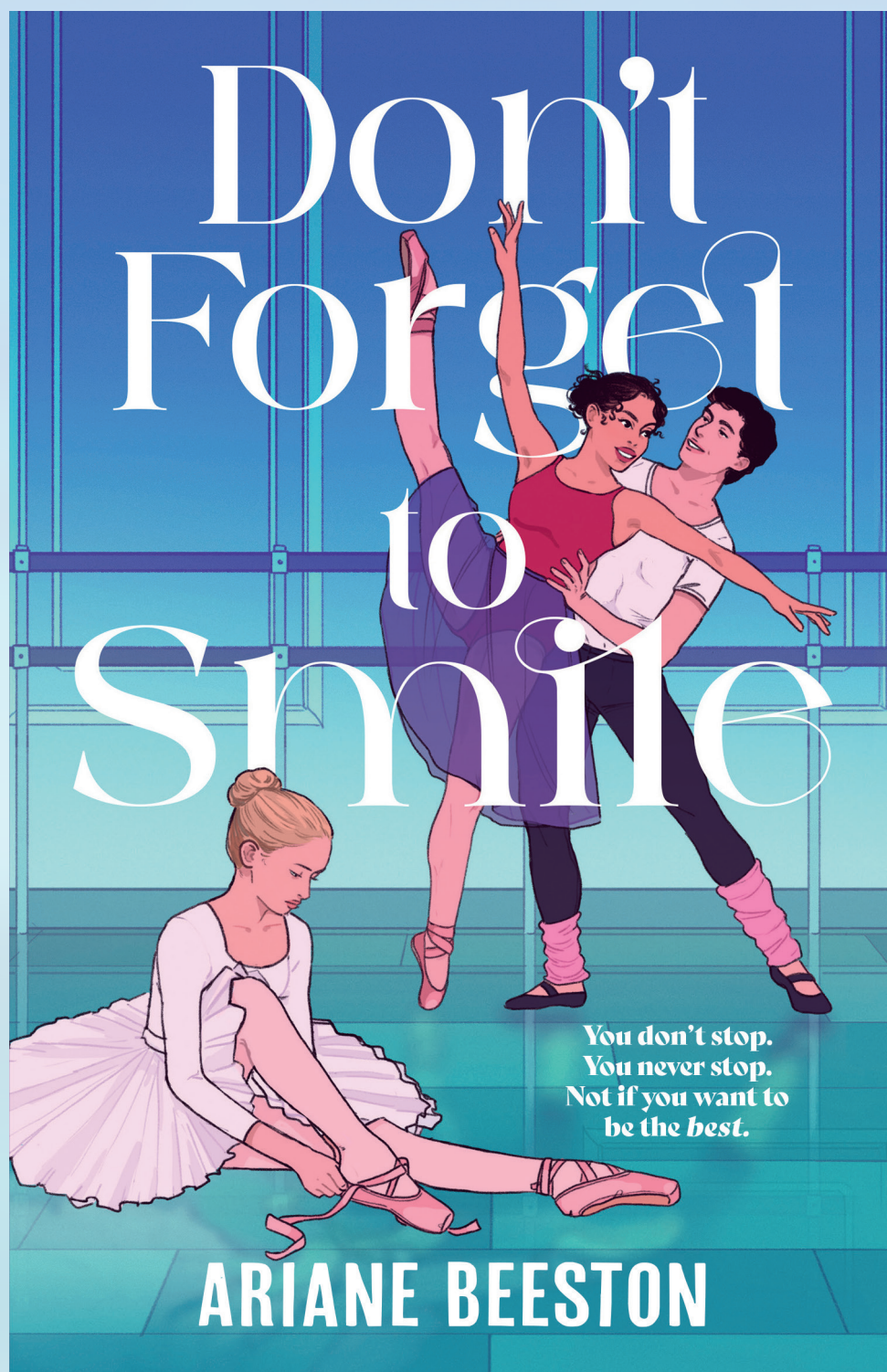


Teaching Notes

by Bec Kavanagh



Age: 9–15

Teacher professional development

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About *Don't Forget to Smile*

You don't stop. You never stop. Not if you want to be the best.

Clara has been dancing since she was three and knows exactly what she wants: a place at the Australian National Ballet School and a career as a principal dancer.

Elle, who accidentally found herself TikTok famous after a #balletfail went viral, is new to the dance world and thinks ballet needs to grand jeté itself into the twenty-first century.

Ben, Elle's best friend, just wants to be able to dance en pointe and have his pick of both male and female solos.

Clara thinks Elle is a bit much. Elle thinks Clara's uptight. Ben's a bit stuck in the middle.

All three want to win the International Ballet Grand Prix at the Sydney Opera House. But when a scandal involving a famous dancer threatens their futures, the trio must put aside their differences to confront ballet's damaging traditions – and demand it do better.

About the author

Ariane Beeston began dancing before she could reliably speak in two-word sentences. She trained to a pre-professional level in ballet and contemporary dance, performing with the Sydney City Youth Ballet and appearing in the English National Ballet's Australian performances of *Swan Lake*. After a detour into psychology and media, Ariane began teaching ballet to toddlers, pre-schoolers and beginner adults. Ariane's debut memoir, *Because I'm Not Myself, You See*, was shortlisted for the Matt Richell Award for New Writer of the Year in 2025. *Don't Forget to Smile* is her first book for young adults. She still wants to be a ballerina when she grows up.

Praise for *Don't Forget to Smile*

‘Sensitive, nuanced and bittersweetly hopeful’ —Ange Crawford, author of *How to Be Normal*

‘The book so many of us needed as young dancers trying to find our place in ballet – and in the world’ —Chloe Angyal, author of *Turning Pointe*

‘Fun and feisty with a dash of intrigue, this story will dance its way into your heart.’ —Clare Atkins, author of *Between Us*

‘Ariane Beeston knows ballet – and it shows. Exquisitely written with insight, grace, humour and plenty of heart, this story goes beyond the beauty of ballet, shining a timely spotlight on one of our most beloved art forms. It’s a compelling, captivating must-read for dance lovers that’s sure to spark some much-needed conversation. I couldn’t put it down.’ —Chenée Marrapodi, author of *One Wrong Turn* and *Breaking Pointe*

‘Clear-eyed [and] understanding ... *Don't Forget to Smile* offers a much-needed Australian dance narrative’ —*Books+Publishing*

High Stakes

Don't Forget to Smile is set in a competitive ballet school. In this focussed setting, ballet is everything and ‘normal’ life drops away. Everyone at the school is working towards (and competing for) the same goal – ultimately to get into a prestigious international Academy, or to be selected for a major dance company.

‘When you’re in a ballet company, you don’t get second chances. There are six other girls waiting in the wings ready to take your place. If you don’t get it right, someone else will – someone who wants it *more*. Again!’ (Miss Debbie, p6)

The extreme pressure these young performers are placed under might help them to succeed but also creates a culture where anxiety and body-image anxiety are the norm. It is clear from the beginning of the novel that everyone is aware that they’re only one mistake away from losing everything they’ve worked so hard to achieve.

Readers are asked to consider what they would be willing to give up in pursuit of their dreams. Where would you draw the line? Have you ever sacrificed something to chase a dream? Was it worth it?

Characters

Although there's an ensemble of characters in the novel, including Elle's best friend at ballet school, Ben; her crush, Dylan; Clara's mum; Clara's new friend, Maddi, the narrative is split between Elle and Clara. Both excellent ballerinas, Elle and Clara are introduced as polar opposites.

- While Clara was 'born to be a ballerina' (16), Elle has 'only been doing ballet for about five minutes – she still gets first and second arabesque confused' (7).
- Elle is surrounded by friends and family, while Clara is portrayed as isolated and strange. 'She's a bit of a ballet snob. Natalie Portman coded. And she shares weird poetry on Instagram.' (12)
- Clara is technically brilliant, while Elle is an intuitive dancer.
- They are in direct competition for one of four places in the International Ballet Grand Prix and see each other as rivals.

But as the novel progresses, the similarities between the two dancers start to reveal themselves.

- Both love dancing. Clara calls ballet the place 'where I feel safe. Held. It's a world I understand' (16), while Elle loves the way it 'makes sense, like it had been in my body all along and I just hadn't realised'. (18-19)
- Both are ambitious and want to succeed. 'I know I'd wanted to make the finals, that I'd visualised myself on stage, dancing in front of the people I love. I had dared to dream it, to imagine what might come true.' (Clara, 249) 'The thing is, until this moment, I didn't realise how much I wanted it, too.' (Elle, 246-247)
- Both are ultimately willing to sacrifice everything to fight for a ballet that is safe and inclusive for all performers.

Compare

Comparison is presented as divisive in the novel – it leads to low self-esteem and body-image but also sets Elle and Clara apart. When they see each other as rivals they're unable to support each other as friends. Read the following two perspectives of the same event.

ELLE (23-24)

Ben was the first to get his hands on the clip, which meant that not thirty minutes after we finished class it was a) in the DCA group chat, b) put into slow-mo and c) cut into screenshots that were already being made into memes I could expect to enjoy for years to come.

“You can actually see the moment it all goes wrong,” Ben wrote, alongside a screenshot of my face circled in red. “Right here.”

“Killing it,” Xander wrote. “Also, your fan gave me concussion.”

“Slay,” wrote Lottie with a kiss emoji.

“HAHAHAHHAHAHAH. I can’t stop watching this,” wrote Izzie.

Felix just offered a skull.

Because it was already doing the rounds, I posted the clip on TikTok with the hashtag #balletblooper. I figured at the very least it might bring my sister, my mum and my other twelve followers a sprinkle of joy, a splash of hilarity.

But then ANBC’s social media team reshared it to their thousands of followers and I woke up to half a million views and a whole lot of new fans. In fact, my Kitri fail got so much attention that a journalist from *DailyOz Online* asked if she could include me in a story. She said it was about the psychology behind why people enjoy watching “fails” but it sounded more like an excuse to list a bunch of viral videos.

“How did you do that?” Ben said, studying the stats on the post. “I can’t get out of the 200 views jail. And I even post thirst traps.”

And that’s how I became TikTok famous.

CLARA (27)

I take a photo, crop it and post it to Instagram. Wide awake, I keep scrolling – exactly what Nadia tells me not to do when I can’t get back to sleep. Elle’s video on TikTok, the one where she fell in class, now has over two million views. I watch it twice more and scroll through some of the comments.

that was the most elegant fall I’ve ever seen

okay but girl those turns

I just know that HURT

BEAUTIFALL

gaspd so loud I scared the cat

Bro how did you not break your wrist?

I’ve never met anyone who needs attention as much as Elle does. Mr Blake didn’t say a word to me in that class. I didn’t get a single correction and not in a *your dancing is perfect* sort of way. It was more you’re not interesting enough for me to bother correcting you. When you’ve been dancing as long as I have, you learn the difference – fast. Some teachers love you and others barely notice you. Ballet teachers always have favourites.

- **What does Clara think Elle’s motivations for posting the video are? What are they really?**

- How does comparing herself to Elle make Clara feel?
- What role does social media play? What's the problem with comparing ourselves to others on social media?

WRITE

Think about a time you've felt envious of someone else. Write a short scene that describes the event from your perspective – what did they do/what did you see/how did it make you feel?

Rewrite the scene from the other person's perspective. What did you think their motivations were? What else could they have been?

Body Image

In 2024, The Butterfly Foundation's third *BodyKind* Survey showed that 2 in 5 young people *never* or *rarely* felt good in their body, with 90% reporting some level of concern about their body image.

<https://butterfly.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/BKYS-2024-FINAL-SNAPSHOT.pdf>

Body image is a major concern for ballerinas. Consider the epigraph from the novel:

The ideal female dancer's body: Height: 5 feet 2 inches – 5 feet 8 inches; weight: 85-115 pounds; small head; narrow hips; small bust; small posterior; slim thighs that appear to be about the same width as the calves; thin ankles and long feet; slightly sloping shoulders that are wider than the hips; straight back and slim waistline with torso neither too long, nor too short in proportion to the rest of the body; long arms and hands; long, straight legs with slight hyper-extension and minimal visible muscular bulk; well-arched foot with all toes approximately the same length.

Classical Ballet Technique, *Gretchen Ward-Warren*

The ballerinas in the novel are hyper-aware of needing to conform to these standards and regularly compare themselves to others and to this ideal.

- Clara burns with shame when Miss Debbie compares her to Elle – “See how Elle's front leg is turned out and her back leg isn't flopping about behind her like a dying fish?” (7)
- ‘Cordelia is pretty and tall (but not too tall, the right amount of tall) with long legs (28)
- ‘I try to quash a swell of envy – with her olive skin, dark hair and brown eyes, Elle looks striking in her costume, while I just blend in to mine.’ (55)

- ‘You’re not allowed to tell dancers to lose weight anymore, but everyone knows what “lengthening your muscles” means’ (240)

Elle uses her TikTok account - @HardCorpsTruths – to critique these unreasonable ideals and the culture that creates and maintains them. She writes about being ‘annoyed’ at a video of a European ballet company who used a dancer in a fat suit in their version of *Sleeping Beauty*, saying:

- ‘Now, the completely messed-up thing is, the dancer looks like an average adult woman and someone they could easily have hired to play that role. This would’ve been the perfect opportunity to showcase that ballet is for everyone! Everyone has a ballet body! But no – let’s all have a laugh at a soloist in a fairy fat suit’ (119).

Elle is shown as having a reasonably healthy body image – she is critical of unrealistic body ideals in ballet, and when Miss Debbie points out that her boobs are ‘too big’ (58), she vents her frustrations to her best friend, Ben, and through her TikTok account, rather than internalising them.

- ‘I’d rather not dance than try to make my body something it’s not.’

Clara, on the other hand, has suffered from an eating disorder in the past. And this, coupled with her anxiety about aging out of the competition, makes her particularly attuned to comments about her body.

- When one of the male dancers comments on her weight, she fixates on his comment. ‘Xander’s words are echoing in my head. *When did you get so heavy?*’ (102)

Later, she over hears the Beaumonts discussing her weight and performance:

- “I mean, she’s still good, very strong. Works hard, too. But I don’t think puberty’s been kind to her. She’s looking a little thicker these days. A bit muscular in the legs, you know? She’s on the shorter side too – that could be a problem. What is she? About 5’3”? And no natural turnout.” (125-126)

This is enough to trigger a relapse. In the following excerpt, Clara speaks to the dangerous appeal of eating disorders, recognising the irony of being unable to perform due to the fatigue and brain fog brought on by her extreme weight loss.

- ‘I tried to eat but my hunger kept disappearing. It was as though it had been switched off. I started to enjoy the strange control I had over my body; it was addictive. I felt bone in places that were once soft and my face looked fiercer, angular, more in focus. At ballet, I stood at the mirror and admired the muscles in my back, the way my shoulder blades looked like wings. But I also felt weak and sad and close to tears all the time. It was harder to find the energy to get through class. I couldn’t jump as high or do as many turns. I couldn’t

focus on schoolwork. I'd try to read my favourite poems, but the words would swim away. My brain just didn't work properly – the lighter I got, the clunkier and heavier it felt.' (103)

What supports does Clara find to help her overcome her eating disorder?

How do comparison, competition and comments made by others increase body image anxiety?

How is body image connected to self-worth or value in the novel? What do you think Elle wants people to do and think or feel about this?

What impact can friends and community have on body image?

RESEARCH

Many experts encourage 'body neutrality'. Using verified, local sources, do some research to answer the following questions:

- What is body neutrality?
- How is body neutrality different from body acceptance and body positivity?
- Can you see any examples of body neutrality in the novel?

REAL/NOT REAL?

Why do you think the novel is called *Don't Forget to Smile*? Consider the following scene, in which Miss Debbie tells Izzie to relax her neck – 'Relax! Smile! It's not supposed to look hard' (31).

Ballet dancers are supposed to conform to the illusion – to look graceful, elegant and happy even when they're in pain, under extreme physical stress, suffering from grief or anxiety.

- Pointe shoes are noisy when you land on stage, and it sort of undermines the illusion that we're weightless, magical beings if we sound like elephants' (19)

Elle attempts to use her TikTok account to break down some of the illusions. How do people respond?

What are some of the other expectations ballerinas are expected to conform to? How do the characters resist these expectations?

Even Jason and Laura present the illusion of a fairytale romance (36), although this is shattered when we discover who he really is.

How does Jason use the illusion of his public persona to manipulate and groom Clara and other girls?

What does Laura say to Clara at the end of the novel? Why does she wish

that she'd spoken up earlier? Why didn't she?

WRITE

Think of a celebrity you follow. How are they presented on social media? In the news?
On stage?

How do you decide which version of them is real or not?

Write a 'behind the scenes' account or a diary entry from the perspective of your chosen celebrity. Does it make you see them differently?

Further Resources

Eating Disorders

The Butterfly Foundation – Resources for eating disorders

<https://butterfly.org.au/resources/resources-for-eating-disorders/>

Eating Disorders Victoria

<https://eatingdisorders.org.au/>

Headspace – Understanding disordered eating and eating disorders – for family and friends

<https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/supporting-a-young-person/eating-disorders/>

ReachOut – Eating disorder helpline services

<https://au.reachout.com/mental-health-issues/eating-disorders/eating-disorder-helplines-support-services>

Coercive Control

'Young People and Relationships: A Guide for Parents, Guardians and Adults that Work with Young People'

<https://www.ag.gov.au/families-and-marriage/publications/young-people-and-relationships-guide-parents-guardians-and-adults-work-young-people>

'Information sheet: Recognising online coercive control in young people's lives'

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-05/Coercive-control-information-sheet-prof-learning.pdf>