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Dance Lest We All Fall Down Breaking Cycles of Poverty in Brazil and Beyond

Margaret Willson

With a New Afterward by the Author

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An unexpected detour can change the course of our lives forever. For American anthropologist Margaret Willson, a stopover in Brazil led to immersion in a kaleidoscopic world of street urchins, drug dealers, and wise teachers. She and African Brazilian activist Rita Conceição join forces with shantytown residents to break the cycles of poverty and violence around them by creating Bahia Street, an internationally renowned educational program for girls. In a narrative brimming with honesty and grace, *Dance Lest We All Fall Down* shows how friendship, when combined with courage, insight, and passion, can transform dreams of a better world into reality.

Margaret Willson is an anthropologist who has taught at universities in the United States and Europe. She is the international director of Bahia Street and has received the Thomas C. Wales Award for Passionate Citizenship and the Jefferson Award for Public Service.

“A highly personal, beautifully written, and theoretically sophisticated ethnography of modern connections in Brazil’s northeast that focuses on the successes as well as the shortcomings of nongovernmental institutions and contemporary means of addressing social inequality.”

— John Collins, City University of New York

“An ideal text for classroom discussions about the cultural politics of development.”

— Maria Elena Garcia, University of Washington

“If true-to-life anthropology can be this breathtaking, who needs fiction?”

— Robert Boonzajer Flaes, Atana Program, Amsterdam

“A very moving tale about race, gender, and class in the ‘Capital of Happiness’ in Brazil, Bahia...and a powerful and personal account of succeeding against the odds in breaking the cycle of poverty for young poor black girls there...Beautifully illustrates that, yes, it can be done through local empowerment and determination.”

—Darius Mans, President, Africare

“Inspiring, unique, and perfectly honest. The idea that street girls can actually escape a life of poverty and destruction through schooling and education is as old as the world. Bringing this idea from a nineteenth-century Victorian fiction setting to the real life slums of a Brazilian *favela* at the turn of the twenty-first century is an adventure...and at times enormously funny. Some books talk about life. Some books give you insight. And once in a blue moon you find a book like this that gives life.”

—Dr. Maaïke Verrips, director of De Taalstudio, Amsterdam

“A gripping read. Willson has produced an unflinchingly honest and clear-eyed account of anthropological fieldwork and non-profit organizing. Its intensely personal quality gives it the power to provide continual and searing insights into how inequalities of race, class and gender are reproduced, locally and globally, through individual behavior and structural circumstance. A real eye-opener, it is a great testament to Willson’s fine ethnographic sensibility and her tenacity as both a researcher and an organizer.”

—Peter Wade, author of *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*

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