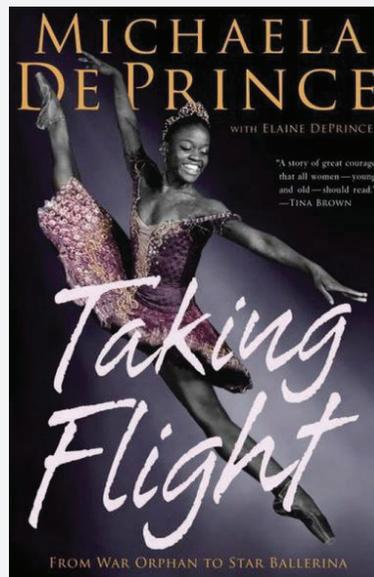


## Second Reaction: The Transforming Power of Hope

DePrince, Michaela and Elaine DePrince. *Taking Flight: From War Orphan to Star Ballerina*. New York: Knopf Books, 2014. Print.

Camea Davis



Michaela DePrince's touching narrative of her route from an African orphanage to international stages as a professional ballerina captivated my middle school students' interests. The vivid cover image, personal photos, and detailed imagery in the book lend themselves to a variety of reading abilities. The structure of the narrative and the action-packed introduction engaged middle school readers and caused them to be excited to complete the book.

Students found the memoir to be equally engaging. They could relate to the theme of persevering through challenges that inhibit one's dreams, yet the unique perspective in war-ridden Africa was a new setting that intrigued student readers. The descriptions of the foreign land of Sierra Leone where Michaela grew up ignited students' imaginations and made them curious about how something like this could happen to children in our modern generation. An additional activity to incorporate with this title would be to read nonfiction texts about other child refugees in order to build students' background knowledge around this issue as well as to offer an opportunity to practice comparative analysis across the genre.

The universal themes make *Taking Flight* a great read for all students. For example, the power of family is a theme that all students could relate to while distinguishing the difference

between an adopted family and their biological families. A testament to the quality of the book's writing is the emotional attachment students developed for the characters. Students learned to love Michaela's kind schoolteacher and playful older brother. They empathized with Michaela when she lost her loved ones. They drew strong parallels to familial challenges and trauma in their own lives. As a result, this book offers an excellent opportunity for in-depth, personal discussions about family, responsibility, survival, and love in the face of challenges.

In addition, *Taking Flight* would be an excellent choice for African American children or children living in poverty because it provides them with a role model who demonstrated resilience in the face of prejudice and poverty. This text teaches young readers how to address and deal with racial prejudice in an age-appropriate manner without distilling the sensitive nature of the topic. For example, Michaela discusses how her physical appearance as an African girl was interpreted by the other girls' mothers as too muscular and masculine to be considered ideal for a ballerina. This instance reveals racial bias based on appearance. Her ability to perform professional ballet was being wagered merely on her African appearance. Nonetheless, with the comfort of her mother, Michaela perseveres and learns to love her body and who she is as she developed into a talented ballerina. Furthermore, this memoir highlighted the power of community strength across racial, socioeconomic, and national boundaries. Students were able to conclude that this is a story about being benevolent individuals. One student remarked that this book taught her to be grateful for where she was born and the opportunities she had been given in her young life. She mentioned how it inspired her to give back to others who are less fortunate.

During the falling action and resolution of the narrative, students began to lose interest because the drama slowed and the story focused narrowly on ballet moves and technique. Vocabulary comprehension of the French words used to describe dance steps presented some challenges. Students required video or pictures to help them visualize the complex dance moves. They desired to complete the book, but lost the initial excitement as the narrative came to a close. Further, Michaela's life as a ballerina did not appeal as much to male students as it did to female students. An additional activity to maintain student interests was to allow students to explore a passion they had and plan how they would go about achieving high success in that arena in their own futures.

In conclusion, *Taking Flight* offered young readers an opportunity to be exposed to another culture while at the same time deeply investigating their own lived experiences. Students traveled from a small orphanage in a dilapidated African village in Sierra Leone to the brilliantly decorated stages of professional ballet in New York City. It was a text that broadened student knowledge of real-world dilemmas such as war, poverty, prejudice, and racism without demeaning any groups of people. This book empowered student readers to be empathetic and reflective as they read. For these reasons, this is a must-read book.

### **About the Author**

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