

Kathleen Ernst
WRITING AT THE INTERSECTION OF PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THE PAST



Preview of *Highland Fling*

A Young Adult Fiction Book

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A year ago, Tanya Zeshonski was living in Wisconsin, interning at the public television station, and eating Polish food on holidays. Then her mother divorced her father, reclaimed her maiden name of MacDonald, and moved to North Carolina to submerge them all in Scottish heritage.

So now, at 15, Tanya is the oldest beginning student at the Flora MacDonald School of Highland Dance. Instead of pursuing her dream of being a filmmaker, she's learning the Highland Fling, one of the national dances of Scotland. Learning it means a lot to her mother, though, so Tanya resigns herself to practicing for the biggest event of the summer, the Cross Creek Highland Games.

At the games, Tanya must face not only the intricacies of the dance, but also the complications brought on by a handsome bagpiper named Miguel, a ghostly ancestor, and the arrival of her father. Tanya's sharp, funny voice rings true as she describes the delicate steps of the dance and the beginning of her new life.

Chapter One (Pages 8-11)

As expected, the audience's approval for the tiny tots in Primary echoed backstage. Then the sound system emitted an ear-shattering screech and crackle as the first three Beginner dancers were announced. I took a sip from my water bottle, and sprinkled a few drops on the soles of my ghillies to reduce the chance of slipping. I heard the bagpiper accompanying the competition begin the only tune used for the Sword Dance, Gillie Chalum. That translates into something like



“servant of God Columba.” Miss Janet says this association with St. Columba represents the symbolic victory of good over evil.

I could use a victory, symbolic or otherwise. The shrill tones made my muscles tighten. I saw Christina and some other girls with the look of top-level dancers—Premier class—playing a relaxed game of “Go Fish” on the floor. All around me other Beginner dancers were leaping and flinging. I probably should have done some leaping and flinging myself, to warm up. But I didn’t.

When an official called Nan’s number I watched her disappear into the murky light of stage right and sent a plea to the Highland gods: Please let her do OK. Please, just let her do OK. Nan reappeared after her round flushed and breathless and beaming. I gave her a thumbs-up. She held crossed fingers high, then pointed at me. I accepted her good luck with a tiny smile. Maybe I’d actually get through this.

When my number was called fifteen minutes later I reported to the official clipboard-toting woman in the wings. She lined three of us up for the next round. “Don’t go out yet,” she ordered, as if we might bolt onto the stage and elbow aside the three girls already hopping about in the Sword Dance. I rubbed my palms on my kilt.

The music stopped, the audience applauded, and the three sweaty dancers marched primly offstage, smiles glued in place. “Miriam McPherson, Tanya Zeshonski, Tiffany Blue!” the clipboard woman hissed frantically. “Go, go!”

Highland dancers are trained to turn out from the hips down, and the three of us duck-walked to our places. I was in the center, with a short brunette on one side and an even shorter redhead on the other. We each stepped into place before a pair of Highland broadswords positioned on the stage in front of us so they crossed at right angles. Miss Janet’s voice rang in my head: “Back straight! Head up!



Knees out!”

I could just make out the judges’ table beyond the lights. Hold it together, I told myself. You can do this. You can get on a stage without disaster. Then the piper, surely bored out of his mind by now, started another round of Gillie Chaliun. We bowed and began to dance.

The sword dance, say those who know such things, was performed by Highland warriors on the eve of battle. At one time only men danced the sword dance, but the choreography hadn’t changed when women began to compete. It involves hopping daintily about the crossed swords in an intricate series of steps. A dancer must never touch one of the swords with her foot.

I kicked one of mine—oh, say fifteen seconds into the dance.

If a Highland warrior kicked one of his swords, he knew he would fall in battle.

If a Highland dancer kicks one of her swords—at least as hard as I kicked mine—she must stop dancing and stand at attention while the other competitors continue.

I stepped back, the metallic clang of that kicked sword still ringing in my ears. I willed myself not to throw up the lentil burger I’d snarfed an hour earlier. The ancient Highland warriors, doomed to a painful and bloody death, could not have felt worse for kicking the cursed sword than I did. If I was producing a documentary about this event, I’d whisper in the videographer’s ear to pull in for a tight shot of the screw-up dancer’s face.

A sword dance lasts about five minutes. I used that eternity to make a mental list of all the people responsible for this disaster:

My father, for walking out on Mom over a year ago.

My mother, for selling our Wisconsin house and hauling our northern butts down to our “ancestral home” in North Carolina.

Nan, who talked me into taking dance lessons “for Mom’s sake.”

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And me, for being stupid enough to let Nan do that.

The brunette and the redhead clapped their hands, signaling the piper to speed up to quick time. Sweat dribbled down my forehead. I wasn't allowed to wipe it off. I hated that feeling. I hated Highland Dancing. I hated the Sword Dance in particular. This was surely the longest Sword Dance on record. The blaring drone and wail went on and on and on. Perhaps the piper had lost his place and started over. Why did they let an inexperienced piper play for competition, anyway?

The bagpipes' wail was unendurable. These were no little uilleann pipes, but the wicked big ones. The ones used to lead those ancient Highland warriors into battle. The ones the British once banned as weapons of war. The ones that send icy shivers down the spine, and curdle the blood.

Bagpipes. Those I hated most of all.

"There are a lot of strands here and Ernst balances them nicely... divorce, recovery and anger; what it takes to make a documentary, do a Scots dance or play the pipes; the haunting nature of history, culture and racial memory."

— **Kirkus Reviews**

"This YA is about coping, adapting, and coming out from one's shell to see life from more than one's own point of view. This award-winning author who has written for the American Girls historical mystery series, portrays a girl with a lot of angst who still manages to get outside herself, finding an important new friend in the process. We rated this book five hearts."

— **Bob Spears, Heartland Reviews**

Highland Fling is available as a hardcover book from independent bookstores as well as from Amazon, Barnes & Nobles and other major book vendors. Signed and personalized first edition copies of the book can be acquired directly from the author, Kathleen Ernst. For more information, click on http://www.kathleernerst.com/book_highland_fling.php