



Ailey Dancer Courtney Celeste Spears on Books and the Power of Versatility

By: Isabella Boylston and Connor Holloway and Ballerina Book Club

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Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater member [Courtney Celeste Spears](#) corresponded with [Ballerina Book Club](#) for “Friend Picks” about her favorite books, how reading informs character development, dancing at Ailey and her Bahamas-based organization [ArtSea](#), which she started to share her love of dance and give back to the local community. Follow her on Instagram at [bahamaballerina](#).

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Favorite books?

[“Milk and Honey” by Rupi Kaur](#): I love poetry. Absolutely love it. And a lot of the times, poetry speaks to me the way dance does. I love little short poems that are packed with so much meaning and nuance. It’s a great way to unwind and think after a long day or week.

[“Their Eyes Were Watching God” by Zora Neale Hurston](#): I read this in high school, and I personally think it was one of the first stories I really connected with. Zora Neale Hurston is one of the most iconic storytellers of our time. It’s rooted in so much history.



“Dance Adventures,” edited By Megan Taylor Morrison (chapter written by me!): This book is really special to me. I was contacted by an amazing editor named Megan Taylor Morrison who wanted to gather dancers from all over to write a dance anthology from over 15 countries. I wrote about my experience in the Bahamas when I performed in Ailey II. I loved reading about dance in so many other countries, and this book reminds me of the power dance has to reach everyone all over the world.



What was the last book you recommended to a friend?

Honestly, I recommended my devotional last. MY favorite books are actually books or collections of stories that have to do with self-reflection. My devotional, which contains a scripture and real-life analogy, really centers me, and I recommended it to someone who I know needed some peace.



What was your relationship to reading as a kid?

My mom would read a lot of storybooks to me as a kid. My first memory of a book was actually “The Very Hungry Caterpillar”! I still think I have it. I always loved imagery and storytelling. I liked books, especially in school. Learning was always fun, and diving into discussions surrounding different topics was always intriguing. I think it made me really hone in on skills in the studio as well.



Does reading ever inform how you portray roles on stage?

ABSOLUTELY. Character development can be drawn from any source, and I think characters in stories have so much to say. They inform us of so much, and we can learn so much from their individual journeys.

How did you get into ballet as a profession? Would you mind sharing a bit about your journey to Alvin Ailey?

I was always a really active kid. But I was tall and awkward. I was always the tallest kid in my class and a little ashamed of my height. My mom put me in dance class when I was three, and I never looked back. I went to a local studio, and then went to the [Baltimore School for the Arts](#), where I really started to see this a career option. I was introduced to Ailey

through one of my teachers, [Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell](#). She was the first Black female teacher I'd ever had, and I was so captivated by her strength and beauty. I knew from then I wanted to dance for Alvin Ailey, and after graduation from the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program, two years in Ailey II and three auditions later, I joined Alvin Ailey in 2018.

What's your favorite role you've ever danced? And dream role you have yet to dance?

The umbrella woman in "Revelations" is by far my favorite role. I remember seeing Renee Robinson do this role when I was a student and was speechless. I related so much to that woman. She reminded me of my grandmother, stoic, regal and a true depiction of joy. When I danced that role for the first time, I nearly cried. It still challenges me to think about the story every time I step on stage. It's special every time and continues to be a special moment.

A dream role would be "A Case of You" by Judith Jamison. I'm such a romantic! I love a good love story, and for some reason, that piece gets me every time. Diana Krall's voice with Ms. Jamison's choreography is just pure genius, and it's a role I'd love to dance one day.

You're not someone who limits yourself to doing just one thing. In addition to dancing professionally, you completed the Harvard Business School Crossover Into Business program and have started writing for publications such as Dance Magazine. What advice would you give to someone on how to branch out professionally and not limit yourself?

Versatility will always be your strongest asset. Versatility will always make you step out amongst the crowd and ultimately gives you more options in life to choose from. I also say "stay ready" so that you're not wasting time getting ready. Opportunities always come, and the ones who get those opportunities, are the ones who were already prepared. Lastly, don't let societal norms dictate your path and your dreams. Don't be afraid to step out your box and the box the world wants to put you in. Don't be afraid to fail and learn along the way!

I know you're passionate about arts education and giving back, and the work you do with ArtSea is so inspiring to me personally. How did you get the idea to found ArtSea? And what has been the most rewarding aspect of it so far?

ArtSea is truly my calling. I performed in the Bahamas when I was in Ailey II, and to see the dance community show up to full capacity sparked the idea to keep that community together. Before then, I hadn't really taught in the Bahamas. I knew that it was my duty to serve my community, having been so fortunate to dance in a place like Ailey. It was my way of giving back. I brought the idea to my brother Asa Cary and we built the company together.

We just celebrated five years and have met so many students that have become family. The most rewarding part is seeing the students truly grow into their best selves. I've watched students come back each year more confident, less afraid and ready to take on anything. Knowing that I've made an impact on them is the most humbling feeling in the world, and reminds me of how blessed I am to be able to know them.

Favorite pasta recipe from a fellow pasta lover?

PASTA IS LIFE and I would eat it every day if I could. Choosing a favorite seems impossible. But I will always love a seafood linguine or classic fettuccine. But then, I love gnocchi, and would eat a bolognese for dinner every night if I had someone to make it.