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Announcing the first children's picture book by legendary prima ballerina Allegra Kent, with illustrations by Caldecott Medalist Emily Arnold McCully

New York, NY—*Ballerina Swan*, by world-renowned prima ballerina and Balanchine dancer Allegra Kent, illustrated by Caldecott Medalist Emily Arnold McCully (Holiday House, \$16.95), encourages children to pursue their goals with passion and hard work.

Sophie, a swan, loves to watch the dancers in Madam Myrtle's Dance Studio stretch and turn and leap. She wishes with all her heart to join them; but when she tries, Madam shoos her away. Then one day a new teacher comes to the class; she allows Sophie to stay and encourages her to work hard. This message of perseverance will ring true for children of all ages as the unlikely ballerina achieves her dreams in spite of the odds.

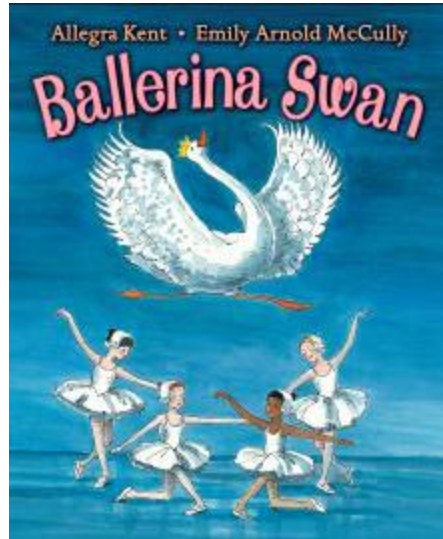
Paired with illustrations by Caldecott Medal winner and ballet enthusiast Emily Arnold McCully, this irresistible story of pursuing one's passions will have readers cheering for the feathered ballerina. Emily McCully draws upon her enthusiasm for ballet as well as her own artistic talent to create paintings with elegant cityscapes, expressive gestures, and an exquisite swan whose body language communicates hope, shame, dejection, grace, and of course good ballet technique—all attributes with which young readers will identify!

Allegra Kent is a dancer, author, and teacher. One of New York City Ballet's most celebrated ballerinas, she danced many performances created for her by the twentieth-century's most famous choreographer, George Balanchine, including the star role in *Swan Lake*. At thirteen she was accepted into the School of American Ballet, on scholarship, and moved to New York.. Allegra became a permanent member of the New York City Ballet at age fifteen. In 1956 she became a soloist and in 1957 she became a principal dancer and also danced in the Broadway musical *Shinbone Alley*. She went on to perform countless performances until her last appearance in 1981. She has written two books for adults as well as articles for dance magazines.

Allegra has three grown children. She lives in New York City, where she is currently an adjunct professor at Barnard College. This is her first book for children.

Emily Arnold McCully was born in Galesburg, Illinois, and moved to Long Island, New York, when she was five years old. She liked to explore the world around her and, inspired by her hero, the naturalist John Muir, kept a nature notebook in which she wrote and drew. She earned a bachelor's degree from Brown University and a master's degree in art history from Columbia.

Among the many prestigious awards Emily has won are the Caldecott Medal for *Mirette on the High Wire* and the Christopher Award for *Picnic*. Her books for Holiday House include *In Like a Lion, Out Like a Lamb* by Newbery Honor author Marian Dane Bauer and *Late Nate in a Race*, an I Like to Read® book. Emily has two grown sons. She lives in New York City and Chatham, New York.



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BALLERINA SWAN

by Allegra Kent

illustrated by Emily Arnold McCully

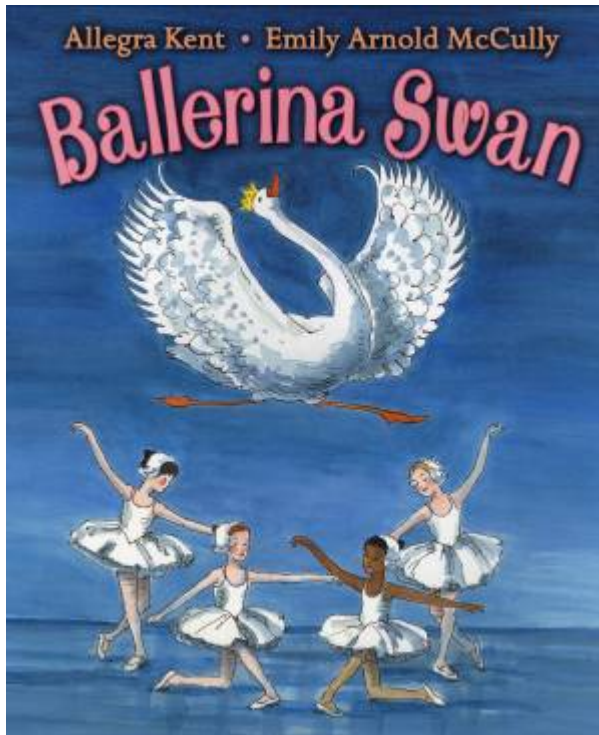
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AUTHOR & ILLUSTRATOR AVAILABLE FOR INTERVIEW

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Ballerina Swan

Behind the Scenes with
legendary prima ballerina

Allegra Kent
and Caldecott Medalist
Emily Arnold McCully

The New York City Ballet's celebrated ballerina and the award-winning illustrator share their inspiration behind this encouraging story about perseverance, hard work, and achieving your dreams.

Allegra Kent:

Q: How closely does the story of a swan who wants to become a ballerina mirror your own entry into ballet?

A: When I was nine and in boarding school, I discovered my favorite classes of the week were the folk dance sessions. Whirling and twirling to exuberant music lifted my spirits. I found these dance moments were so much fun and thought "I must become a ballerina." The odd thing was that I had never seen a ballet, but that wasn't going to stop me.

I asked my mother to take me out of boarding school so that I could study ballet, and she did. The ballet school she selected was Bronislava Nijinska's. When my mother and I questioned the secretary, we found out that the school had no beginners' ballet class, only the advanced levels with many GIs present. I took my first classes ever with veterans of World War II. I was in despair. Everyone knew what they were doing except me. But the landscape of sound and movement stirred something in me—a magical realm. After class, I thought for a moment and then decided to proceed. I suppose the lesson I learned was, don't give up too quickly.

Sophie the swan had somewhat the same problem, but not exactly. Her teacher rejected her entirely, but Sophie kept persevering. Sophie, by nature, is a highflier who knows how to soar, land, catch a jet stream, and fly forward in a formation. But it takes her a while to learn the structured dance movements of ballet that she sees in Mme. Myrtle's classes. Sophie and I were both bewildered for a while, but we were determined to catch up—and we did.

Q: Allegra, you are the author of a few adult books. What inspired you to write this story for children after so many years?

A: The idea for Sophie's story came to me while I was watching a swan swimming on a pond. I thought, "What if this graceful, exquisite creature decided to become a ballerina?" Usually it is the other way around. Ballerinas want to portray swan-like qualities in their dancing.

The desire to dance is inherent to all avian creatures. Their display of feathers, neckbending, and other creative choreography helps the boys beguile the girls. Ballet is usually studied by humans but can be mastered by swans if they work hard enough. Sophie's story and my life story don't exactly resemble each other, but it is a universal story of working very hard with discipline and perseverance at something you love—and succeeding.

Q: Are there any other parallels between you and Sophie?

A: Sophie and I both caught the attention of great choreographers who saw unique qualities in his dancers and used them in his ballets. Sophie's choreographer, Balletski, saw Sophie's special qualities and used them. Sophie was a swan, and he would choreograph for her as a swan. Balanchine used my special style and highlighted it in unusual works such as "The Unanswered Question" (from *Ivesiana*); and he created central roles for me in *Episodes*, *Bugaku*, *The Seven Deadly Sins*, *Stars and Stripes*, and *Brahms-Schoenberg Quartet*. He also cast me in a revival of *La Sonnambula* and as Odette in *Swan Lake*.

Emily Arnold McCully:

Q: Emily, when you were young, you wanted to be a naturalist. How did you come to the world of illustrating children's books?

A: I drew plants, animals, birds, and rocks in my Nature Notebook. Drawing what I was looking at connected me to the world and taught me to see. As a child, I also liked to write stories and illustrate them. I did not expect to do that as a grown-up. I got very lucky!

Q: People have multiple talents; sometimes they are never realized. How did you realize your talents and passions?

A: Children's books are an ideal medium for anyone who draws and writes. Acting also figures in their creation. A picture book is a little theatrical production that takes place on the pages of a book. Again: realizing anything takes perseverance. Discouragement is natural and can be overcome.

Q: Emily, you not only have a passion for creating children's books, but for ballet as well. You drew the positions of the ballerinas beautifully. Do you practice ballet yourself?

A: No, I never took ballet lessons. Though I do love to dance, and I have played lots of sports.

Q: What does artistic expression do for us as people? What makes art and dance so important?

A: In this world, where we are surrounded by facts, we need art to provide truths. Imagination allows us to love. Making art is the ultimate individual act that can bring communal enlightenment. Art resides more in perception than in intention. The observer brings an appreciation that completes what is a suggestive, playful, original, and open-ended creation. The pleasure that art gives, whether from beauty or from invention, is surprising and joyful. It uncovers meaning and illuminates it, unnerving and consoling us.

Artistic expression frees us from the ordinary—often ecstatically, in the case of dance. Dancing must be our most fundamental expressive instinct, and probably the first art. One imagines the earliest peoples moving rhythmically to express the very things that made them—and ourselves—human. They knew they had to let go and summon something beyond the ground they stood on, then connect to it. The human body, for most of us an imperfect machine, transcends its limitations under the influence of music—and the emotions follow. Because we all move, all dance happily, carelessly, at some time or other, seeing trained dancers perform is the most vivid illustration of the discipline, technique, hard work and risk taking involved in making art. It is thrilling. And there is always something beyond mastery to mark a great artist. We can't usually articulate it. It is something uncanny.