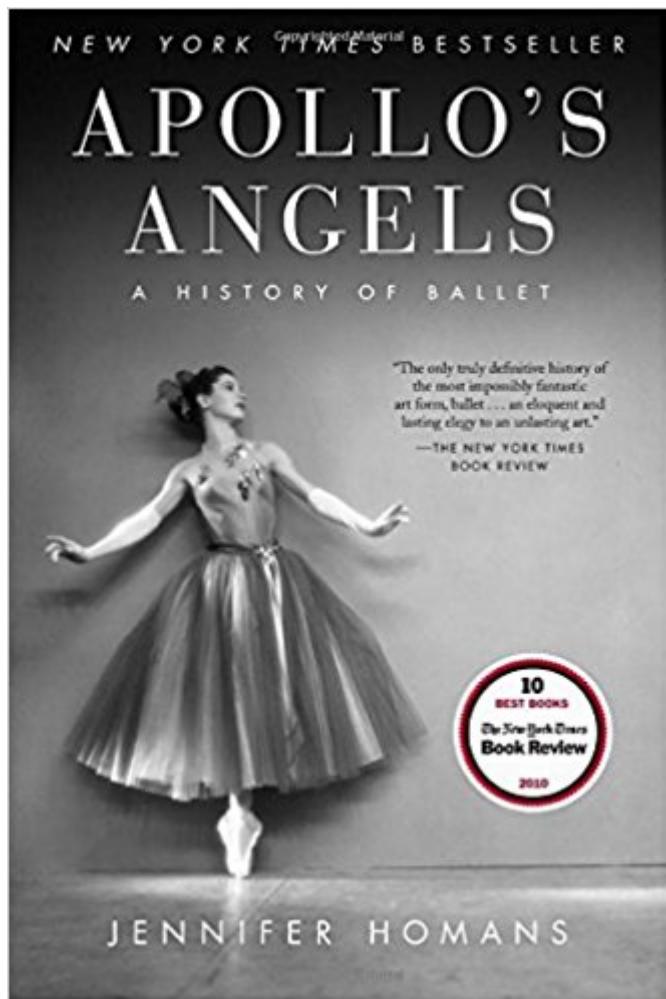


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Apollo's Angels: A History Of Ballet



Synopsis

NATIONAL BESTSELLER For more than four hundred years, the art of ballet has stood at the center of Western civilization. Its traditions serve as a record of our past. Lavishly illustrated and beautifully told, *Apollo's Angels* "the first cultural history of ballet ever written" is a groundbreaking work. From ballet's origins in the Renaissance and the codification of its basic steps and positions under France's Louis XIV (himself an avid dancer), the art form wound its way through the courts of Europe, from Paris and Milan to Vienna and St. Petersburg. In the twentieth century, *immigrant* dancers taught their art to a generation in the United States and in Western Europe, setting off a new and radical transformation of dance. Jennifer Homans, a historian, critic, and former professional ballerina, wields a knowledge of dance born of dedicated practice. Her admiration and love for the ballet, as *Entertainment Weekly* notes, brings *a dancer's* grace and sure-footed agility to the page. •NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW • LOS ANGELES TIMES • SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE • PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

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Customer Reviews

A Look Inside Apollo's Angels RubiesPhoto by Costas SerenadePhoto by Costas

Nutcracker SnowflakesPhoto by Costas Nikolaj Håbbe in La SylphidePhoto by Costas

Starred Review. Holmes's magisterial history of ballet is even better in audio. Kirsten Potter has a deep, smooth, sensuous voice that sounds as cultivated as the art form she describes. With pacing

that allows the listener to savor the musicality of former ballerina Holmes's sentences, their lulling alliteration and lively wit, Potter brings the ambitious study of ballet's 500-year history (and bleak prognostications for its future) to life. Potter's French accent could use a bit of work; it's clumsy and forced, but doesn't detract too much from the pleasure of this panoramic look at the art's singularity, the discipline it demands (in Holmes's phrase, it is "a grammar of movement"), and the liberation it allows. A Random hardcover. (Jan.) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I started ballet late in life, in my sophomore year of high school. I had 4 left feet, was fat, and uncoordinated, so I had no aspirations to become a ballerina. I am currently 61 and still taking classes regularly. In my fortys I began to wonder and ask questions how ballet evolved. I asked my ballet teacher who was elderly and she said she didn't know of any books on the subject. I was delighted to hear the review on NPR radio when the book was first published. It was a tedious read for me because of all the detail but it was necessary to tell the story. As the book progressed into the 1900s it became more fascinating and relatable to me as I had witnessed Nureyev, Fontayne and others. It was fascinating to see where dance had come from, where it is now and maybe where it is progressing. Even my own preferences of dance are evolving. Thank you Ms Homan's for all of your hard work and skill to create this work of art in itself.

Dr. Jennifer Homans is a former ballerina and is a distinguished scholar in residence at New York University. Homans writes a dance column for the "New Republic" magazine. Her expertise and love of ballet are manifest in this long tome on the lengthy history of ballet. The art form became special during the long reign of King Louis XIV (reigned from 1648-1715) the Sun King of la belle France. Louis was a dancer who made ballet important at his splendid court. Ballet was both an entertainment, exercise and visible embodiment of the aristocratic milieu of European court life. Ballet steps bore a distinct affinity with those of fencing. Though it was given birth in France the art soon spread to all the courts of Europe. Homans takes the time and detail necessary to explore the growth and style of ballet practiced in France, Denmark, Great Britain, Italy and most notably in Russia. It is clear that ballet's development was impacted by social issues and war. Homans book is more than just a book for ballet fans but a social and cultural history of Europe. The book is most interesting in its discussion of the state of ballet in the twenty-first century. Homans believes ballet is in a sharp decline as aristocratic culture and disciplined dance have been superseded by our technocrat society. I also found of great interest her discussion of some of the men and women who

made ballet a great art form. These luminaries include people such as Serge Diaghilev who created the famous Ballet Russes which turned the dance world upside down with such ballets as Stravinsky's "The Firebird".

Apollo's Angels by Jennifer Homans is a major one-volume cultural history of classical ballet. Homans takes the reader from ballet's origin in the French Renaissance through to our own time, covering in detail the development of the art form and its evolution as it passed through 16th century France and Italy, to Denmark, Britain, Russia, and eventually to contemporary America. The book focuses specifically on how ballet came to embody ideas, or a people, or a time. Homans shows how and why the steps were never just the steps but rather were a set of beliefs and a way of life. She explains the ideas, idealism, and politics behind the development of ballet, and she explains very well how the art form was shaped by the Renaissance and French Classicism, by revolutions and Romanticism, by Expressionism and Bolshevism, and by Modernism and the Cold War. The chapter on France and the classical origins of ballet are the most interesting. Homans explains that ballet's roots can be traced to Charles IX's time, when he established the Academie de Poesie et de Musique all the way back in 1570. The purpose of the Academie was to bring spirituality to theatre and art. Homans writes, "these poets believed that hidden beneath the shattered and chaotic surface of political life lay a divine harmony and order, a web of rational and mathematical relations that demonstrated the natural laws of the universe and the mystical power of God." This is where we see the theoretical foundations of ballet, which just needed to be codified into a technique, which would then elevate man and bring him closer to the angels and God (Homans 2010). Very entertaining in particular is the author's description of court etiquette and the vanity of kings. Also interesting is her explanation of state strategy, the difference between courtiers and trained dancers, and the eventual move from court to theater in the late 17th century. The connection between dance and politics is emphasized throughout the book, and the reader will understand how ballet, although wordless, is an art form that carries both meanings and subtexts. The reader learns, for example, that the ballerina Marie Antoinette established a trend dressed as a shepherdess, whereafter women in white tunics became powerful symbols of a nation cleansed of corruption and greed. (Homans 2010). The women in white became what we know today as the corps de ballet, which took its cue from the Revolution. They represented the claims of the community over those of the individual. (Homans 2010). The chapters on ballet in the New World focus mostly on the influential Russian choreographer George

Balanchine, who founded New York City Ballet in the 20th century to rival the European ballet companies. But, despite Balanchine's innovative creations of neoclassical ballets that paved the way for a tradition of classical ballet in America, Homans sees no future for ballet. She ends her book with an Epilogue called "The Masters Are Dead and Gone" in which she laments what she perceives as a decline of the classical ballet during the past 20 plus years. Her feeling is that we no longer admire ballet, and that without new genius creators the art form will not survive. That is a perplexing view, given the fact that dance always has been a fluctuating art form. Despite the book's massive volume of 650 pages, it is rarely boring. Homans' descriptions of important artists and the works they created or danced are vivid and expressive, - possibly due to the fact that Homans herself was a professional ballerina who danced many of the works she writes about. While her writing is packed with meaning it is never dense or convoluted. A fluid writing style makes it easy for any reader to follow and understand the scenarios surrounding the evolution of ballet for hundreds of years. Apollo's Angels is scholarly and entertaining at the same time, and beautifully told. I recommend it to anyone who is interested in history, dance, and body politics.

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