

# Language dances across the page in *Various Positions*

**REVIEW**

**Various Positions** by Martha Schabas (Doubleday Canada, 368 pages, \$22)

**CANDACE FERTILE**  
FOR POSTMEDIA NEWS

Rarely does a debut novel nail its subject with such precision, but Martha Schabas has taken the confusion of teenage girls and the world of ballet to create a stunning novel. The title, *Various Positions*, definitely references ballet positions, but it also reflects the multiple ways of being and seeing through the mind of a young ballet student, Georgia, whose parents' marriage is imploding as she struggles with her own ambition and hormonal chaos.

That classical ballet is all about appearance is a given — and that means that no matter what dancers can do, how they look likely will determine their success. Georgia is lucky: she is naturally thin, with a dancer's body. But the genetic gods have not smiled on all the students, so eating disorders are a definite concern.

The problem is that in their desire to fit the mould, the students have no idea what damage they are doing to themselves, and Georgia, who has tried to help a fellow student lose weight, is caught in a downward spiral of guilt and chaos about body image. And all these feelings are happening when girls are going through an extremely difficult time in their lives and trying to come to grips with their own sexuality.

Schabas, who studied ballet, captures the meanness of girls, the misunderstanding of teenagers regarding their instructors and the innocence of 14-year-olds who have access to stuff via the Internet that only compromises their own physical urges.

Looking at Internet pornography is not the way to learn about one's own sexuality, but Georgia seems to have few options, and it's likely that these days, many



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**Martha Schabas' *Various Positions* is a stunning novel told from the point of view of a teenage ballet student.**



Martha Schabas takes part in this year's WordFest, Oct. 11 through 16. Tickets and info at 403-237-9068 and [wordfest.com](http://wordfest.com).

young people are doing exactly the same thing. That's plain scary.

Georgia is a bright and ambitious girl. She tries to figure out why her mother is so unhappy, and her older half-sister Isabel attempts to step in when Georgia's parents fail her.

The family dynamic is complicated, and Georgia has been misled about when her father left Isabel's mother to marry her own mother.

Schabas's skill means that readers grasp the truth long before Georgia does, and that knowledge ramps up fears for Georgia and how she will contend with all the negative positions of her young life.

The novel is told from Georgia's point of view, and my guess is that any female reader will immediately recognize the perplexity of being 14. Adding in the strict world of ballet and a collapsing family just raises the voltage.

Georgia's idol in the ballet world is Gelsey Kirkland, and Isabel tries to dislodge her hero worship by giving Georgia *Dancing on My Grave*, Kirkland's autobiography. The result is the opposite of Isabel's hope of dissuading Georgia from admiring someone who used coke and collagen.

Georgia says: "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."

Teenagers are not known for great decision-making skills. And Georgia has adults around her with limited skills in that area. The ballet school that Georgia attends in Toronto has a male teacher, Roderick, about whom many stories swirl, but one thing is clear: the students must please him. He has an enormous effect on their futures. His attitude to the students (almost all girls) is a constant source of gossip that often slides into the vile. The collision of teen sensibility with that of an adult apparently unaware of many of the consequences of his interaction with the girls is achingly real.

*Various Positions* is amazing. Its insight into the world of girls, ballet and lame parents is pitch perfect. Ballet fans will appreciate the candour of this novel, but its appeal is much broader than that audience.

*Various Positions* is an outstanding novel, full of wisdom and language that dances across the page.