

Taking Flight: From War Orphan to Star Ballerina

By Michaela DePrince, Elaine Deprince

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The extraordinary memoir of an orphan who danced her way from war-torn Sierra Leone to ballet stardom, most recently appearing in Beyonce's *Lemonade* and as a principal in a major American dance company.

"Michaela is nothing short of a miracle, born to be a ballerina. For every young brown, yellow, and purple dancer, she is an inspiration!" —Misty Copeland, world-renowned ballet dancer

Michaela DePrince was known as girl Number 27 at the orphanage, where she was abandoned at a young age and tormented as a "devil child" for a skin condition that makes her skin appear spotted. But it was at the orphanage that Michaela would find a picture of a beautiful ballerina en pointe that would help change the course of her life.

At the age of four, Michaela was adopted by an American family, who encouraged her love of dancing and enrolled her in classes. She went on to study at the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School at the American Ballet Theatre and is now the youngest principal dancer with the Dance Theatre of Harlem. She has appeared in the ballet documentary *First Position*, as well as on *Dancing with the Stars*, *Good Morning America*, and *Nightline*.

In this engaging, moving, and unforgettable memoir, Michaela shares her dramatic journey from an orphan in West Africa to becoming one of ballet's most exciting rising stars.

"A story of great courage that all women—young and old—should read." —Tina Brown

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Editorial Review

From School Library Journal
Gr 6 Up—In this moving memoir, DePrince, who in 1995 was born in war-torn Sierra Leone but went on to become an acclaimed professional ballerina, tells her story. Her struggles started early: it was discovered that she had vitiligo, a medical condition that results in blotchy, irregular patches of skin, and her biological parents both died when she was only three. DePrince was sold to an orphanage, where she was starved and abused and where she witnessed the brutal murder of her pregnant teacher, a memory that would forever haunt her. After the orphanage was bombed, DePrince and the other orphans fled to a refugee camp. When she was four years old, she and her best friend, Mia, were adopted by the same family and taken to live in the United States. Just before leaving, DePrince found a magazine photograph of a ballerina, and her dream of becoming a dancer was born. Her supportive family did everything they could to help her attain her goal, but the girl still encountered challenges, including prejudice from those who believed African American dancers to be less suited for the craft ("'Black girls just shouldn't be dancing ballet. They're too athletic. They should leave the classical ballet to white girls.'"). However, she persevered and succeeded, becoming the youngest principal dancer for the Dance Theatre of Harlem and joining the Dutch National Ballet. Though the text is accessible and engaging, there are events that are glossed over or not fully fleshed out, such as details of her adopted sister's medical problems. Overall, though, DePrince is an inspiring narrator, wise beyond her years. An uplifting story about overcoming the odds.—Stephanie Farnlacher, Trace Crossings Elementary School, Hoover, AL

Review
Starred review, Publishers Weekly, August 11, 2014:
"A compelling narrative . . . The book's strong thread is Michaela's lifelong passion for ballet and her candid depiction of the physical and emotional struggles of becoming a black classical ballerina. There is plenty of ballet detail for dance lovers to revel in, and the authors achieve a believable, distinctive teenage voice with a nice touch of lyrical description."

"Readers will find her life story gripping whether or not they are dance fans...the heart of the journey resonates in this mother/daughter collaboration. A revealing and absorbing journey through dance classes and competitions to success."—*Kirkus Reviews*

"From her earliest days as an orphan in Sierra Leone to the stages of world-renowned theaters, Michaela's incredible determination to not only survive, but triumph in the face of unthinkable adversity is an inspiration to anyone who has fought for a dream. Her grace and strength bleed through in each of her breathtaking performances. This is a story of great courage that all women—young and old—should read." —Tina Brown

"Extraordinarily written. Hardship ads to the strength of the people and artists we become and Michaela is nothing short of a miracle, born to be a ballerina. For every young brown, yellow, and purple dancer, she is an inspiration!" —Misty Copeland, world-renowned ballet dancer

About the Author
Michaela DePrince graduated from the American Ballet Theatre's Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis school in New York, and is a dancer with the Dutch National Ballet. She travels between Amsterdam and New York City, where she lives with her family.

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