

MARY'S LAST DANCE

MARY LI

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The highly anticipated memoir of Australian ballerina Mary Li – and the long-awaited sequel to her husband Li Cunxin's bestselling memoir, *Mao's Last Dancer*.

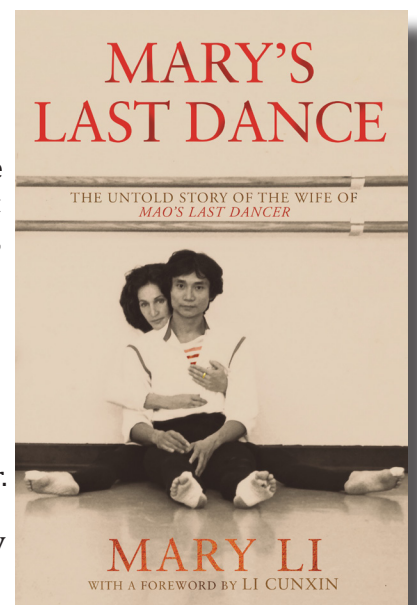
Mary McKendry had an idyllic childhood: a rambunctious family full of love and support, in a large Queensland country town, Rockhampton. Here she discovered the joy and beauty of ballet, an art in which she very quickly found herself at home. Mary's dedication and persistence in excelling shone, opening a world of possibility. At the age of just 16, she flew halfway around the world to start a life in London, studying at the Royal Ballet School. Mary's talent saw her join the London Festival Ballet, where she danced with the likes of Rudolf Nureyev, and then moved on to Houston Ballet, dancing under acclaimed director Ben Stevenson. Here she met Chinese dancer Li Cunxin: their chemistry ignited the stage, and off stage the two fell in love, becoming darlings of the ballet world.

When their first daughter, Sophie, was born, their lives were complete. Mary and Li doted on their precious daughter, and revelled in their fortune at having Li's parents live with them to care for her while they were dancing. On her first birthday they started to notice Sophie wasn't as responsive to noises as she should have been. One doctor cleared her of hearing problems - twice - but still, they noticed a difference when compared to other children. Their fears were confirmed when, at 18 months of age, Sophie was pronounced profoundly deaf. She would never hear the music her parents performed to, would never learn Mandarin to communicate with her beloved grandparents, or hear her parents speak to her. It was unlikely Mary and Li would ever hear their daughter's voice.

After being told bluntly by a specialist, *If you both want to continue your careers, then she [Sophie] probably won't learn to speak*, Mary stepped out of the spotlight to focus on her daughter, determined that one day the two of them would have a conversation together. While Mary grieved for her daughter, and for the career she put aside, her sole goal in life was for Sophie to have her own voice. They made the heartbreaking decision for Li's parents to return to China, so the dual languages at home wouldn't confuse Sophie. Mary and Sophie had to create a new relationship, different from what Mary had ever imagined.

Mary and Sophie spent years working together to give Sophie a voice. Through hearing aids, hours upon hours of daily speech therapy and fighting for a cochlear implant, all their efforts paid off when a sweet little voice sung along to *Rain, Rain Go Away* for the first time. It took further years and specialist schools, but Mary achieved her goal: she and Sophie were able to have a verbal conversation together.

As much Sophie's story as it is Mary's, *Mary's Last Dance*, is, above all else is a story of love; a love of art, a love of family, and the unbreakable love of a parent for her child.



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TALKING POINTS INCLUDE

- *Mary's Last Dance* is just as much Sophie's story as it is Mary's: Sophie has written her story, interwoven with her mother's world. We are offered an insight into Sophie's mind, her frustrations and her feelings of not fitting into the Deaf world - due to her lack of knowledge of Australian Sign Language (Auslan) - nor the hearing world. However, Sophie's determination mirrors that of her mother - she learned Auslan, just as she learned Mandarin as a teenager.
- The follow up to the international bestseller, *Mao's Last Dancer: Mary's Last Dance* picks up where *Mao's Last Dancer* left off, continuing the story of Mary, Li, and their formidable family. *Mao's Last Dancer* was a bestselling book which, in Australia, sold half a million copies across various editions, and was turned into an acclaimed film.
- A mother doing what she felt was best for her child: With little knowledge of the world of the Deaf and hearing impaired, Mary did what she thought was right for her daughter at the time - learning to speak. This is a book Mary wishes had been available when she discovered Sophie was Deaf - *I would have found such comfort and hope in reading something like this*, she says.
- An insight into the world of professional dance: the incredible world of grace and elegance that is ballet. From early days in a small ballet studio in Rockhampton, to starring roles on stages across Europe, Australia, Asia and the United States, *Mary's Last Dance* offers a view into the determination, persistence and talent required to excel.
- The evolution and progress in the Deaf and hearing impaired communities: In 1989, when Sophie was born, hospitals didn't have hearing tests for newborns, as they do now. Hearing aids were bulky, and Cochlear implants were a very new invention, one that there wasn't a lot of information about. Pre-internet days, there wasn't a wealth of information readily available, and Mary relied on word-of-mouth to help her make informed decisions. Today, advancements have been made in many ways - such as Auslan interpreters at media press conferences and major events, numerous support networks and societies, and a wealth of readily available and accessible information. Mary can speak to the world that existed as she and Sophie grew and learned.
- Reconnecting with ballet after dedicating herself to raising their three children: Mary began to teach ballet at a small studio in Melbourne, and was then offered a teaching and coaching position with Australian Ballet. Today she is Ballet Mistress and Principle Repetiteur at Queensland Ballet, along with Li, who is Artistic Director.
- A very personal look into overcoming adversity, and both adjusting to and learning a whole new world.



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