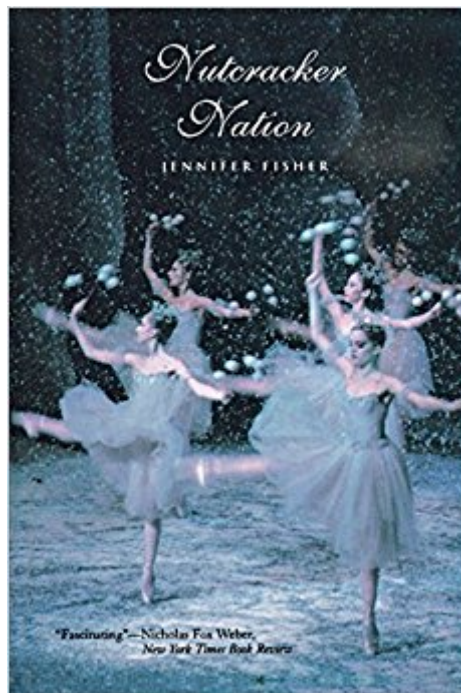




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Nutcracker Nation: How An Old World Ballet Became A Christmas Tradition In The New World



Synopsis

The Nutcracker is the most popular ballet in the world, adopted and adapted by hundreds of communities across the United States and Canada every Christmas season. In this entertainingly informative book, Jennifer Fisher offers new insights into the Nutcracker phenomenon, examining it as a dance scholar and critic, a former participant, an observer of popular culture, and an interviewer of those who dance, present, and watch the beloved ballet. Fisher traces The Nutcracker's history from its St. Petersburg premiere in 1892 through its emigration to North America in the mid-twentieth century to the many productions of recent years. She notes that after it was choreographed by another Russian immigrant to the New World, George Balanchine, the ballet began to thrive and variegate: Hawaiians added hula, Canadians added hockey, Mark Morris set it in the swinging sixties, and Donald Byrd placed it in Harlem. The dance world underestimates The Nutcracker at its peril, Fisher suggests, because the ballet is one of its most powerfully resonant traditions. After starting life as a Russian ballet based on a German tale about a little girl's imagination, The Nutcracker has become a way for Americans to tell a story about their communal values and themselves.

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Customer Reviews

Dance scholar, critic and former snowflake Fisher presents a lively historical and cultural analysis of The Nutcracker. The beloved ballet bonbon has been performed by the world's most prestigious dance companies, shown on television, adopted and adapted across North America, leaving one

dance critic to grumble that, every year, we are all "one more Nutcracker closer to death." Still, Fisher's thoughtful account puts the phenomenon in perspective. Created in 1892 to Tchaikovsky's lush score, The Nutcracker was introduced to North America in the early 20th century by Russian touring companies and legitimized in the 1950s by George Balanchine, who had danced Lev Ivanoff's original steps at St. Petersburg's Maryinsky Theater. Balanchine choreographed his own distinctly Americanized version, adding it to the New York City Ballet's annual holiday repertoire. Televised in the late 1950s, NYCB's Nutcracker was seen across the continent, and as baby boomers were sent off to ballet classes, The Nutcracker became the perfect vehicle to showcase their talents. With its secular holiday appeal, it also became a moneymaker for struggling regional dance companies, who lent their versions of the ballet a unique flavor-hulas in Hawaii, cowboys in Arizona, cross-dressing in Mark Morris's The Hard Nut. Fisher deconstructs many of these versions, analyzing how the ballet has become both an annual ritual and a rite of passage. The Nutcracker may be, as Fisher writes, "the ballet we love to hate," a "cliché; in a world that craves constant innovation," but she also explains why it has become a meaningful ritual that Americans have "taken to heart." 40 illus. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

“A book for dance outsiders and insiders, for all grownups who have lived the Nutcracker experience and wondered about its sometimes crazy mix of history, kids, and pure stage magic.” —Lynn Garafola, coeditor of *The Ballets Russes and Its World* “A lively historical and cultural analysis of The Nutcracker.” —Publishers Weekly

Ask many Americans if they ever go to the ballet. "No. Oh no. Ballet? Never." Ask those same Americans when they last saw The Nutcracker. "Last December. We go every year. Love it." And that is why Ms. Fisher's examination of the Nutcracker phenomenon is so interesting. Combining interviews and historical research, she gives us a wonderful account of the diaspora of Russian ballet alumni. The diaspora started with the rise of Communist Russia and the turmoil of World War I, then accelerated from the the pressure of World War II in Europe. It's not just coincidence that the first U.S. performance was in 1934 by the San Francisco Ballet (America's first professional ballet company) and then in 1944 by the New York City Ballet. By the late 1950s, small ballet companies and schools, such as Virginia Ballet Company and School in Fairfax, VA, were starting to offer the Nutcracker as an annual holiday treat. Throw in a little television, a few famous ballet stars, and you find Nutcracker is a perennial holiday phenomenon. This is a readable book even while it is

well-researched non-fiction. I recommend it to every parent of a Nutcracker dancer, and to all the Nutcracker alumni who still perk up when they hear the first notes of the overture. I hope this review is helpful.

Jennifer Fisher's 2004 dance history takes on a pretty daunting task: to explain the Nutcracker ballet's current status in North America as not only an entrenched Christmas tradition, but also everyone's favorite classical ballet. To accomplish this Fisher did her own field research, somewhat anthropological in nature, spending time with both a major professional company, the National Ballet of Canada, and a much smaller company, the Loudon Ballet in Leesburg, Virginia. (Since Fisher's work covers both the United States and Canada, the title of the book is mildly misleading.) She weaves excerpts from interviews and anecdotes from her time with these companies through and around a historical narrative of the original conception and production of Tchaikovsky's and Ivanov's ballet in St. Petersburg in 1892 (like many works that have become beloved classics, it opened to a mixed reception), followed by a chronicle of its gradual importation and proliferation across the Atlantic. George Balanchine and the New York City Ballet, as one might suspect, play an important role in this latter part of her tale. Along the way the author makes frequently telling points about the neat dovetailing of the ballet's scenario with American traditions and values, and how its appeal to children both as performers and audiences has bolstered its popularity. However, there are also digressions into such topics as the sociological import of the various national dances in the second act and how they have been staged (including in Walt Disney's film *Fantasia*), diverting but not particularly relevant to the central topic. This impression of looseness is also underscored by the rather casual way in which excerpts from Fisher's own research with the ballet companies are dropped into the narrative. Ultimately, *Nutcracker Nation* reads like a doctoral dissertation interleaved with popular history. As such it is consistently interesting, but a little disheveled in feel.

Very interesting and clearly well researched. At times you may need a pad of paper and a pen to make notes ...lots of information.

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"Nutcracker Nation" is a fascinating examination of a much-loved, much-performed, but little-analyzed ballet. Fisher examines the question of just why American loves "The Nutcracker" so much, and what the ballet can teach us about ourselves. Fisher finds real meaning in the seemingly simple (and admittedly rather silly) story of Clara, her mysterious godfather, and the nutcracker prince. Rather than stop there, though, Fisher also examines the impact "The Nutcracker" has had on American culture, and vice versa. She interviews parents, dancers, technical crew, artistic directors, and other workers from 2 productions of the ballet, one amateur and one professional. We learn their opinions on performing the same ballet Christmas after Christmas, their ideas about where the Sugar Plum Fairy is from, and the joys of moving up the ranks from mouse to snowflake to Sugar Plum. Fisher also analyzes many serious issues related to the ballet, such as the controversial second act divertissements and their characterizations of various ethnic groups. "Nutcracker Nation" is an insightful, entertaining book and is highly recommended to both ballet enthusiasts and the uninitiated.

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