

# Aria of the Sea Short Guide

## Aria of the Sea by Dia Calhoun

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# Overview

Aria of the Sea opens with intense emotions. Cerinthe Gale of Normost is frantic to reach the Trial for the School of Royal Dancers and fears their ship arrived too late at Faranor, the capitol island-city of the realm of Windward. At the age of thirteen, if she misses this Trial, she will never have another chance; the following year, she would be too old for consideration. Clutching her letter of recommendation from her dance teacher back in Normost in the far Northern Reaches, Cerinthe and her father Gaebron approach the doors to the school where anticipation and worry change to embarrassment when the doorman looks down his nose at them and tells them servants should knock only at the rear door.

Cerinthe knows her family is common.

Her father is a fisherman with simple tastes and dreams. She was training to be a folk healer, but her late mother, Eilisha, dreamed of Cerinthe's dancing in the Royal Ballet. To honor her mother's memory, Cerinthe leaves the familiar and comfortable behind. Now that she is at the Trial, her insecurities almost overwhelm, but she forges ahead. After she survives the first cut, her hopes crumble when she is not called with a final group to perform before Daina Odonna, the head of the school.

Making her way slowly to the waiting room, she accidentally overhears a conversation between a ballet student and her mother, and is accused of being a snoop when Elliana Nautilus catches her. The instant enmity between Cerinthe and Elliana sets the stage for future conflicts, beginning with Elliana's telling Cerinthe that only losers are told to go to the waiting room.

Devastated, Cerinthe flees the school without telling her father and schemes to find a way to dance even if she must become a servant at the school to earn a place. When she finds out Elliana lied and she was listed first for the Trial, her life changes dramatically, though not necessarily for the better.

## About the Author

Dia Calhoun's life provides material for her award-winning tales, from carvings on her bedpost to her love affair with ballet. Born January 4, 1959, in Seattle, Washington, to James and Eva Alaire Calhoun, a small business owner and homemaker respectively, Calhoun studied ballet from the age of five to seventeen, but, even as a child in second grade, she knew she wanted some day to be a writer.

With the encouragement of her parents to try anything creative, and at the urging of her second grade teacher, Muriel Kennedy, to explore writing, Calhoun took the first tentative steps toward her future. Her first efforts at poetry—the passion of her teacher—led to a poem in fifth grade entitled "Our Classroom Flag" that was "truly terrible," as Calhoun candidly admits on the Winslow Press Web site, "but it rhymed!"

Calhoun continued to explore reading, dancing, writing, drawing, and music, and eventually she used the knowledge gained from these pursuits as she began to put the images in her head on paper.

At the age of fifteen, after spending years training for a career in ballet "at least two hours a day six days a week," according to an interview in *Authors & Artists for Young Adults*, Calhoun underwent surgery on her foot which left her unable to dance or practice while it healed. She picked up a book and studied more, enabling her to graduate from high school at the age of sixteen in a program sponsored by the University of Washington in Seattle. At seventeen she quit dancing, except for her own pleasure, and pursued higher education at Mills College in Oakland, California. She graduated from Mills with a bachelor of arts degree in English and a desire to pursue graphic design and lettering as a means of earning a paycheck.

First, Calhoun interned with an advertising agency in San Francisco, California, and later she received training in commercial art, focusing on lettering and logo design at the Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles. Once she had compiled a portfolio, she returned to Seattle as a freelance graphic artist and soon began lettering book jackets as one of her jobs. From 1984 to 1999, she continued to work as a graphic artist until her success with *Firegold* enabled her to write full time. Readers can see an example of her work anytime Alaska Airlines promotes itself; she designed their corporate logo.

In her early twenties, Calhoun set aside time each day for writing. She wrote for one hour in the mornings and found her calling when she started her first novel. Five years later, she submitted the manuscript for *Firegold* to a publisher. Six rejections later, Winslow Press accepted it and launched her career. "I had neither an agent nor any special contacts," she told AAYA. Before *Firegold* was published, Calhoun started writing her second fantasy set in a maritime kingdom and utilizing her love of ballet and her native Puget Sound: *Aria of the Sea*.

On February 27, 1990, Calhoun married Shawn Richard Zink, a cabinetmaker. The couple lives in Tacoma, Washington, and Calhoun writes for at least five hours each day

in a studio over a garage owned by friends. The friends' daughter Anna is Calhoun's "fairy goddaughter." In her spare time, Calhoun likes fly fishing, canoeing, hiking, gardening, and yoga, activities which flow into her writing. Robin McKinley, Katherine Paterson, and Francis Temple are some of her favorite authors for young people, and she enjoys Jane Austen's novels and Ursula Hegi's *Stones from the River*.

In 2001, *Aria of the Sea* became an ALA Best Book for Young Adults, a New York Public Library Book for the Teen Age, a Fore Word Bronze Medal winner, an IRA Teacher's Choice, and a Bank Street College Best Children's Book. It also won the 2000 Mythopoeic Award for Children's Fantasy Literature, and is listed on the Kentucky Bluegrass Award Reading List and the Voice of Youth Advocates Best Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Horror List 2000.

Currently, Calhoun is working on a prequel to *Firegold* and is considering a sequel to *Aria of the Sea*.

# Setting

"What readers will remember are the exceedingly well drawn atmospheric setting and the winning heroine, torn between her two callings," claims Publishers Weekly.

The entire fantasy is solidly based, with a maritime culture that permeates every aspect of life, including the Royal Ballet. Readers can almost smell the briny air, taste the hint of salt on the wind, and feel the rough texture of the beach and the coolness of the waves. Even the major deity referred to throughout, the Sea Maid, travels the sea in a large scallop shell drawn by a team of six blue sea horses and sends the Black Ship, escorted by silver dolphins, to claim the souls of the dead. Cerinthe's memory of seeing the Black Ship come for her mother is chilling. Shipbuilders are held in high esteem, particularly since ships are the only means of travel between the islands forming the Windward Archipelago. Thordon of Tycliff, a young man showing an interest in Cerinthe, is an apprentice shipbuilder learning his craft, much as Cerinthe studies dance.

The School of Royal Dancers is strictly regimented, with male and female dancers segregated, and hard lines drawn between teacher and student and student and servant. Because of her talent and her age, Cerinthe is placed in the Pearl class, the next to lowest level. The youngest students are Agates between the ages of nine and thirteen, then come the Pearls, aged fourteen, then Emeralds, Rubies, and finally, the Diamonds, the ones eligible to graduate. The age levels are fluid depending on talent, which determines when a student graduates to the next level. Only a select few Diamonds are chosen for the Royal Ballet Company; the rest return home or move elsewhere to join local companies or teach other potential dancers.

As a laundry servant, Cerinthe occupies the lowest rung of the servant ladder and is ignored by the upper servants unless she makes a mistake. As a Pearl, if she makes any overtures of friendship toward Tayla, a younger servant who takes care of the Pearls, she risks Tayla being punished for being too familiar with her betters. The longer Cerinthe lives within the confines of the School, the more she chafes at the restrictions and pushes against or ignores the invisible boundaries.

The only place in the School where Cerinthe feels secure is the infirmary. Since discovering that the School has no healer on staff and receiving Mederi Grace's permission (a mederi is a trained healer), she spends her free time poring over the large herbal kept there. The herbal is a reference book that describes various plants and their uses in treating patients. Cerinthe compares the knowledge learned from the folk healer back home with the herbal and discovers several errors in her training.

# Social Sensitivity

Silere's suicide is sudden and shocking, coming as it does on top of her triumphant performance before the royal family. Her despair and despondency are carefully foreshadowed, but Cerinthe is left feeling she should have seen the signs because of her training as a folk healer. Cerinthe's feelings of failure provide for the discussion of teen suicide, its symptoms, and steps teens can take to make sure their friends do not become a statistic.

# Literary Qualities

Aria of the Sea teems with maritime imagery, as described in the setting. Names reflect the ocean, its inhabitants, and the weather: Gale and Nautilus, for example.

The imagery provides a solid base and an unusual flavor for what is basically a quest fantasy. The quest Cerinthe undergoes is both physical, as she works hard to win a place as a dancer, and spiritual, as she seeks the meaning of her life and how she can contribute to the larger circle of life sung into being by the Sea Maid. The title of the novel emphasizes the spiritual search and discovery. Calhoun's technique is smooth, flowing from scene to scene and gaining momentum like a wave racing for and breaking on the beach until Cerinthe finds her peace and the wave retreats.



# Themes and Characters

Cerithe Gale is a down-to-earth girl seeking a dream not really her own. She sees herself through a flawed "mirror" held up before her face by everyone's hands but her own. "'Look,' they say, 'this is who you should be.' What they really mean is, 'Look, this is who I want you to be.'" In her mirror, she sees her mother's dream of dance, her father's love, Thordon's dream of his future with her as wife and appendage, and Elliana's contempt for her dancing. She does not see the talent, skill, and determination Mederi Grace, her friend Tayla, and Daina Odonna see. Nor does she see her physical appearance: the dancer's body, blonde hair, and sea-colored eyes.

Her mother Elisha never adjusts to life as the wife of a simple fisherman. Instead, she reminisces endlessly about her one trip to the capital, Faranor, and her dream of seeing Cerithe dance her way to fame and fortune. Steady, dependable Gaebbron, Cerithe's father, lives for the sea and the life he has known since birth. He adores his wife and daughter, but probably would never have stirred himself to take Cerithe to the trial if it had not been his wife's dying wish. Thordon of Tycliff, the young man Cerithe meets on the voyage to Faranor, sees her with her skills as a folk healer, and as the perfect wife to journey with him after he finishes his apprenticeship with a shipbuilder to a new island being colonized. To that end, he hopes Cerithe fails as a dancer, but her selection to dance in the special ballet before the queen ruins his plans and their budding relationship.

Elliana Nautilus, the pampered, spoiled lead dancer of the Pearls, detests Cerithe's common background and refuses to share a room when the housekeeper first assigns Cerithe to the room assigned to Elliana and three other dancers. She mocks Cerithe's dancing, looks, and belongings, smashing a figurine given to the other girl by her late mother as a means of striking back for imagined slights. She always strikes back in some sly, hidden way, such as stealing Cerithe's dance in honor of the Sea Maid and ruining it forever by making it a mockery in the Temple of the Sea Maid. Her flamboyant red hair and cold attitude mimic the contrasts in her life: her passion for dance and the neglect of her family who spoils her with possessions and then ignores her. Cerithe's talent, her sudden elevation to first dancer, and her selection to dance the part of the young princess in a special ballet unbalance Elliana and force a confrontation between the two dancers that leads to disaster. Elliana challenges Cerithe to a dance contest on a turret outside the room of a famous ballerina from Faranor's history, but instead of defeating Cerithe and proving her superiority, Elliana falls and breaks her leg, severing an artery. Only Cerithe's knowledge of healing saves her, but Elliana's mind twists events to make Cerithe the cause of her fall, not her own actions.

At the school, Daina Odonna rules with a stern hand and little patience for mistakes. Her white hair is always tightly rolled into a bun, and her habitual black dress adds to her harsh appearance and attitude.

She recognizes Cerithe's talent, but, like all the other dancers in the school, Cerithe's talent exists only to glorify the Daina. Daine Ambrose, the dancing master, uses

Cerithe's talent to punish Elliana in a way that backfires and hurts Cerithe's self-confidence just as much.

Two older dancers—Diamonds Juna Wilner and Sileree Vox—offer encouragement to Cerithe, the silent Sileree more so than the outgoing Juna. The two girls are best friends and rivals, a mocking counterpoint to Elliana and Cerithe's relationship, as they support each other and as they try to outdo each other. Sileree and Cerithe resemble each other physically, which is one reason they are chosen to dance the parts of older and younger princess, but Sileree holds her problems inside and suffers while Cerithe attacks hers. When Cerithe compliments Sileree by saying she wants to be just like her when she grows older, Sileree reacts almost violently for the first time in the book and rejects the idea, begging Cerithe to never be like her. Within days, Sileree is dead, having walked into the sea to commit suicide and escape the life of a dancer she never wanted. Her dream was to be an opera singer, but her relatives forced her to dance since greater wealth and fame would come to a dancer.

Perhaps the person who understands Cerithe best is Mederi Grace, the healer.

Mederis are vilified in the outermost reaches of the kingdom as witches since they use more than just herbal knowledge to heal.

She recognizes the torment in Cerithe's soul even if she does not know the cause is self-blame for her mother's death. Eilisha Gale cut her leg on a rusty piece of metal cast up by the sea, and the resulting infection would have killed her if Cerithe had not used her knowledge to save her. With gentle concern and guidance, she directs Cerithe to search her soul, asking, "What are you in the deepest place inside your heart? What do you feel the most joy doing?"

Cerithe's answer is tied up in the voice of the Sea Maid, who "sails through the Windward Archipelago in a gigantic scallop shell pulled by six blue sea horses" according to Calhoun on the Winslow Press Web site. Calhoun visualizes the Sea Maid as Botticelli's Venus, the famous painting depicting the birth of the goddess Venus from the sea. According to myth, Venus sprang fully formed from the sea, the domain the Sea Maid rules. The Sea Maid's voice is heard by those true to their calling as an aria, "a song sung by a single voice, often a high, clear, beautiful, woman's voice." Cerithe heard the aria when she was at home working as a healer, but when she joined the dance school, the aria disappeared. She did not hear it again until she used her skills to save Elliana, but it still took her several days to realize what had happened and why.

Calhoun describes Cerithe's calling to heal as a vocation, meaning the Sea Maid is calling her to heal. Calhoun leaves the reader to infer from Cerithe's comfort in the infirmary and her constant pull toward healing and learning about herbal remedies to establish the conviction of her eventual choice.

However, this method does not lessen the impact of the choice. Instead, it underscores the idea that true happiness comes from within and may not lead to fame or riches, but that it does lead to satisfaction in a job well done.

# Topics for Discussion

1. Cerinthe wins a position in the Royal Ballet School through her talent, but Elliana makes her believe she's been rejected because of her working class background. Should a person's background affect their chances of success in their chosen field, or should talent, hard work, and knowledge count the most?
2. Is Cerinthe a strong young woman for mostly ignoring Elliana's taunts, or is she weak for not fighting back? Explain.
3. Was Cerinthe responsible for her mother's death or Elliana's accident?
4. What does the Black Ship represent to you? Is it something to dread, or is it beyond human comprehension?
5. Was Cerinthe right to follow her dream even though it changed? Why or why not?
6. Cerinthe has certain moral standards she will not compromise for success. How important is her integrity to making her a strong character, and what does integrity mean to you?
7. Would you want to work as a servant in the School of Royal Dance? Would you want to work as a servant anywhere? Since someone has to do the work, do you consider people who perform skills requiring hard labor and little education as inferior?
8. Have you ever been fishing? deep sea fishing? How did the experience affect you? Would you go again?
9. Would you be willing to dedicate years of your Life to achieving a dream or a goal?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The arts have often flourished chiefly through the patronage of royalty and the wealthy. Pick at least three artists from any field and discuss how patronage enhanced or destroyed their careers. For example, Mozart, Hans Holbein the Younger, Lord Byron, Michelangelo, etc.

2. Examine the history of ballet. How did it develop? Who are some of the major dancers, composers, and choreographers from each century?

3. Investigate the history of the domestic servant. How did the servant class develop? How were/are they treated?

What laws have been passed to improve working conditions for domestic servants?

4. How has the fishing industry developed over the centuries?

5. The ocean is considered the birthplace of the ancestors of many creatures living today. Discuss at least three and how they evolved from an aquatic life form to a terrestrial one. Are there any similarities in their evolution?

6. Compare and contrast Nemaree and the Sea Maid to other mythological deities associated with the sea.

7. Discuss how folk medicine and herbal lore is treated by the established medical community. Is such treatment fair?

Why or why not?

8. Are there any myths about "ghost ships" that carry off the dead? If so, compare and contrast.

9. Explore the various myths related to Venus and Aphrodite, and explain how Botticelli created his masterpiece and possibly why he named it after Venus instead of Aphrodite.

10. Pretend Cerinthe is a modern teen. How would her actions have differed from those in Aria of the Sea? How would they remain the same? How would you have reacted in the same situation?

## For Further Reference

"Calhoun, Dia." In *Something about the Author*, vol. 129. Detroit: Gale, 2002. This entry contains biographical information, a list of awards, her bibliography, and information about *Firegold and Aria of the Sea*.

Chance, Rosemary. "Women with Backbone." *Teacher Librarian* (December 2001): 16. This entry lists titles featuring strong female protagonists for teens, and it includes *Aria of the Sea*.

Elzinga, Melinda. Review of *Aria of the Sea*.

Book Report (November/December 2000): 57. Elzinga focuses on Cerinthe's personal decisions in relation to dancing and healing.

Review of *Aria of the Sea*. *Publishers Weekly* (August 14, 2000): 356. This anonymous reviewer compares secondary characters who "lack depth" with "exceedingly well drawn atmospheric setting and the winning heroine."

Review of *Aria of the Sea*. *Reading Teacher* (November 2001): 248. This brief positive review focuses on the strong female protagonist, and states that the book stimulates important discussions concerning motivation and decision making.

Shook, Bruce Ann. Review of *Aria of the Sea*.

*School Library Journal* (September 2000): 225. Shook focuses on Cerinthe's choice between dance and healing, praising Calhoun's natural storytelling ability and realistic descriptions of dance.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

The quest for identity in *Aria of the Sea* is an integral part of Robin McKinley's *The Blue Sword* and *The Hero and the Crown*, and of Lloyd Alexander's *Prydain Chronicles*. The young women, Harry (born Angharad) and Aerin in McKinley's two books struggle to make a place for themselves as strong women in a male-dominated culture. In *Prydain*, a young orphan named Taran chases after his master's runaway prophetic pig and discovers hidden depths in himself that he never realized were there as he makes a stand against evil. Patricia McKillip's *The Changeling Sea* also features a maritime theme and a young woman who accidentally hexes the ocean queen and frees a prince. Monica Furlong's *Wise Child* and its sequel *Juniper* contain elements of fantasy.

## Related Web Sites

"Dia Calhoun." Winslow Press, <http://www.winslowpress.com>. Accessed July 9, 2002.

This site includes biographical information, an interview, a copy of a speech given by Calhoun at the YALSA preconference to ALA 2001, reviews, a glimpse at the writing and editorial process, pictures, and contact information for Calhoun.

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