

### Gilda

an autobiographical narrative by Alma Flor Ada



### Background

Have you ever changed schools or moved to a new city? How did you feel about the change? In this autobiography, Cuban-born Alma Flor Ada tells how she felt about changing schools in the middle of fourth grade. Read on to see how her ballet teacher, Gilda, changed her life.

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Connect main ideas to other sources and topics
- Create and punctuate compound-complex sentences
- Recognize and use words from other languages
- Respond to literature by using examples and facts from a text to support your ideas

### Building Your Vocabulary

1. Alma Flor Ada talks a lot about her learning experiences in “Gilda.” Some of her experiences were in grade school, and some were in ballet school. Look at the vocabulary on page 171. On a separate sheet of paper, list the words in the correct category, following the example.



- |             |             |
|-------------|-------------|
| imperative  | first grade |
| grace       | board       |
| conjunction | positions   |
| waltz       | leotards    |
| preposition | slippers    |

Grade School	Ballet School
<i>imperative</i>	<i>grace</i>

2. Check your responses with a partner. Can you add any more items to the lists?

### Reading Strategy

#### Connect main ideas to other sources and topics

As you read, you should try to connect main ideas in the story to things you know or are familiar with. For example, when you read about Cuba, you should try to connect what you read to what you know about Cuba. This can help you get a better idea of what the story is about.

### Applying the Reading Strategy



1. As you read the narrative, find the main idea of each paragraph. Have you read any books or magazines that are linked to this main idea? Have you seen any movies or TV shows that are related to the topic?
2. Use any connection you make to better understand what you are reading. For example, the story you are about to read takes place in Cuba. Do you know where Cuba is located on a map? Do you know what language people speak there?
3. Try using the connections you were able to make. For example, after you finish the story, you might go to a Web site about Cuba. If possible, link one source to additional sources to find out even more information.

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## Building Your Vocabulary

As you read, list unfamiliar words in your Vocabulary Log.

- 2 When midway through the school year my fourth-grade teacher, Gladys Carnero, moved to Havana, I felt lost. Then I became sick.
- 1 First I caught one cold after another, then the measles, and finally the mumps. My wonderful parents realized that something lay beneath this. The *Colegio Episcopal* which I had been attending was unbearable to me if Gladys Carnero was no longer there. So, my parents transferred me to a new school.

Although it might have been a relief at the beginning of the school year, this transfer became another kind of nightmare. I arrived as the new child in the middle of the year—to a class where all of the other children had known each other since first grade. To make it worse, at the new school, *Colegio El Porvenir*, the students were seated according to their academic performance. Those with the best grades sat in the front; those with bad grades sat in back. Since I had no grades yet, they sat me at the very back.

In the last row, I was surrounded mostly by boys who were the tallest in the class. I, a year younger than my classmates, was the shortest. Furthermore, no one had discovered yet that I needed glasses. I could not see anything on the board.

I tried to hide behind one of the students who sat in front of me, but it seemed that my strategy only brought me harder questions

from the teacher. “Indicative,” “subjunctive,” and “imperative,” sounded equally horrible to me. I loved words like “zephyr” and “zenith,” “nectar” and “ambrosia,” “friendship” and “loyalty.” But the words “preposition,” “conjunction,” and “subordinate” sounded almost as ugly as “sulfur” and “hate” to me.

Because my parents had been so understanding, I felt I could not tell them how unhappy I was. There was only one thing that allowed me to survive that horrible school with its treeless cement yard—a school without songs, without drawing, without stories, without friends.

On my way to school one day, a couple of blocks down a side street that I had followed just to delay my arrival, an unexpected wisp of music greeted me, merrily escaping from a tall window behind a carved wooden railing.

On tiptoes, grasping the wooden railing, I peered inside the old colonial house from which the waltz spilled onto the street.

Inside, an enormous mirror reflected a dozen young girls, in pink leotards and black slippers, practicing at the **barre**. At the piano an older woman played the unending waltz. In front of the class, holding a tall staff, stood a young blond woman, so pale she was almost translucent. She had incredible eyes—eyes that took in everything: the girls, the piano

**zephyr:** a gentle breeze

**zenith:** the highest point

**ambrosia:** something extremely pleasing to eat

**barre:** handrail used by ballet dancers



## As You Read

- 1 Is the narrator happy or sad? What words in the first paragraph tell you this?
- 2 Who is Gladys Carnero? Does the narrator like her? How can you tell?

## As You Read

- 1 What does the narrator hear one day that surprises her? Where was it coming from?
- 2 What does she see when she looks into the window of the old house?
- 3 From the context of the story, what do you think the word *translucent* means?

player, and indeed the whole room, including the far corner where a group of elegant ladies sat in mahogany rocking chairs, sleepily cooling themselves with silk fans.

As the days went by, school became bearable only because as soon as the long-awaited bell rang, I would run and cling to the window of the ballet school, imagining myself in soft slippers, changing positions, second, third, fourth, performing a *jeté* or a *plié*.

One afternoon, the pale teacher disappeared from view, and before I realized what was happening, she was standing on the sidewalk by my side. “Do you want to study ballet? What is your name?”

Her voice was as soft as her gaze. “Come in,” she said. “Come in.”

Once she knew who I was, she called my mother and offered to accept me in her class. My life was changed, not only after school, but in school, too!

I was never again bothered by prepositions and conjunctions, nor by my inability to remember how much is seven times eight. Nor did I mind anymore sitting in the back of the class, although slowly, without really noticing how, I managed to move to the middle rows and even to the front.

1 I lived only for the moment when the bell rang and I could run to the ballet school. And it wasn't that I did very well there. I did not. I was placed at the end of the line, and there I

**mahogany:** reddish-brown wood from a West Indian tree

2 stayed for as long as my classes continued. In spite of my love for music and for the beauty of the movements, it was as if I had three feet, or as though my left and right sides had traded places. But in spite of my clumsy attempts, so devoid of grace, how wonderful it was to be there!

No matter what mistake I made, I was never criticized nor ridiculed by Gilda, the teacher. Although I saw her become impatient once in a while, it was only when someone who could naturally do better was not paying attention. To me she offered the same gentleness she showed the youngest of the girls, looking at me with a sweet look of **complicity**, as if to say “You know that I know you cannot dance, but that you long to be here, and I welcome you.”

I was very surprised when one day my teacher invited me to stay after class. That was the beginning of a beautiful friendship that was cherished equally by both of us.

**complicity:** participation in a secret activity



### As You Read

1. Does the narrator do well in ballet school? How do you know?
2. Find the words in the selection that tell you the narrator's reactions to ballet.



### Social Studies

Did you know that Cubans are one of the three largest groups of Spanish speakers living in the United States today? Many Cubans live in Florida, especially Miami, along the East Coast, and in New York City. The Cuban section of Miami is called “Little Havana” because there are so many Cubans living there. (Havana is the capital of Cuba.)

## About the Author



### Alma Flor Ada

Alma Flor Ada lives in San Francisco and is a professor of multicultural education at the University of San Francisco. She was born in Camagüey, Cuba, and has also lived in Spain and Peru. She has published books in the United States, Spain, Mexico, and Peru. She travels around the United States speaking on topics such as multiculturalism and education.

# After You Read



## Retell It!

What do you think Gilda was like in general? What did she think of teaching? What did she think of her students? With a partner, retell the story from Gilda's point of view.

## Think, Discuss, Write

With a partner, discuss your answers to these questions. Then write them down.

- Structure** Is the selection you just read nonfiction or fiction—that is, did it really happen or not? How do you know?
- Recall details** List three facts that the narrator gives us. What are her feelings about each fact?
- Making inferences** Did the narrator like to answer questions in class? How do you know?
- Recall details** Did the narrator tell her parents how she felt?
- Tone** Write down details from the selection that tell you how the narrator felt about ballet.
- Recall details** What did the teacher look like?
- Cause and effect** How did going to ballet school change the narrator's performance in grade school?

## What's Your Opinion?

Work with a partner. Decide on a new experience that you have both had recently. Have you both moved to a new home or apartment? Have you

had a new teacher? Copy the chart and write down your own experience. Write positive things about your experience under "Positive." Write down any negative things under "Negative."

Experience: Starting in a new school

Positive	Negative
<i>new friends, new teachers</i>	<i>being the new person, not knowing anyone</i>

Now answer the questions below.

- How is your experience similar to the narrator's experience in the story "Gilda"?
- Did you share some of the same feelings? If so, which ones?

## Launch into Grammar

**Compound-complex sentences** Compound-complex sentences have two or more clauses that can stand on their own as sentences (independent clauses) and a dependent clause that cannot stand on its own. Use a conjunction to join one independent clause with the other independent and dependent clause—*and, but, or, yet, for, so*.

**independent clause:** "One afternoon, the pale teacher disappeared from view,

**conjunction:** and

**dependent clause:** before I realized what was happening,

**independent clause:** she was standing on the sidewalk by my side."

Work with a partner. Find another compound-complex sentence in the reading.



For more practice with compound-complex sentences, complete page 107 of the Student Workbook.

## Launch into Word Analysis

**Words from other languages** English has borrowed a large number of words from other languages. Spanish words used in English include *tortilla*, *mesa*, *plaza*, and *enchilada*. What do all of the words borrowed from Spanish have in common?

Find some ballet terms in “Gilda” that come from the French. What do these words have in common? Discuss with a partner and report your answers to the class.



For more practice with words from other languages, complete page 108 of the Student Workbook.

## Launch into Writing

**Support a response to literature with details**

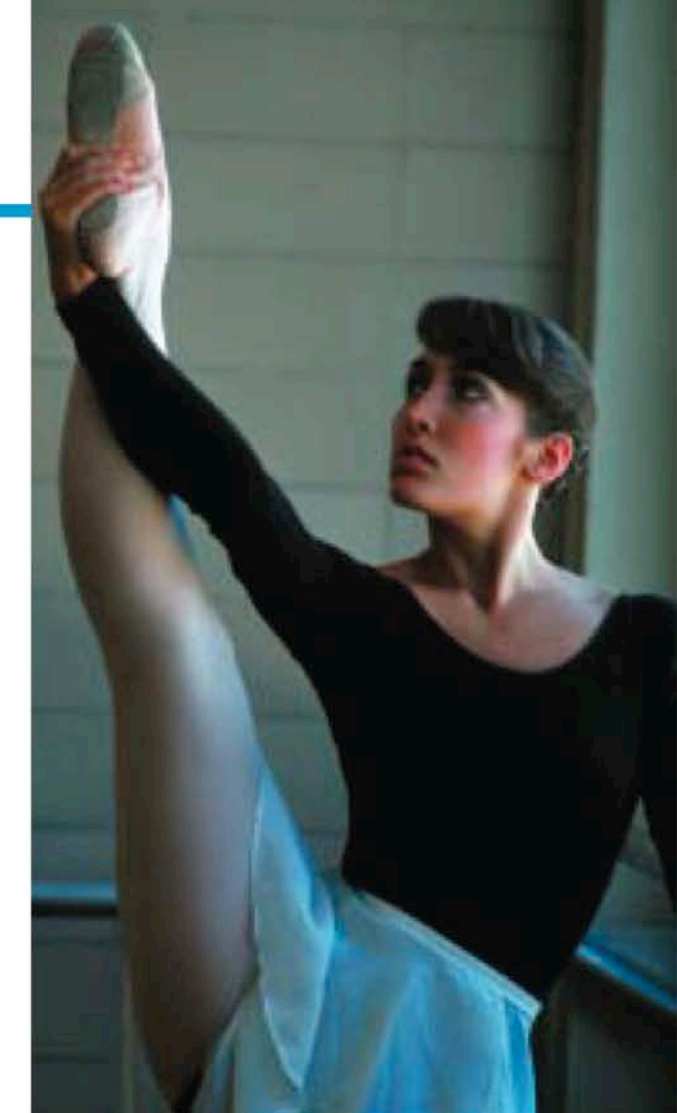
Your response to reading literature can be wide-ranging. Some pieces that you read can be deeply moving. Other pieces may barely make an impression on you. Write a paragraph that tells your reaction to the selection. Did you like it? Did it make an impression on you? Would you recommend it to others? Tell why. What details from the selection can you use to support your view?

Here is an example.

*“Gilda” really made sense to me. It’s not that I am a dancer. In fact, I’m a terrible dancer. I have two left feet! When it comes to basketball, things are different. One day I saw some kids in the gym playing basketball. I said to myself, “Rita, you can do that.” I was afraid, but I asked if I could play. The kids said, “Sure.” To make a long story short, I am now a basketball player on the school team. Alma Flor Ada’s story was important to me because it reminded me of all I had to do to become a basketball player. It’s a great story!*



For more practice using supporting details, complete page 110–111 of the Student Workbook.



### Writing Tip

Check your paragraph. Make sure all of your sentences are complete sentences.

