more rights than girls who were living at home with their families. In creating Alexandrie's story I did fictionalize her life at the Paris Opera Ballet somewhat for the sake of drama. Through my research, I learned that the mistress aspect of the ballet was indeed quite prominent during Degas' time—usually arranged by the young girls' mothers, in fact. And many of Degas' paintings depict the relationship between abonnées and ballerinas, including L'etoile. But the Ballet never functioned as an actual underground prostitution ring. Young ballerinas were closely monitored by their mothers to ensure they stayed intact, and, to my knowledge, were not living in dormitory-style housing as is depicted in the novel. It was also not an absolute requirement for ballerinas to become mistresses. The Paris Opera Ballet was, and still is, one of the most prestigious institutions in France, and history has shown that there are many famous ballerinas who were dedicated only to dance.

RHRC: The issue of women's rights at the time being similar whether in the country or in the city is an intriguing one. Yet when Alexandrie is transplanted from her small farming village to the big city of Paris, she thrives despite the challenges. Your family moved around a bit when you were young—did you have that same experience of hitting one particular place that was the perfect fit for you?

Kathryn: My family moved when I was 15, so I was able to relate to Alexandrie's mixed emotions of fear, excitement, and intimidation at a vulnerable age. But an experience like that also gives you the reassurance that you can move to a place where you don't know anyone and make a new life, which is what made Paris so enticing for Alexandrie. After college, I moved to Massachusetts for about five years and made a lot of great friends, loved Boston, hated the winter, but for some reason I just always knew that it was a temporary place for me. I'm living in Washington, D.C. now, and I feel completely settled here and don't have the desire to move anywhere else. I'm definitely an East Coast girl, and I think the

combination of a smaller city and the fact that hardly anyone is born and raised in D.C. is what makes it work for me. It's an interesting question, because I'm not sure if it's hitting a certain place geographically, or if it's growing up and hitting a certain place where you're happy with yourself and where your life is. Most likely, it's probably a mix of both and I think if you have the chance, everyone should try to live in a few different places to find out what kind of environment they thrive in.

RHRC: Among other things, D.C., of course, has a lot of great museums. Do you have a favorite? What's your favorite Degas painting and why?

Kathryn: D.C. is a great museum city—and most are free which is amazing. My favorite museum is the National Gallery of Art, and I also love the Corcoran Gallery of Art and The Phillips Collection. I would have to say that my favorite Degas is L'etoile because, besides being a beautiful painting, it got my imagination going and gave me the inspiration to write *Dancing for Degas*.

RHRC: You mentioned that, aside from writing historical fiction, you're also a fan—who or what are your favorite authors or books?

Kathryn: I love Philippa Gregory's books, especially *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *The Boleyn Inheritance*. The Tudors are fascinating and I'm semi-obsessed with the six wives of Henry VIII and all of the drama that surrounded them.

RHRC: Can you tell us a little about what else you're obsessed with? Perhaps what you're working on next?

Kathryn: I'm working on another historical fiction novel that focuses on the Post-Impressionist artist Pierre Bonnard, and the love triangle between Bonnard, his wife Marthe, and his mistress, Renee Monchaty. It's set in 1920s France, which is such an energetic time, and the setting goes beyond Paris into Provence and the Riviera. This book is a lot of fun to write because each woman brings out a different side of Bonnard's personality—Marthe plays to the responsible husband who is content living outside the city, taking walks and painting landscapes, while Renee plays to the restlessness that made him travel from place to place in search of something new and exciting. The tone of the book differs from *Dancing for Degas* in that it is much more gossipy and lighter, but at the same time, Marthe has some big secrets that she kept hidden from Bonnard, and his affair with Renee ends in a shocking way. I have a lot more research and writing to do, but it's really coming together nicely.