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## Strictly Ballroom

**Alice Simpson, daughter of a renowned vaudevillian, infuses her first novel with her love of dance.** By

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Alice Simpson felt like she'd struck gold when her email query to a top New York literary agent resulted in a phone call the very next day. The agent liked the chapters Simpson had sent and offered to represent her in the sale of her first book. That great coup was quickly succeeded by yet another one: The agent sold the first-time author's book within a week to the venerable HarperCollins publishing house. The novel, *Ballroom*, was published in hardcover last year; the paperback just came out last month.

To celebrate her unexpected success, Simpson, 73, did what she always said she'd do if she ever won the lottery. "I always said if I won, I'd get private tango lessons. I actually said I'd buy Tony Dovolani from *Dancing with the Stars* to come teach me the tango," Simpson says with an exuberance that gives her voice a perpetual smile. Dovolani

proved impractical, so she went on YouTube and found the instructor who now comes to her South Pasadena loft, where they tango together every week in her endless pursuit of terpsichorean splendor.

The seductive thrum of tango music has permeated Simpson's life ever since she can remember. It has hovered, like the scent of some exotic bloom, over all her artistic endeavors. It saturates the memories of her father, the renowned eccentric dancer Hal Sherman, once known as "the Charlie Chaplin of dance," who is said to have invented the Moonwalk long before Michael Jackson. His so-called rubber-leg routines made him an international star and household name when vaudeville reigned as the world's supreme form of entertainment.

Immortalized by Al Hirshfeld in a *New York Times* caricature, and by some of the era's top photographers, Sherman cavorted through the world's capitals in bespoke suits and gold-tipped cane, surrounded by showgirls along with the rich and the royal. By the time Alice was born, however, both vaudeville and her father's career were largely finished. She saw her father dance only in their living room. While her mother went to work to support the family, her dad was at home, listening endlessly to the haunting melodies of tango masters like Carlos Gardel, whose mesmerizing voice you can still hear on YouTube. No longer the chum of European royals like the Prince of Wales, with whom he used to pal around at Maxim's in Paris, and no longer surrounded by fancy women (Simpson's mother was Sherman's fourth wife), he used to let his daughter dance on his toes as he twirled to tango rhythms in their New York apartment. It is music that Simpson says she only realizes now, in retrospect, "must have seeped into my bones and into the very core of me...and it has lasted forever."

Tango plays a huge part in her book, which takes place in 1999 and follows six characters who seek love and fulfillment in Sunday night visits to a once-grand but now-seedy ballroom in lower Manhattan. There they dance with strangers who become objects of desire, but who ultimately cannot fulfill the fantasies their weekly partners have woven around them.

Reviews of the book have been sparse but positive. Comparing *Ballroom* to Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*, Kirkus Reviews said, "Readers who enjoy seeing inside the hearts and minds of others will relish sharing the lives of Simpson's creations."

And now that she's launched as an author, Simpson says she has no time to waste. She's already 350 pages into her next volume, a story of greed in New York's Gilded Age. "It's a wonderful time period, the 1890s to the early 1900s. People were building mansions on Fifth Avenue, the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Natural History were founded, they were putting elevators into steel structures and the Brooklyn Bridge was being built. There were the few who were very rich, like the Rockefellers and the Fricks, and the many who were very poor, immigrants crowding into tenements. There are some parallels to today."

The story of Simpson's late-life literary success would be interesting enough on its own, but it is just a small part of this fascinating woman's delayed foray into new fields of work at a time of life when most people think they've defined who they are and what they are capable of. Simpson reached her 50s believing the rest of her life would

probably proceed much as it had before. She was a single mother who enjoyed a successful career as a commercial graphic artist and illustrator, with top-notch corporate clients in the New York fashion and cosmetic industries.

Her first marriage, at 22, had been brief, but brought the blessing of a son. In 1980 she married again and joined her new husband in the San Fernando Valley, where she again plied her trade for such clients as Max Factor and Redken. That marriage lasted nine years, she says, and by the time it ended her son was out of college and on his own. She moved back to New York alone, intending to resume her career and friendships. During all those decades of work and motherhood, she says, dancing was no part of her conscious life, nor did she ever imagine herself veering off to become a fine artist — and certainly not an author. Where her story departs from millions of others is the U-turn she made in her 50s, when strictly by chance she discovered talents she never knew she had. And she rediscovered dancing.

“It was 1990 when I went back to New York. I was getting my business and my life back together again,” she says. “I had a friend who told me she was doing ballroom dancing and how wonderful it was. I had loved to dance in high school and college, but that had all gone away. I felt it was beneath me as an adult to go to a ballroom to dance. It wasn’t a classy thing to do. My friend said the people are nice, they’re educated, they’re not what you would imagine. She convinced me to try it, and we went to the Marc Ballroom in lower Manhattan, and dancing became an important part of my life. Once you start you want to become better and better. So I began taking dance classes, and it was great. You meet people and gather at different places and find out where to dance in the city. It’s a community of its own.

“Then another friend said, ‘Come with me to the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts on Deer Isle in Maine.’ I asked what it was and what we’d do there. She said, ‘We’ll make artist books.’ I had never heard of that and asked what it was. She said ‘They’re painted books,’ and explained the process. I didn’t really want to go. She said, ‘It’s only three weeks and we’ll have great fun.’ So I went. And that changed my life. I have never been the same.”

Simpson discovered a talent for creating painted books that she never knew she had. “I just couldn’t believe what I was capable of. It’s quite magical, especially considering who I had been. And others responded to my work in positive ways. The first book I made was called *Matthew with the Turquoise Eyes*. It’s a tunnel book that expands, like an accordion, into a ballroom.”

Simpson has continued making art books, which are now in private collections as well as those of museums and universities around the world. Seven have been purchased by New York’s Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts and the Lincoln Center Theatre Collection. Her work is also in collections at Yale, Harvard and Stanford universities, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Cafesjian Center for the Arts in Armenia, the New York Public Library and the Rhode Island School of Design.

For one of her Haystack projects in the '90s, Simpson had been asked to write brief stories describing the lives of characters she had created visually in one of her painted books. She discovered she loved writing, another discipline she'd never tried before. Those same characters and stories, much expanded on over many years, became the basis for the characters in *Ballroom*.

Throughout the '90s in New York, Simpson continued perfecting her writing, her dancing and her book art, and she also began sculpting in clay, all of which she continues to this day, almost always with tango music in the background. In addition to Gardel, her favorites include Astor Piazzola and the contemporary Gotan Project based in France.

In 2009, her son, Mike Simpson, a multiple Grammy Award-winning music writer and producer, asked her to try California once more, to be closer to him and her grandchildren. She moved to her modern, light-filled live/work loft that year and says she was "surprised at how much I enjoy living here in little South Pasadena. It's clean and quiet and sweet and life is easy. Of course, after living in the heart of New York City, where I used to go to theater and out dancing sometimes five nights a week, I sometimes do miss my night life. But I fulfill my cultural longings — I go to a lot of classical music concerts here, and that's very important in my life. And I have my work and dance lessons, and I have found a wonderful writing group nearby that is excellent and supportive. I'm also working with the Pasadena Festival of Women Authors."

She's not the first woman in her family to bloom later in life, Simpson says. Her mother met her dad when he was at the top of his career. At age 65, she became the secretarytreasurer of a mining engineering corporation. "It was very unusual in those years," Simpson says, seemingly unaware that her own trajectory as an artist is unusual even today.

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