

# Dancing in the Rain

by Nadha Hassen



## Author reflections

Ten years ago, as a teenager, I wrote the first story that would be included in my children's book, *Dancing in the Rain*. I vividly recall the frenzy to scribble down the words as fast as my imagination conjured them up. **It feels important to reflect on how I've grown in the intervening time, what I've (un)learned and most importantly, on my book and words.** Good books enable us to think and feel, and even if just for a moment, offer us a glimpse into the worlds outside of our own. Authors have the responsibility to reflect on the context they introduce their stories into and the impact their words may have (both intended and unintended). Hindsight is a valuable teacher.

This book was published a few years after Toronto, Canada became my home and is the setting for my book. I have since come to learn more about Canada's colonial history and would be remiss if I did not **acknowledge the history of the land where this story is based.** This land is the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat, the Haudenosaunee, and most recently, the territory of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation. Today, the meeting place of Toronto (from the Haudenosaunee word Tkaronto) is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island. As an immigrant and settler, I am grateful to have the opportunity to live and work on this territory.



**Diversity and the representation of different races, family structures, health issues and challenges is a core theme in this book.** All the characters had backstories and lives that existed in my head. This was not unusual because as a child, I had multiple worlds that I would inhabit during play.

**I have felt the implications of patriarchy and misogyny in my life,** and from my writing, it is clear that this had an impact on me even at a young age. I wrote strong female-identified characters into this book which was my way of exploring these relationships. For instance Chandra's character, a South Asian female-identified person who chose to be a single mother, was my way of confronting the taboo of adoption. Another point I have thought long and hard about is how I chose not to give Khalon and Keisha's mother a name but rather call her "Mama". It was not my intention to diminish her importance in the story as to me, the word "mama" holds strength and importance. Part of my intention was to highlight positive male/masculine figures such as Rafiq and Amdis to counter negative ones in the book. I also craved male figures who were nurturing. Through Amdis' character I wanted to normalize affection and emotion from a masculine person.

**Death, loss, hope and resilience played a large role in the stories of *Dancing in the Rain*.** I had lost my grandmother shortly before beginning to write *Dancing in the Rain* and I felt her loss dearly. The support and guidance women provide— holding families together and sharing knowledge— is often unrecognized work. There is so much I regret not being able to learn from my grandmother. However, I will always fondly remember those "golden moments" I had with her.

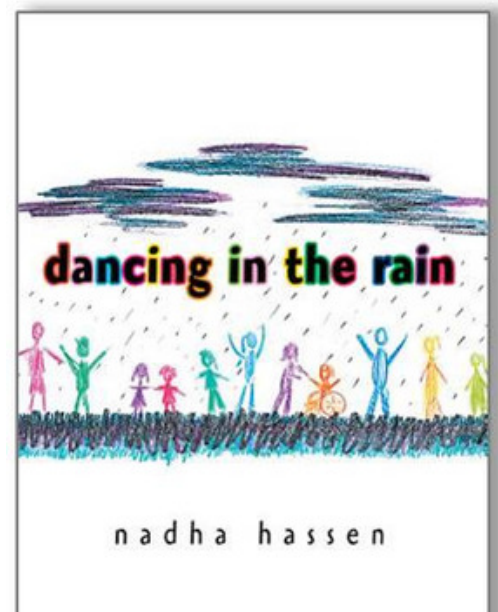
## Note: Potential spoilers!

**If I could go back and do it again**, I would elaborate on my characters' background stories in the book as well as have more discussion with different people to ensure that the characters are rooted in the real, nuanced experiences of the people they inevitably represent. To a certain extent, I fell into the trap of creating characters without speaking enough with the people who inhabit these bodies. I attribute this to my young age and lack of exposure and understanding of the complexities of colonial history, power dynamics, not as an excuse but to understand where my education failed me and where I could unintentionally perpetuate harmful notions. I think specifically about Minowa and Maska. The characters Maska and Minowa are Indigenous and their names were chosen as I understood them to mean "strong" and "moving voice" respectively. They are complex, strong characters but if I had a redo, I would approach how I wrote them differently.

No one person can speak for their entire race or gender or any other social location as we are all an intersection of identities and experiences. However, I have learned **the importance of listening, unlearning and respectfully engaging people** in my work. Indigenous and Black folks face disproportionately more discrimination compared to other racialized groups or people of colour and this is something I had to become aware of and in doing so, continue to acknowledge my own privileges and the position I write from.

At the time of finalizing this book, I had wanted to explore queerness, sexuality and gender expression. However, I did not have the beginnings of the language or the position to give voice to these thoughts of mine. I want to acknowledge the teenage me who struggled with this decision, because it was the best I knew to do at that time, while feeling safe. **I would tell myself that you pushed the boundaries you felt you could at that time.**

I would also have de-genderized the activities that Seren and Keisha and Khalon and Maska engaged in predominantly. I now recognize that this was entrenched in my thinking back then. Another point of note is that Shae never speaks (with words) and that is intentional. However, I noticed that not all readers picked up on that and perhaps issues of ableism could have been more clearly articulated. The characters face a variety of challenges throughout the book, some more explicit than others. I wonder if perhaps short snippets of their lives were not enough to make the characters as multifaceted as they have been to me.




The counter point is that I did want to leave the stories fairly open-ended as we can never fully know people's stories. Writing and editing can also keep going and so when does one stop. I am trying to accept that with my writing there will always be something I want to change, and that it is a balancing act. I do not want the fear of judgment to be the reason I stop using my voice and telling my stories. One way to do this is to be open to having conversations and engaging in critical thought (and writing reflections like this one!).


**Ultimately, writing this book was a part of my own growth and healing process.**

Storytelling can be a powerful form of healing. I often affectionately refer to this book as a time capsule. It has been a wonderful way for me to connect authentically with others. Life's challenges come in so many different forms and variations and at any time in life. I want to reiterate how important it is to have those harder conversations with children and youth, as a starting point for learning, unlearning, critically thinking, fostering empathy and resilience. It is also incredibly important for children to see themselves and their families represented within books. This book has not just served as a reminder to appreciate the beautiful moments amid a chaotic life, but also pushed me to be a more accountable author and humble human being.

Warm wishes,  
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