

## ENGLISH: *STRICTLY BALLROOM*

### Strictly Ballroom and TWO other related texts.

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It was Andrew Fuller who adroitly observed in his studies of anthropology that "belonging... bridges the gulf between isolation and intimacy. Without this feeling, lives become empty and pointless, and people become expendable". While this quote was initially made in reference to sociology, it is pertinent to the idea of belonging and how it is an essential human need wielding the potential to enforce both positive and negative repercussions. Baz Luhrmann's 1992 film *Strictly Ballroom*, Janell Cannon's 1993 picture book *Stellaluna*, and a 2011 photograph titled *Isolation: My Best Friend* by Rucksack Revolution reinforce Fuller's notion. Luhrmann's text highlights the importance of individuality in an oppressive society and the struggles humans endure in order to establish and withhold connections. While, *Stellaluna* emanates the challenges of achieving and maintaining a sense of belonging, and *Isolation: My Best Friend* highlights the ramifications of not belonging. Hence, these texts deal with similar issues relating specifically to identity and not belonging, while frequently encompassing the negatives associated with belonging.

*Strictly Ballroom* demonstrates how not belonging often results in marginalisation. Contextually, Doug Hastings, a character who exerted his individuality, does not belong to the ballroom dancing community; a society Luhrmann satirises to comment on notions of acceptance and identity. This is shown in Scene Nine when Doug is dancing his own steps alone in the studio. The flamboyant red Coca-Cola sign looming overhead satirises Doug's ostracism because it is a motif for connection and symbolises the oppressive dancing community. Doug's isolation is reinforced by his dull costuming juxtaposed to the vibrant primaries of those who belong; such as Liz's yellow outfits. Also, the flashback sequence of Doug is shot in a hyperbolised unnatural palette of colours. This suits the comedic nature of the sequence and reinforces Doug's individuality resulting in isolation. Therefore, through Luhrmann's use of visual techniques, it is clear that belonging often does not come naturally and that a lack of acceptance from the community can subsequently lead to ostracism.

Similarly, the idea of not belonging to places or other people often resulting in isolation is emphasised in *Stellaluna*. On the opening page, the embrace between two bats highlights the valuable relationship shared between mother and daughter. On Page Four however, there is a challenge to this sense of togetherness as vector lines, created by each bat's eyes which provokes the reader to focus on the owl that is overhead. The owl is a visual metaphor of orthodoxy and alerts the audience to how belonging is often controlled by higher powers. Therefore, despite the irrefutable strength of a bond; encapsulating understanding and acceptance, it is often dispensable to the wider world.

A sense of belonging is frequently difficult to obtain because in order for individuals to feel important and be acknowledged, they must belong, ironically however, one can only belong to the wider world if they are already understood and accepted. At Kendall's Dance Studio everyone dances in a circle with partners. While Fran is included in this circle, she dances alone, portraying a false sense of belonging to this community and how connections are often merely superficial. Additionally, the circle is symbolic of continuity, inferring that a sense of belonging or not belonging is often permanent; ongoing and constant, especially in societies founded by tradition. Shirley's repetition of "Fran who?" highlights Fran's exclusion, and high angle shots reinforce this idea, as they belittle the heroine. When Fran finally establishes a relationship with Scott, Luhrmann conveys how this new-found sensation of belonging is prohibited, evidenced through Scott and Fran's first kiss behind a wire fence; symbolic of a barrier to inclusion in the mainstream. Thus, Luhrmann's cinematic techniques elucidate our understanding of belonging being an essential human need which is often controlled by higher powers. In this sense, one should conform to alleviate powerlessness, as it is often more enriching to sacrifice one's personal identity, than to not belong to the wider community.

The negative ramifications of not belonging to the wider community, having the ability to devalue one's sense of self and identity, is emanated in *Isolation: My Best Friend*. A psychologically harmful aspect of this essential human need is shown in the body language of the nude male; he is crouching with his arms enveloping his knees. His symbolically-stripped clothing also reinforces this idea of not belonging negatively impacting the individual because it is a visual metaphor for the protagonist's stripped sense of self and identity. Paired with the grey sparseness of the background, encroaching the figure in the foreground, the composer symbolises the vulnerability and isolation of individuals who do not belong. Moreover, by using a long shot the photographer belittles his protagonist, alluding to the powerlessness of those who do not belong. Overall, this photograph is testament to the significance of achieving and maintaining a sense of belonging, as psychological and emotional debilitation often results from not belonging.

Although a sense of belonging is vital to establish, it is frequently difficult to obtain. Barry Fife, the president of the Australian Dance Federation, underpins how belonging can be forced and manipulated. Abusing his power, shown through the metaphor "One bad egg can rot the whole barrel", Fife's dialogue and analogy unveils the need of establishment to ostracise those who refuse to conform. The confrontation climaxing with "Where do you think we'd be", "out of a job!" extends the power struggle between Scott and Fife established at the start of the film - the individual versus the establishment - heightening our awareness of how one's individuality is frequently challenged and difficult to uphold. In the closing scenes when Fife falls and knocks down the trophies; symbols of orthodox success unimportant in the new order, this acts as a double entendre, symbolising Fife's loss of power while simultaneously conveying how every individual has potential to belong. Therefore, with diligence and persistence, a sense of belonging is able to be established in any community and by anyone, as there is a pre-eminent desire for all individuals to follow their own path unrestricted by authority.

Hence, belonging remains an essential human need. Luhrmann's film serves as a social commentary directed towards the benefits associated with individuality and the obstacles pertinent when challenging mainstream values. While, *Stellaluna* and *Isolation: My Best Friend* illuminate the negative facets and difficulties in achieving and maintaining a sense of belonging. Ultimately, these texts reveal how belonging is paradoxical, complex, but nevertheless important, having the ability to construct, shape, and subvert an individual's identity.