



Jessi and the Awful Secret

Ann M. Martin

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Jessi discovers that one of the girls in her dance class is anorexic, and she and her friends soon learn about the seriousness of the illness.

Jessi and the Awful Secret Details

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From Reader Review Jessi and the Awful Secret for online ebook

The Kawaii Slartibartfast says

09/06/2009

Amanda says

Can't have a ballet dancer without an anorexia subplot! That aside, I liked the focus on J's ballet school in this one, as well as the comments about race (Jessi's dad not driving through yellow lights included).

Logan Hughes says

Jessi is happy to get to know ballet classmate Mary Bramstedt better when they work together as TAs on a short-term ballet class for underprivileged elementary school kids. But she's concerned when she noticed Mary making derogatory comments about her body, refusing food on a TA outing, and seeming weak, ill, and distracted in class. The BSC researches eating disorders and armchair-diagnoses Mary with anorexia (although that didn't work out too well the last time). Jessi reaches out to Mary, but Mary uncharacteristically snaps at her. Finally, when Mary faints, Jessi brings her concerns to Madame Noelle, who talks to Mary's parents. We leave Mary under the care of trained professionals.

The kids' ballet class, meanwhile, is both fun and sad, because there are two talented dancers who don't have the money to continue their studies. Jessi laments the problem to Kristy, who gets Watson to save the day by offering two ballet scholarships through his foundation or whatever.

There's a subplot where Shannon suddenly has a lot of free time for some reason and wants to hang out with Kristy all the time, but Kristy doesn't have time, so she shunts Shannon off on her other friends. Then when they actually hang out, Kristy is jealous that they did things without her. Things that would improve this plotline include any of the major players in it being the narrator character; any kind of solid explanation for the givens, such as why super-busy academic club queen Shannon has this weird time off in the middle of the school year; any connection, however tenuous, to the main plot.

Overall, this was reasonably enjoyable for a VSE, and ballet is a realistic world in which to explore this issue, but it's weird that they didn't have Jessi experience the problem directly. I guess they couldn't have shunted her off to counseling never to be heard from again. Also, Jessi is too perfect to experience psychological problems.

Lingering Questions: I'm really curious about how this scholarship works. They were only going to sponsor one kid, but they "came up with the money" for two. I feel like that could be a significant financial difference, right? Do they plan to offer the scholarship to new kids next year? Is it just for one year each (which wouldn't do much good), or do they continue supporting these two individuals while simultaneously adding more pairs of up-and-coming inner-city dancers indefinitely? Is Watson really making, like, a ten-year commitment for two new kids a year for the rest of time?

Timing: Mentions of cold weather. Winter.

Revised Timeline: Winter of twelfth grade (tenth for Jessi). This puts her more of an age with the other dancer TAs than the kids they're serving, which I feel helps. There are some charming dynamics with Jessi feeling grown-up because she's the youngest TA, and part of what makes her holier-than-thouing so obnoxious to irritable Mary is her youth, but that could be preserved if the other kids are mostly seniors.

Katie (BooksRUs) says

great book

Shira says

this is my first time reading this book!

in this afterschool special on top of afterschool special book by ghostwriter Suzanne Weyn jessi starts volunteering for a free ballet class for "underprivileged" kids. in the class she notices that one of the other volunteers/one of the girls in her regular ballet class is not eating much, is losing weight, and keeps getting sick/fainting. anorexia, race & other minority statuses, and what "underprivileged" means are all addressed in kind of idiotic ways. meanwhile, kristy gets mad at the bsc for hanging out with shannon--the associate member of the bsc, not the puppy--and not hanging out with her as much.

highlights:

-the one real highlight is the martha plotline. martha is a black girl in jessi's "underprivileged" ballet class who has natural talent. her mom keeps staring at jessi. it turns out that she had sent martha to dance classes before but stopped when her neighbor told her she was wasting her money because there is "no room for people of color" in ballet. seeing jessi being part of this school's ballet community helps. also, jessi talks about alvin ailey & judith jamison. it's a nice bit of mini-education about the state of being black in mainstream american dance circa 1993.

-watson brewer ends up sponsoring two scholarships to the ballet school, given to martha (see above) and devon, a boy who is really hyper and silly but ends up getting serious about dance.

lowlights/nitpicks:

-kristy subplot. she just doesn't know what she wants. she complains about shannon, who she says is trying to hang out with her too much. then when others hang out with shannon she gets mad. it's very dumb. it also seems really inappropriate to have such a shallow idiotic plotline in such a SERIOUS DRAMA kind of book.
-jessi notes that she hadn't thought of the kids as underprivileged until she saw their parents who looked sad and tired. uggghhhh. not everybody who is "underprivileged" (what does that word even mean? it's like "at-risk" -- isn't there a better way of saying what you're trying to say?) is totally beaten down by life all the time.

-raul (one of the volunteers) thinks that mme dupre (the ballet teacher) doesn't take the free classes seriously because the kids are charity cases. he defends his belief, saying, "being a minority you become used to getting a raw deal. you get defensive. haven't you found that, jessi?" jessi replies, "no...not especially. I mean, I know what you're saying, but that hasn't been my experience." SERIOUSLY? I am sorry but I can point to a thousand examples in Hello, Mallory and Jessi's Secret Language alone wherein you say the EXACT opposite of this. I am really tired of the poor handling of race in these books.

-jessi suggests mary (the anorexic girl) order a salad at burger king and she says that salad dressing is too

fatty so she gets fries instead. you know you don't have to put the dressing on right? salad with no dressing is probably less fatty than fries.

-nobody in the bsc can understand anorexia. I don't buy it. you take any group of seven teenage people socialized to be girls (especially ones that read teeny bopper magazines, which these ones DO) and there is at least one who has thought they were fat when they weren't. claudia is sitting and eating a twinkie and says something about how she couldn't imagine anyone thinking that way. if you didn't have an unbelievable metabolism that allows you to eat nonstop junk and still be thin, maybe you could get off your high horse and be more empathetic about this.

-mmes noelle and dupre don't automatically assume mary is anorexic when she is super thin and pale and keeps fainting. this seems unrealistic to me. you guys teach ballet. you encourage rigorous exercise and strict diets. you can't pick out a malnourished person in a crowd?

-why do they keep calling yvonne (one of the free ballet class kids) plump in a book about anorexia? seriously, this is THE WORST THING about this book. WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS? at 30, after struggling with body image stuff off and on for years, I have virtually no body image problems at all/am stoked on being a semi-chubby/curvy/whatever person. still, this almost made me feel weird about my body because it's treated like everyone else is normal and this "plump" person is so unusual that plumpness becomes her main character trait. UGH. I HATE THIS.

claudia outfit:

- *"For example, today she was wearing a neon green tank top under a white oversized man's shirt and fuschia [sic] pink stirrup pants. The shirt was rolled at the sleeves and belted with a colorful woven belt."*

jessi outfit:

- *"I settled on a neon-green leotard and a pair of deep blue work-out pants with heavy yellow slouchy socks."*

snacks in claudia's room:

-twinkies (n.s.)

-potato chips (n.s.)

Kate says

Jessi stars in another Very Special Episode, this time about an anorexic girl in her ballet class... I was wondering when this cliche would appear!

Amelia says

i want to read it

Ciara says

i feel like there are 76 different plotlines in this book. we open with jessi at ballet class. at the end of class, mme noelle tells everyone that the ballet school is going to be hosting a children's beginning ballet class for local under-privileged youth, & she asks for volunteers that might want to work with the kids. jessi volunteers right away & is surprised that more of her classmates are not chomping at the bit to spend their

regularly scheduled dance class time (for which they pay out the nose) teaching strange children ballet skills for free. but one other girl in the class, mary, does volunteer.

in the locker room later, mary remarks that she is having a hard time doing the pas de chat because she can't get enough height of her jumps. another student, mindy, suggests that mary lose some weight. she says she lost weight & could jump higher as a result. "don't you find that to be true, jessi," asks mindy. jessi starts to say no, but gets distracted by something.

at that afternoon's babysitters club meeting, a call comes in that none of the regular sitters can take, & mary anne says she knows logan is busy that day as well. they have to call shannon. but kristy frowns & asks someone else to do it. she explains that shannon has more free time recently, & has been spending it by hanging around with kristy & monopolizing her time. she doesn't want to risk calling shannon & getting shanghaied into another tedious hang-out. stacey tells kristy to tell shannon to call her, claudia, dawn, etc. they all think shannon is cool & would like to get to her know her better. this makes kristy happier, & she makes the call to shannon.

at the first under-privileged kid dance class, jessi notices a few kids that seem especially talented. one is a dark-skinned little girl who seems to naturally fall into proper ballet postures, but is very shy. another is a rowdy latino boy with tons of energy & natural grace, but a tendency to disrupt the concentration of the other kids around him. jessi helps out with the class as much as she can, & afterwards, mary is again complaining about her weight. mindy again encourages her to try dieting. jessi is confused because mary is already quite thin, but she brushes off her concerns. the volunteers all decide to go out for snacks together at burger king. mary seems alarmed by the idea of eating at burger king, & is reluctant to order anything, & even more reluctant to eat what she ordered. one of the boy volunteers, a latino dude named ramon, remarks that the class teacher, mme dupre, doesn't really seem to be pushing the kids to do any real ballet. she just let them fool around. he suggests that she doesn't think it's worth teaching them anything because they are mostly poor &/or of color & won't go on to have ballet careers after all. i imagine him jumping up on the table & being all, "mme dupre doesn't care about black people!" he asks jessi to back him up, but she demurs & says that she doesn't feel she has ever faced prejudice in her ballet classes. jessi is the dinesh d'souza of the ballet world.

& from here the story drags on. jessi notices that mary is a little thinner during every ballet class, & she starts wearing baggy clothes to hide her body. she frets over her weight, skips a trip to burger king in order to go running, & even faints in class one day. the naturally talented kids that jessi noticed on her first day of volunteering with the kids' class continue to be good dancers, & the high-spirited little boy dedicates himself to learing the steps after mme dupre benches him one day for distracting the other students. ramon backs off his assessment of mme dupre when he realizes that the first class was basically just a taster, & that she is planning to make the kids work. claudia, stacey, & dawn spend more time with shannon, & kristy acts more & more pissed off for reasons no one can understand.

finally, jessi tells the other babysitters & aunt cecelia her suspicions about mary. they all agree that mary may be on the road to anorexia, & that jessi should say something to her &/or mme noelle. jessi also realizes that the under-privileged kids she's teaching won't be able to afford to continue taking ballet classes after the free starter class is over. she mentions this to the other babysitters & kristy suggests soliciting corporations to sponsor some of the more talented kids. she offers to talk to watson about it. kristy also finally admits that she's been pissy because she was worried that the babysitters were replacing her with shannon as a friend. she was jealous. she apologizes to shannon & everyone feels better. jessi confronts mary about her fears regarding anorexia, mary gets pissed, so jessi goes to mme noelle. there's all this narration on jessi's part about how mme noelle probably has no idea what's going on with mary. because i'm so sure a professional

ballet teacher is totally unfamiliar with the symptoms of anorexia. mme noelle talks to mary's parents, who enroll her in some hardcore eating disorder treatment program. watson volunteers to fund two scholarships for under-privileged kids, & they go to the two kids jessi noticed on her first volunteer day.

this wasn't that awful of a book, but i don't know what all the kristy/shannon drama had to do with anything else. just a way to bring the other sitters into the story somehow, i guess. but there was already an A-plot (mary's anorexia) & a B-plot themed around kids (the volunteer class), so the kristy/shannon stuff seemed like a distraction. & the volunteer class stuff was incredibly tedious. the little girl who got the scholarship had taken a few lessons before, but her mom pulled her out after a neighbor said that a black girl could never really be a professional ballerina, so lessons were a waste of money. i can't believe that the mom would listen to that shit. jessi talks to her & explains that she has gotten some big parts in performances "even though" she is black. sometimes i wonder what the hell is going on with jessi's racial self-perception. then i remind myself that her books are written by white people, which explains a hell of a lot.

Susan says

Excellent mystery, suspense, with a healthy helping of history

Maria Elmvang says

Jessi's books tend to be my favourites - especially the one about her dancing.

Kristine Hansen says

This book focuses in more on Jessi and her dance classes, than on baby-sitting kids, which is actually something of a nice change. Though there's still plenty of children needing supervision as Jessi volunteers to help with a class of underprivileged youth at her ballet studio.

The focus though is on another student in her class who has a very real, and very serious problem. This is part of the later half of the BSC series where the books started sounding a little more like an After School Special in that there are more "issues" related books. But the topic of eating disorders is an important one to address, and this is the most natural place to find it. I do like that grown-ups handled the problem, and that it wasn't up to an 11 year old kid to fix her friend. At the same time, I do like the message that we all need to look out for each other

This is a good book. Maybe not the best in the series, but still a solid read, and a nice way to get to know Jessi better.

Samantha says

This book wasn't bad, per say. Boring and full of ballet stuff like every single Jessi book, but just..meh. Also what did the Kristy/Shannon plot have to do with anything else going on in this book? Oh, wait. It didn't

have anything to do with the other plots. I see. That makes sense.

lisa says

Jessi helps teach a special dance class for children, and discovers that one of her fellow dance helpers may be anorexic. In the meantime the older girls in the BSC get to know Shannon Kilbourne, to Kristy's annoyance.

Things I remember from reading this as a kid:

I read this when I was ten or eleven, and I remember how Jessi agonized over what to do about Mary, the girl she thinks has an eating disorder. She refuses to talk to her parents, she only vaguely mentions it to her aunt Cecelia, but she spends forever researching the problem with the other members of the BSC. She finally decides to tell her dance teacher, but I felt like she wasted a lot of time doing it.

As a kid I assumed that the secret the title mentioned had to do with something more sinister than anorexia based on the cover. Mary had a torn skirt, wrinkled leotard, no leg warmers, a vacant expression, and stringy hair. I'm not sure what any of those factors have to do with an eating disorder other than not getting enough calories would make your hair look bad, and cause you to be distracted while dressing. I had thought Mary was being neglected at home, or something.

I loved reading about Jessi helping out in the dance class for kids. The class seemed similar to the classes I took as a kid, and I liked the fact that a male dancer ended up with a scholarship to continue taking dance classes.

Things I've considered since reading this as an adult:

This book talks a lot about the "underprivileged" people that the special dance class is serving. Jessi doesn't quite know why they are different from the people she interacts with in Stoneybrook, but they make her feel "sad". This pity feels super awkward, especially coming from Jessi, who is so often pitied by her best friends for having such a hard time dealing with racism in Stoneybrook. It's always weird when the series throws in characters that don't have lots of money, and shiny, well-behaved, enthusiastic children. Even the way this book throws around the word "minority" sort of bothers me, although I feel this book deals with the minor subplot of racism better than any of the other books. Raul is angry when he feels that Madam Dupre isn't teaching what he considers a real ballet class. He assumes this is because she thinks inner city kids, some of whom are children of color, aren't worth teaching a real ballet class to. He asks Jessi if she feels dismissed for her skin color, and Jessi tells him "That hasn't been my experience . . . I've been very lucky." Even though she's worried about being cast for roles that traditionally go to white dancers. Even though she knows that she sticks out as the only black student in her ballet class. I guess since Jessi's family has a lot of money racism isn't so bad. Money = well behaved, optimistic, happy children who only want to see the good things. Underprivileged/no money = unfocused, misbehaved, defensive children who are just so negative. But I liked that the book mentions Raul's point of view, even though the white kids and Jessi don't agree with him. This book acknowledges that it's hard to be a minority, no matter what, and that the racism faced by people of color include directors and choreographers being afraid to pair a dancer of color with a white dancer, and non-white dancers having trouble being accepted by ballet companies.

There is a lot of after school special type information in this book about dieting, given in the earnest, mimeographed pamphlet conversation. Always check with your doctor before dieting. Eat healthy foods. As a kid I must have found this interesting since I remember liking this book, but as an adult it was tedious, and

not very well written. Stacey sounds like an old lady spouting off advice she pilfered from a housewife's blog about health. It is a little sobering at the end of the book when Madame Noelle tells Jessi that she has seen this extreme dieting happen to her students before. It seems that she tries to get their parents involved by suggesting they take them to the doctor, but I guess that doesn't always work. I don't quite buy her explanation that "it sneaks up so gradually" but I suppose if she only sees Mary twice a week for ballet class it would be gradual. The book also slips into "let's teach a lesson mode" when it has Jessi talk about the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and how hopeful the future looks for dancers of color. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with this (as a teenager Alvin Ailey's dance company was a big inspiration) but this information is not inserted into the story with any grace at all. It's just a truth bomb planted when the "underprivileged" mother can't bear to see her daughter's dreams of being a dancer dashed because of racism. And Jessi in her wise benevolence gives it to this suffering mother. The class-ism in this book is just . . . yeah. Obnoxious.

For a woman who struggled as a single parent with four children for years, Kristy's mother has taken to the role of society wife very well. In this book she traipses off to dinner in a blue evening gown, and attends a luncheon to benefit a children's hospital, where she suffers such indignities as bad food and boring speeches. And then complains about to her eleven year old baby sitter. "Oh you know how these things are," she says when Jessi asks her how her afternoon went. Because clearly Jessi has to deal with these gauche shindigs all the time, and would completely sympathize. "I suppose it was all worth it," the second Mrs Brewer, nee Thomas concludes. I always think of Kristy's mother as being an awesome, determined woman, one who just picked up the pieces of her life, and carried on to keep her family from falling apart. However, this side of her sets my teeth on edge a little, until I consider that it sounds like she was raised in Stoneybrook. Which means her family must have some money, so maybe she used to attending a lot of society functions. Which means it's still pretty cool that she worked hard to provide a life and structure for her children after her ne'er do-well husband ran off. She could have run crying to Nanny, but she chose to get a real job instead. I'm guessing she met Watson at one of the fancy functions she still attended, even if she didn't have the money to buy a new dress for every single one.

I'm glad Watson decided to sponsor a dance scholarship (doing this has always been in my dream) but I'm not quite understanding how everything came together so quickly. Of course, I know absolutely nothing about setting up a scholarship, but it just seemed too convenient and easy.

It seems odd that in this book only Shannon, who is usually so busy she can't be full time member of the BSC, suddenly has lots of free time on her hands and expects to hang out with Kristy. Why does she assume Kristy, who is also pretty busy, would just have time to spend with her, and why does Kristy feel so guilty about not spending time with her? I would think that Shannon would understand being busy, and not hold it against Kristy. After all, Shannon can't commit to being in the BSC, so why does it matter to Kristy that she's too busy to be with Shannon? I'm also dying to know why Shannon has the random time off, for this book only. Was one of her after school projects canceled because the instructor went to jail? Did she have a fight with her other friends? It also seemed very childish to me that Kristy got so bent out of shape about her friends spending time with Shannon. The cult of BSC rears its ugly head. What with Jessi becoming friends with her dance school classmates, and the older BSC girls spending too much time with a mere associate member, Kristy, the cult leader of the BSC, is just not having a good month. I did find it somewhat amusing and curious that Kristy asks Shannon if she's having trouble at home. It was just such a non-sequitur that I can't tell if Kristy is being a real bitch, or if she's truly concerned and can't think of a better way to ask, or if it was the first thought that came to her mind and her famous big mouth got the better of her. So now I'm very curious, especially since we know very little about Shannon's life, even after she becomes a more permanent member of the club. Is Shannon having trouble at home, and what kind of trouble could it be? Does her mom drink? Does her father hit (or worse)?

April says

Fantastic books for young girls getting into reading!! Great stories about friendship and life lessons. The characters deal with all sorts of situations and often find responsible solutions to problems.

I loved this series growing up and wanted to start my own babysitting business with friends. Great lessons in entrepreneurship for tweens.

The books may be dated with out references to modern technology but the story stands and lessons are still relevant.

Awesome books that girls will love! And the series grows with them! Terrific Author!

Sally says

I generally liked the Jessi books, and this one teamed up a couple of my other interests - ballet and eating disorders... yes, I was a weird child, okay? But I kind of liked reading about girls with eating disorders. Maybe looking for tips? I don't know, but looking back, probably.
