



The OTHER SIDE of PERFECT

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May 2021
ISBN 9781760526252
Format: Paperback
Recommended for 12 to 18 year olds

Summary

Alina Keeler was destined to dance, but then a terrifying fall shatters her leg – and her dreams of a professional ballet career along with it. After a summer healing (translation: eating vast amounts of Cool Ranch Doritos and bingeing ballet videos on YouTube), she is forced to trade her pre-professional dance classes for normal high school, where she reluctantly joins the school musical. However, rehearsals offer more than she expected – namely Jude, her annoyingly attractive castmate she just might be falling for. But to move forwards, Alina must make peace with her past and face the racism she experienced in the dance industry. She wonders what it means to yearn for ballet – something so beautiful, yet so broken. And as broken as she feels, can she ever open her heart to someone else?

Author Style

The Other Side of Perfect is a romantic, emotionally-driven contemporary YA that blends romance, quirk and comedy, with modern themes. It's a story of hope and ambition, perfectionism and jealousy, grief and rebirth all told in a refreshingly honest, perfectly angst-y teenage way. A novel about healing: both physical and emotional – with a wonderfully diverse cast of characters and surprising turns along the way, it is a joy to read. It's also incredibly timely, as the author's careful inspection of *The Nutcracker* within the manuscript reflects the ballet world's real-life struggle with modernisation and inclusion.

Suggestions for Classroom Discussion and Application

Title

Why do you think the author chose *The Other Side of Perfect* as the title of this book? In your answer, explore Alina's understanding of the word 'perfection' before and after her accident.

Visual Literacy

How does the cover illustrate the ideas behind the book? Look closely at the blurring of the letters in the words 'Side' and 'Perfect', and discuss why you think the designer included this element. Now look at the image of Alina: her head is placed in front of the word 'Other' but her body is placed behind the words 'Side' and 'Perfect'. Might this placement be significant? Why/why not? What effect do colour and light have on your 'reading' of the cover?

Prologue

What is the purpose of a prologue in a novel? Did the prologue of *The Other Side of Perfect* achieve this purpose for you? Explain, giving details, why or why not.

Characterisation

'Show, not tell' is a technique in which a writer builds a character via the thoughts and actions of that character. Rather than explicitly stating something about the character, the writer helps the reader to 'interpret' their thoughts and actions to create a deeper, more immersive understanding of the character.

- Write a description of Alina Keeler based on your interpretation of her thoughts and actions in Chapter One. In your answer make sure you note the use of a Jean-Paul Sartre quote in the opening sentence.
- Can you find examples of 'show, not tell' in the portrayal of Jude?
- Does Alina change over the course of the novel? Compare and contrast the person she was before the accident with the person she is after it. In your answer consider:
 - her devotion to ballet
 - her acceptance of racism
 - her interactions with others, such as Josie, Jude and Diya
 - her self-reflection

Stepping Up

In what way might Alina's passive acceptance of Paul and Jake's comments in English class be similar to her acceptance of Kira's biases in ballet class? Does the fact that she comes to recognise Kira's biases give her the motivation to confront Paul and Jake? Was this confrontation important? Why/why not?

Literature

...Mom sighed. 'If I were inclined to be literary about it, I'd say it was like all the pieces of myself had shaken up and flown in different directions, flipping and spinning and rearranging themselves. Like confetti. But in the end, after the whirlwind, all the pieces were still there. Every single one. Just in different places ... I looked the same, but inside, I felt different. Like all my pieces had settled back in different places, rearranged.' (pages 164-165)

- What literary term describes Alina's mum's description of moving from Hawaii? How does this description, and Alina's subsequent memory of mastering the double *tour en l'air*, relate to Alina's character development over the course of the novel?
- Is *The Other Side of Perfect* first person or third person point-of-view? Which do students prefer when reading YA novels, and why?

Themes

'My casting decisions have never been anything but fair,' Kira said in a clipped voice. ... 'That's why you have these roles. How dare you imply anything different.' (page 75)

Define the term 'unconscious bias'. Is it possible that Kira's casting decisions are influenced by her unconscious bias against Asian and African-American dancers? What impact has unconscious bias had on classical ballet? Now consider Alina's classmates Paul and Jake: are their jokes consciously biased? From where might they have learned these biases? How might one person's unconscious bias result in another's conscious bias? How might unconscious bias impact people in a school or workplace?

Extension

Read the following article about a ballet shoe manufacturer extending its range of colours to better match a variety of skin tones in light of the above discussion about unconscious biases.

<https://footwearnews.com/2020/focus/womens/bloch-pointe-shoes-darker-shades-petition-1203001879/>

Ask questions such as:

- Was the lack of darker toned ballet shoes because of conscious or unconscious bias?
- What might have been its impact on a non-Anglo dancer?
- What will be the likely impact of this change on ballet going forwards?

Contrast

That was what she meant when she explained Strange Harmonies to me. Contrasts and oppositions in the world. Joy and anger. Love and hate. Beauty and ugliness. (page 165)

What realisation do you think Alina makes here and how does it affect her later in the novel? How does *Strange Harmonies* influence her choreography of Diya's dance? Can you find other examples in the novel of contrasts coming together to create something beautiful?

Resolving Feelings

Like Alina, Mariko Turk has felt torn about her relationship with ballet. She says, 'I love ballet, but I know it has its share of harmful aspects – like its lack of diversity and its reliance on racial stereotypes in many classical pieces. So, if ballet perpetuates these negative things, does that mean I shouldn't love it? And if I do still love and support it, what does that mean about me?' (see 'In the author's own words' at the end of these notes).

How does Alina resolve these questions by the end of the novel? Did you find her resolution satisfying?

Ending

In ballet, a curtsy is also known as a reverence. It's not a simple bow to say 'Thanks for clapping.' It's a gesture of love and respect to your classmates, teachers, the music, the orchestra, the audience, and most of all, to ballet itself. (page 140)

What does Alina's curtsy in the final moments of the novel tell us about her new relationship with ballet?

Further Reading, Viewing and Discussion

Spend some time exploring the yellowface.org site to become acquainted with the issues of cultural stereotyping in ballet. Now watch Phil Chan, co-founder of yellowface.org, talk about his work on a Ballet West production on YouTube [type in 'Final Bow for Yellowface Phil Chan' to find the 2:42 minute clip]. Follow this with a short video featuring three traditional versions of the dance 'Chinese Tea' from *The Nutcracker* [Type in 'The Nutcracker Chinese Dance Comparison' to find the 3.32 minute clip].

- In a whole class discussion, ask students to share their reactions to the three versions of the Chinese Tea dance. Do they agree that these performances have created negative racial stereotypes? What particular aspects of the dances did they find problematic? What do they understand Phil Chan to mean when he talks about 'othering' groups and what the impact of that 'othering' might be?
- Now read the following article that appeared on the Guardian Australia's website in December 2019,

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/dec/04/the-australian-ballets-nutcracker-tones-down-the-yellowface-and-its-a-relief>

Discuss the questions that are posed at the end of the piece. 'Is it better to cast Chinese dancers for Chinese dances?' (How do you think Alina might answer that question?) 'Should producers be more historically accurate when signposting different cultures?' And 'are diverse voices being heard when these decisions are made?'

Debate

'Non-traditional casting' is the practice of casting without considering an actor's ethnicity, skin colour, body shape, sex and/or gender. (Wikipedia)

1. Watch the following trailer of Amando Iannucci's film adaptation of Charles Dickens's *The Personal History of David Copperfield*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dF495ERjRUo>
2. Then read the following Guardian article: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/aug/11/its-dangerous-not-to-see-race-is-colour-blind-casting-all-its-cracked-up-to-be>
3. Now divide students into two groups to discuss the proposition: 'The law should demand that cinemas only screen films that have practised non-traditional casting.'

About the author

Mariko Turk grew up in Pennsylvania and graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a BA in creative writing. She received her PhD in English from the University of Florida, with a concentration in children's literature. Currently, she works as a Writing Centre consultant at the University of Colorado Boulder. She lives in Colorado with her husband and baby daughter, where she enjoys tea, walks and stories of all kinds. *The Other Side of Perfect* is her debut novel.

In the author's own words

'Dancing was always a big part of my life, though I was never serious or skilled enough to be on the professional track. When I was in my twenties, I broke my leg while I was dancing ballet. Like Alina's injury, it was severe, required a long recovery time, and meant my dancing abilities would never be the same. Despite that, I remember being so grateful that the injury hadn't happened when I was a teenager, because dancing was such a huge part of my identity then that losing it would have thrown my life into turmoil. And what if I had been on the professional track? What then?

'When I went to graduate school to study literature, I became interested in how people respond to the negative aspects of the stories they love (such as a beloved book from childhood that contains outdated or harmful messages). Then I extended this kind of thinking to my relationship with ballet. I love ballet, but I know it has its share of harmful aspects – like its lack of diversity and its reliance on racial stereotypes in many classical pieces. So, if ballet perpetuates these negative things, does that mean I shouldn't love it? And if I do still love and support it, what does that mean about me?

'I thought about those questions a lot, and they combined with memories of my injury. I started imagining what would happen if a 16-year-old half-Japanese girl who dreamed of dancing professionally had a career-ending injury and had to deal with losing ballet and with realising how it had hurt her in ways she hadn't let herself fully realise before. Her story fascinated me and became *The Other Side of Perfect*.'



– Mariko Turk