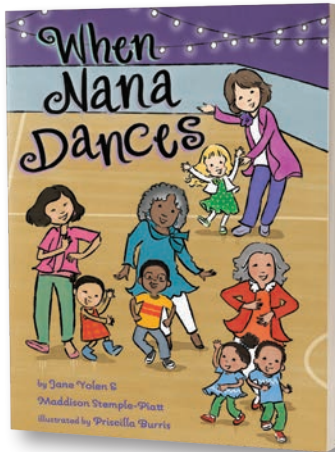




When Nana Dances: Interview With the Author



Does she mambo, shimmy, or bunny hop? When Nana dances we are filled with delight, but nothing is better than when a grandmother dances with her grandchild. Grandmother, Jane Yolen, and granddaughter, Maddison Stemple-Piatt, captured the joy of dancing together in their picture book, *When Nana Dances*. We interviewed them about creating the book.

Magination Press: What inspired you to write *When Nana Dances*?

Jane Yolen: I studied ballet from 7-14 years old at Balanchine's American School of Ballet, way back in the mid '40's. Prima ballerina Maria Tallchief once hung her practice tutu from my locker! Swoon. My daughter Heidi (Maddison's mom) tried ballet, hated it, and went right into gymnastics and then cheer leading. But Maddison, my first-born grandchild, was a dancer from the start, and we would dance together in my kitchen.

Maddison Stemple-Piatt: In short, Nana inspired me to write *When Nana Dances*. From as long as I can remember, Nana and I have been dancing through our lives together. If we are walking down the street, odds are we are doing a little jig arm and arm. If there is live music, watch out—we are about to really bust out the moves.

MP: What was it like writing *When Nana Dances* together?

JY: Pure delight. We began it when she was around ten, giggling and playing with words. We finished the last bits of revisions when she was in law school. Some books take a long time to cook all the way through.

MSP: *When Nana Dances*, is our first book together, but we have always been writing together. Since I was seven until I went to college, Nana and I had most dinners together where the whole family would popcorn-style rhyme or tell a story. Nerdy, I know. So putting our story on paper was the natural next step.

As a writer, I have focused on scientific or legal writing up to this point. Breaking down those confines and working into rhythm and rhymes has definitely pushed me out of my comfort zone. I am so grateful to have done so with the best mentor and tutor, the prolific Jane Yolen, my Nana.

MP: Were there parts of the book that were easier or more challenging than others to write?

JY: I think it went very smoothly throughout... but maybe that's a grandmother's 30/40 hindsight.

MSP: This book definitely flowed quite smoothly, but making sure the lyrical movement shown through was the most important effort we put in.

MP: Did you two dance-out the pages as you wrote it?

MSP: For the most part we stuck to pen and paper as we wrote, but it was backed by 23 years of dance-partnership.

JY: Sometimes. Sometimes we just danced for the sheer joy of it.

MP: *When Nana Dances* features many different dance forms. What dance forms have you explored?

JY: I did ballet for years, then in college I took classes in modern dance. After graduation, I learned to do country/folk dancing ala British and Scottish. I love the Gay Gordons and the Dashing White Sergeant particularly. And now that I have a house in Scotland, it's mostly Scottish dancing all the way!!!

MSP: Like Nana, my primary training is in classical ballet. In high school, I also trained in modern, contemporary, and ballroom. In college, I was a dance minor which allowed me to explore all different kinds of dance, including Hip Hop. I was on the Union College Dance Team for four years, serving as captain my last year. I was granted the 2016 Villella Fellowship, which sponsored me to intensively study Belly Dancing for one summer. Additionally, as a Scholars Fellow I created an interdisciplinary documentary on Body Image in Dance, which was presented at the 2017 Stienmetz Symposium. For ten years I taught Dance Fitness and now I practice and teach Yoga.

MP: How did you feel when you saw Priscilla Burris' illustrations?

JY: I fell in love with the book all over again.

MSP: I fell in love instantly. The movement in the illustrations leaps off the page and makes me want to move. The cultural diversity in dance styles was important to me, so readers could more easily relate, so I loved seeing ballet to salsa.

MP: Grandparents and grandchildren have a special relationship. What did you hope to capture about that relationship in *When Nana Dances*?

JY: The joy, the partnering, the secrets, and the memories.

MSP: All too often, grandparents fall into the archetype of wise, soft-spoken story tellers. Although my grandmother is definitely just that, she is so much more. She is vibrant, rambunctious, and the life-of-the-party. She inspires me to be a go-getter and stand strong on my own two feet. I wanted that side of grandparents to shine through in the story line.

MP: What other ways do you two connect?

JY: We both love the outdoors, helping people, being close to family, and music. I can sing. Or at least I used to do it semi-professionally. Old age has constricted my range to less than an octave. Maddison, poor darling, has never been able to sing at all. Though I think we did...in this book...sing together, as well as dance.

MSP: Clearly, Nana and I connect through song, dance, and writing. But our relationship is somewhat unique in that I grew up with her either in the same house or as my neighbor. So not only was she a caregiver, but she also has always been my biggest cheerleader and partner in crime.

This Article's Author

Jane Yolen is the author of over 400 books for children and adults. Her books, stories, and poems have won many awards including the Caldecott Medal, two Nebula Awards, two Christopher Medals, three Golden Kite Awards, and the Jewish Book Award. She lives in Hatfield, Massachusetts. Visit her website or follow her on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.

Maddison Stemple-Piatt is Jane's first grandchild. Following in her Nana's footsteps, she trained in ballet from a young age. She has earned her bachelor's in psychology with minors in Spanish and dance, her master's in criminology and criminal justice, and is currently a Juris Doctor candidate. She lives in St. Petersburg, Florida.