

Title: *The Other Side of Perfect*

Author: Mariko Turk

Genre: Young Adult Fiction

Reviewer Name and Grade: Kate S., 12th Grade

Date Reviewed: July 30, 2022

It's not enough to say that Alina is in love with ballet. Ballet is her soul. Alina is ballet. With her persistent training and talent she finally lands a spot in the prestigious American Ballet Theatre summer intensive. The only issue is the multiple screws in her leg she wakes up with after an awkward fall at practice. This fall completely shattered her leg, inhibiting Alina from ballet completely and kissing her dreams of being a professional dancer away forever.

Quickly facing reality, Alina falls into a depression where she refuses to socialize with friends, even her best ballet friend, Colleen. Despite her parent's insistence to move on and find new interests, she hides away in her room while watching ballet performances on her laptop. That is, until November, when Alina chooses to push herself out of her comfort zone and audition for Eagle View High School's rendition of "Singing in the Rain." The stakes are high, but Alina gains the part of *The Vamp*, a role only requiring her to dance which she begins to question. Her whole life had revolved around ballet but after her accident, was she willing to dance again?

Through the play, she meets Margot, Jude, and Ethan. They quickly become a close-knit group and share a distaste for Diya, the girl that ditched Jude for a once-in-a-lifetime choral performance. Though Alina initially goes along with the termed nickname "Robobitch," she discovers the sheer similarities between her and Diya: they were both artists willing to dedicate everything to their art. Alina begins to question whether her friends would also treat her like Diya if she weren't as close with them, but more importantly, she began to question whether her years of ballet was worth enough to be sacrificing hangouts with her friends and other hobbies like theater every year.

Along with this questioning, she begins to rethink her time at the Kira Dobrow Ballet School and the roles she was given for performances like "Chinese Tea." Deep down she knows this is racism, since she's the only Asian at her ballet school. What does it take to change? Her old ballet instructor insists her decision to keep the same dance was for the sake of tradition. Will Alina be the one to break through and make change in her life?

Did the plot (for fiction) or presentation of information (for nonfiction) keep you interested?

The plot did keep me interested. Alina does a lot of reflecting in the snapshot we see of her junior year and I think that inner dialogue brought a deeper and more meaningful storyline to the book. We also see a progression in character through this from starting junior year unwilling to socialize with others to ending junior year with a new group of friends and a new definition of dance.

Was the pace of the book too fast, too slow, or just right?

At times it was slow because the emotions she felt were very repetitive. For example, almost half the book was her avoiding her best friend and feeling like she couldn't fit in with dance that wasn't ballet. That isn't to say there's anything wrong with Alina feeling this way, but it definitely began to grow monotonous in the first few chapters.

What grade level(s) is this book appropriate for?

This grade level would be appropriate for seventh graders and up. It teaches a valuable lesson of being open to exploration and self-discovery and doesn't have too many profanities besides a nickname someone is called.

What type of reader would you recommend this book to?

I would obviously recommend it to a dancer or theater kid. It contains a lot of those themes that they could probably relate to, like the exhilaration of performance. I would also recommend it to others who aren't into those hobbies because it still carries the valuable message of hardship and persistence.

What other information do you think would be helpful for teens to know about this book?

Don't always assume the worst about someone. I think that was definitely a side Mariko Turk wanted to convey through her book.

4 stars: I enjoyed this book and found it worthwhile reading.

There were definitely moments where I was intrigued by the connections the author was making. A lot of the story's message was about change and being accepting of such change. Firstly, Alina's broken leg is a big change, then Alina realizing the discriminatory practices of her ballet studio is change, and finally, Alina's friend group is change. I liked that aspect a lot because it enveloped the book under one main theme. However, like I mentioned previously, chapters seemed repetitive and did not seem to progress the story. This didn't stop me from finishing the book but it's definitely something to consider while reading.

Reviewer Name and Grade: Emily K., 7th Grade

Date Reviewed: 9/26/22

The Other Side of Perfect is a well-written, emotional YA realistic fiction novel that centers around the life of an aspiring high school dancer named Alina. Alina was one of the most dedicated ballet dancers of her age- she was flexible, seasoned, graceful on stage and hardworking in class. She had trained day and night ever since she was very little, sacrificing time, relationships, and even her 10th birthday party all to practice and perfect her art. From the very beginning, Alina knew she wanted to become a ballerina- and, of course, she still did. But by the time the summer had ended, CRACK, she knew she never would.

Years upon years of practice, useless in the face of injury. After severely breaking her leg, Colleen by her side, Alina had been hospitalized, Alina had been changed. She was told that although her wounds would heal with time, her bones would never quite be the same- they would be stiffer, weaker, and held together with surgical steel implanted deep into her flesh. She would never be able dance like she once had; she would never become a ballerina.

At the start of the new school year, jealousy towards all those dreamers back at ballet class harbored deep inside her stomach, Alina returned to school. She half-heartedly decided to join the school musical *Singin' in the Rain*, partially to try and distract herself from what had been, but mostly to try and distract herself from what she knew she couldn't be.

As Alina continued to bond with the other cast members also participating in the musical, specifically her friends Margot, Ethan, and Jude, she finally began to pave her way towards recovery. But as new information about Alina's previous reputation leaks through during a social event at the local ice rink, Alina begins to wonder who she can trust, who her real friends are, and why people like her, people who pursue, sacrifice for, and work so hard achieve their dreams, will only ever be seen as their passion, but never as real people.

Did the plot (for fiction) or presentation of information (nonfiction) keep you interested?

While there were a few instances when I did find parts of the plot to be a bit uninteresting or unimportant to the overall theme of the story, the general storyline was very entertaining and kept my eyes glued to the pages from the beginning to the end.

Was the pace of the book too fast, too slow, or just right?

In my opinion, the pace of this story was perfect, as it gave me just enough time to process everything that I was reading while still keeping me interested and wanting to read more.

What grade level(s) is this book appropriate for?

I would recommend this book to students in grades 7 and up. While the book does include some swearing, aspects of relationships, and a few emotional scenes, I would still consider it completely appropriate for mature middle-grade readers.

What type of reader would you recommend this book to?

I would recommend this book to readers who enjoy exploring the realistic fiction genre or are looking to discover this genre for the first time. I would also recommend this book to people who enjoy reading school stories and/or other types of fictional sub-genres that fall closely into play with "The Other Side of Perfect".

What other information do you think would be helpful for teens to know about this book?

This book comes entirely from the perspective of Alina, so most of the narrative revolves around her thoughts and feelings (while still containing a large amount of input from the outside world).

4 stars: I enjoyed this book and found it worthwhile reading.

While this book was enjoyable to read, and while I would most definitely still recommend it to other teen readers, I felt as though not all of the main characters were easily relatable, as some acted in ways that made it very difficult to like them.