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Mao's Last Dancer, Young Readers' Edition

By Li Cunxin



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At the age of eleven, Li Cunxin was one of the privileged few selected to serve in Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution by studying at the Beijing Dance Academy. Having known bitter poverty in his rural China home, ballet would be his family's best chance for a better future. From one hardship to another, Cunxin demonstrated perseverance and an appetite for success that led him to be chosen as one of the first two people to leave Mao's China and go to American to dance on a special cultural exchange. But life in the U.S. was nothing like his communist indoctrination had led him to believe. Ultimately, he defected to the west in a dramatic media storm, and went on to dance with the Houston Ballet for sixteen years.

This inspiring story of passion, resilience, and a family's love captures the harsh reality of life in Mao's communist China and the exciting world of professional dance. This compelling memoir includes photos documenting Li's extraordinary life.



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Mao's Last Dancer, Young Readers' Edition By Li Cunxin Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #916901 in Books
- Brand: Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing
- Published on: 2008-07-22
- Released on: 2008-07-22
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.11" h x 30.10" w x 5.39" l, .91 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 304 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

This is the heartening rags-to-riches story of Li, who achieved prominence on the international ballet stage. Born in 1961, just before the Cultural Revolution, Li was raised in extreme rural poverty and witnessed Communist brutality, yet he imbibed a reverence for Mao and his programs. In a twist of fate worthy of a fairy tale (or a ballet), Li, at age 11, was selected by delegates from Madame Mao's arts programs to join the Beijing Dance Academy. In 1979, through the largesse of choreographer and artistic director Ben Stevenson, he was selected to spend a summer with the Houston Ballet—the first official exchange of artists between China and America since 1949. Li's visit, with its taste of freedom, made an enormous impression on his perceptions of both ballet and of politics, and once back in China, Li lobbied persistently and shrewdly to be allowed to return to America. Miraculously, he prevailed in getting permission for a one-year return. In an April 1981 spectacle that received national media attention, Li defected in a showdown at the Chinese consulate in Houston. He married fellow dancer Mary McKendry and gained international renown as a principal dancer with the Houston Ballet and later with the Australian Ballet; eventually, he retired from dance to work in finance. Despite Li's tendency toward the cloying and sentimental, his story will appeal to an audience beyond Sinophiles and ballet aficionados—it provides a fascinating glimpse of the history of Chinese-U.S. relations and the dissolution of the Communist ideal in the life of one fortunate individual. 8 pages of b&w photos not seen by PW.

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From School Library Journal

Grade 6–9—In 1961, just three years after Mao's disastrous Great Leap Forward, Li Cunxin was born, the sixth son in a family of Chinese peasants who eked out a meager existence on a rural commune. During his childhood he endured unimaginable poverty and hardships and witnessed the shooting of 15 "counter-revolutionaries" by Mao's Red Guards. When chosen to audition for Madame Mao's Beijing Ballet Academy at age 11, ballet became his chance for a good job and enough food for life. Many years of training, two U.S. trips, one premature marriage, and a defection later, Li joined the Houston Ballet as a principal dancer, paving his way to international fame. Although told in a rather bland style—mostly in basic declarative sentences—the information about the country at this time and the danger and angst that accompanied the dancer's decision to defect will be of interest to teens. This Young Reader's Edition of the adult book (Putnam, 2004) gives a much fuller portrait than the author's picture-book version, *Dancing to Freedom* (Walker, 2008). The black-and-white photos, the abbreviated history, and time line will help students place Li's life story into historical context. With the current interest in all things Chinese, and with the immigration debate in full swing, this is a good choice, both to promote an understanding of Chinese culture and to provoke a discussion about the issues facing today's immigrants.—Nancy Menaldi-Scanlan, LaSalle Academy, Providence, RI

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Review

"[A] fascinating memoir...told simply but passionately, with subtle humor and unguarded emotion."—*The Houston Chronicle*

"Mix *Billy Elliot* with *Torn Curtain* and you'll have some of the tale in very broad outline...well-paced...full of adventures."—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Fascinating reading...unfolds with honesty, humor, and a quiet dignity. This book has wide appeal, for it

concerns not only a dancer's coming of age in a turbulent time but also individual strength, self-discovery, and the triumph of the human spirit.”—*Library Journal*

“The facts of his life are astonishing on their own, but what makes Li Cunxin's engrossing autobiography so captivating is his enthusiastic retelling of every twist and turn.”—*Vogue* (Australia)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Owen Bourne:

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Stacia Cobb:

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