



# Various Positions

By Martha Schabas

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Trapped between the hormone-driven world of her friends and the discontent of her dysfunctional family, fourteen-year-old Georgia is only completely at ease when she's dancing. When she is accepted into Canada's preeminent ballet school, Georgia thinks it is the perfect escape. Artistic Director Roderick Allen singles her out as a star, subjecting her to increasingly intensive training, and Georgia obsesses about becoming the perfect, disciplined student. But as she spends more and more time with Roderick, it's not so clear exactly what their relationship means. Is he her teacher and mentor, or is there something more? These blurred lines will threaten both Roderick's future at the academy and Georgia's ambitions as a ballerina.

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## Various Positions By Martha Schabas Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

### Review

“...nuanced and disturbing...” ?*BCCB*

“In this unique coming-of-age story, Georgia is a troubled 14-year-old, and her struggles to understand her burgeoning sexuality and her journey through adolescence are particularly rocky.” ?*School Library Journal*

“A thought-provoking look at femininity and sex, made all the more confusing by that ultimate contact sport-ballet.” ?*Kirkus*

“Schabas skillfully weaves themes of power, communication, trust, intimacy, and betrayal through this character-driven tale, as 14-year-old ballet dancer Georgia struggles to find a place where she belongs and people she can trust.” ?*Publishers Weekly, Starred Review*

“Presenting a richly nuanced portrait of a young woman struggling to make meaning of the mixed messages and complexities of the world surrounding her, *Various Positions* is a cross between a modern day *Are You There God, It's Me, Margaret?* by Judy Blume and Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There.*” ?*VOYA*

### About the Author

Martha Schabas trained in classical ballet as a child. She holds an M.A. in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia, where she received the David Higham Literary Award. She lives in Toronto, Canada. *Various Positions* is her first novel.

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I found the envelope in a pile of letters on the hallway radiator. It was white, flat, ordinary as any envelope except for the strange look of my name across the front. I wasn't used to getting mail. There was a logo in the corner, the curving, antique script of the Royal Toronto Ballet Academy. I took the envelope up to my room. My fingers were stupid with adrenalin, and as I ripped off the top, I tore the letter too. I read the time and date of my audition aloud and recorded the information on the Gelsey Kirkland calendar above my desk, filling the March 27 box with tiny handwriting.

I observed what I'd written as though I didn't trust it, staring, squinting, trying to look at the ink askance. I muttered patchy sounds under my breath, little words like *yes* and *good*. March 27 needed to be distinguished from its meaningless neighbours, so I drew a green border around the date and added jagged diagonal strokes that tied like a knot in the middle of the square. I stepped backward, examined my work. It all looked a bit like the kind of flammability warning you'd find on a hairspray bottle. I worried this was a bad omen. Symbols of explosions might not lend themselves naturally to good luck. But maybe it could be a kind of reverse jinx, like whispering *merde* before going on stage, or grabbing your partner in the wings and screaming

“Go to hell!” beneath the opening chords of the overture. That's what they did in Russia.

Above the March grid of the calendar was a black-and white photo of Gelsey in rehearsal. She was standing with her back against a studio barre and bending at the waist to fiddle with the ribbon of her pointe shoe. Her oversized leg warmers crawled up to the middle of her thighs and she wore a leotard that reflected light like

tinfoil. The material pinched at her chest in the shape of a tiny accordion. On either side of this accordion there should have been boobs, but there were no boobs; there was virtually nothing at all. Ha! It was a laugh in the face of everything.

I had been watching Gelsey on the Arts & Entertainment Network since my mom ordered specialty cable three months before. I had seen her in five different ballets and I loved her. She didn't look wet and brainless like some other ballerinas, dancing across the stage as if they were lost in heavy fog. She attacked her steps as though she had something against them, pouncing ferociously from one to the next. These pounces were punctuated every few minutes by close-ups of Gelsey yearning into the camera. Sometimes her pale face would take up the entire frame and just hang there in a look of incurable distraction. Pain hammered deep around her crystalline eyes. A tenderness pillowed her lips. It was a beauty I had never seen before, too extreme for human beings. Somewhere along her vacuumed cheeks, inside the pout of her ruby mouth, Gelsey became less girl and more creature, so feminine she cancelled herself out.

I folded the letter back into the envelope and sat down on my desk chair. I would e-mail Isabel and tell her about my audition. I turned on my computer and waited for my e-mail account to load new messages. I had a separate folder for Isabel that I'd labelled *sister*. This wasn't really necessary, considering she was the only one who ever e-mailed me. The file name also wasn't technically accurate. But Isabel had told me it was tacky to always call her my half-sister in front of other people, and I wanted to make up for the mistake.

I imagined scenarios where Isabel would happen to see the title of the e-mail folder. She'd be home at Christmas and we'd be hanging out in my room. She'd be telling me about the stuff she usually tells me about, her most recent semester at university, about after-dark activities and theories on gender and meaning. At some point I'd have to get up to pee. Alone in my room, she'd glance at my computer screen, see the only folder in my e-mail account and smile to herself. When I came back into the room she'd poke me in the ribs and tell me how grown up I seemed.

My inbox loaded zero new messages. I clicked on the *sister* folder and scrolled through old messages instead. Isabel always filled in the subject lines, titling her e-mails things like "W'sup" and "Hola Infanta" and "Georgia on My Mind." I clicked on one e-mail with the subject line "Gelsey." It was from a few months ago, soon after I'd told her about my new idol. Isabel had written that she was "skeptical of a society so predicated on celebrity-worship." I had typed "predicated" into [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com) and written back that I wasn't trying to "derive, base, found, proclaim, assert, declare or affirm anything." Isabel hadn't been convinced. She'd done a little Googling and had written back that Gelsey was a cokehead who'd dated Pat Sajak in the eighties, and that her lips had been injected with an amount of collagen that Health Canada considered "unadvisable." When I hadn't believed her, she'd sent me *Dancing on My Grave*, Gelsey's tell-all autobiography, via priority post.

I looked at the bookshelf across my room. I could pick out the spine immediately, the font reflective like a speed sign on the highway, the rose wilting onto the word *Grave*. The spine looked worn, even from a distance, with a deep wrinkle scarred through its middle. I had read the book three times now and knew the quotations on the back cover by heart: "the dark side of fame," "a descent into drugs and madness," "a tortured quest for perfection." I loved Gelsey more with every read. Not only was she the most wonderful ballerina the world had ever seen, but she had suffered something horrifying and her face was brimming with poisonous chemicals.

Isabel had been e-mailing me approximately twice a week since she'd moved downtown for university. She lived in a three-storey house with six other girls, one working shower and no TV. Every time I visited I felt cold inside my knee caps and smelled old beer and Pantene Pro-V. Still, I loved visiting her. My dad had only been once, and he called the house Moldova. *How are things in Moldova?* he'd ask when Isabel came home for dinner and he wasn't at the hospital. *Have you girls managed to get a land line yet?* Isabel's mouth would fatten into a smirk. *Moldova isn't so bad anyway*, she'd say. *It has a thriving viticulture industry. It's*

*the crossroads of Latin and Slavic worlds*. My dad would lift his hands on either side of his body, palms facing Isabel as if she were a bandit with a gun. I would stand absolutely still, do my best to embody neutrality so that no one could accuse me of picking sides.

Right before she'd left for university, Isabel had taken me to the park for a talk. We sat on the swings and I followed her lead, digging my heels into the gravel beneath us, engraving hearts and then wiping them clean with my soles. The kid swinging next to me was pumping his legs hard, trying to propel his body towards rooftops, but Isabel was unmoving, so I would be too. I watched a tiny bulge in the middle of her neck and then another, as though she were swallowing her thoughts.

Half an hour went by and she still hadn't done any talking. Pins and needles fried the underside of my thighs. Finally she looked at me. The greyness of her eyes had deepened. They were the colour of the sidewalk after a thunderstorm.

"Things might be difficult when I leave, George. You'll have to be extra grown up."

"Sure."

"Just—" She paused, stabbed the rubber toe of her sneaker into the middle of a dusty heart so that a cloud of sand wafted up her ankle. "I know it's difficult when Dad's always—" She cut herself off and looked at the sky. "Just don't let it get to you. They're adults and it's not your problem. And call me if you need anything. Like anytime, whenever."

I nodded slowly, trying to put lots of meaning into it because I knew that's what she wanted to see. Isabel generally talked about my mom that way, ran circles around the problem without ever stopping to look it in the face. In her last year of high school, Isabel had stayed with us less and less, and this had distorted her perception of what was happening between my parents. Isabel never saw my mom's tiny provocations, the way she would stare out the window and announce the strangest things out of nowhere—that she missed smoking cigarettes in her old Ford Cortina, that she was curious about neo-punk. One time after dinner, I passed my mom the lasagna dish and she said she'd rather ram her head into the kitchen sink than wash it. Another time, when there was a segment on the radio about the fruit bat, she stepped out into the backyard and started to cry.

I swiped my finger on the trackpad to wake up the computer screen. I clicked on the Compose button and typed Isabel's e-mail into the address bar. I told her about my letter and asked how things were going at Moldova. I paused over the subject line. Then I brought my fingers back to the keyboard and typed *My Audition*. I sat back in my chair and looked at the title. I deleted *Audition* and wrote *Career*.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Jamey Ainsworth:**

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**Myrtie Hammond:**

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