

TAKING FLIGHT



From War Orphan to Star Ballerina



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EDUCATORS' GUIDE

INCLUDES COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS CORRELATIONS

“A compelling narrative. . . the authors achieve a believable, distinctive teenage voice with a nice touch of lyrical description.”

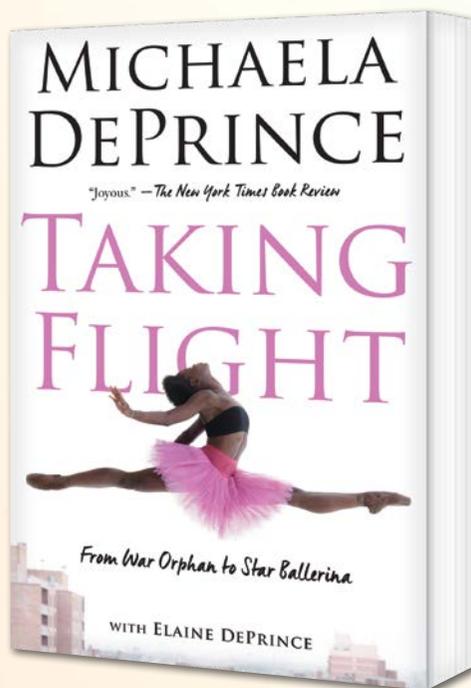
—*Publishers Weekly*, *STARRED*

“DePrince is an inspiring narrator, wise beyond her years. An uplifting story about overcoming the odds.”

—*School Library Journal*

“Readers will be moved by [Michaela’s] grit and passion.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*



Grades 7 and up
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About the Book

To her birth parents, she was Mabinty Bangura. To the abusive “aunties” in a Sierra Leone orphanage, she was Number Twenty-Seven. To her adoptive American family, she is Michaela. To the world, she is Michaela DePrince, professional ballet dancer. DePrince’s remarkable journey from war-ravaged Sierra Leone to some of the most renowned ballet stages in the world is the stuff of riveting fiction, harrowing and miraculous, although amazingly true. In her memoir, *Taking Flight*, readers will encounter a fascinating story of grit, survival, determination, love, and, above all, hope. Writes DePrince, “It was hope that enabled me to survive in Africa in the face of abuse, starvation, pain, and terrible danger. It was hope that made me dare to dream, and it was hope that helped that dream take flight.” *Taking Flight* will inspire readers to believe in themselves, hold on to hope in the darkest of hours, and strive to make their own dreams a reality.

Pre-Reading Activity

Resilience.

Perseverance.

Determination.

Courage. Hope.

Each one of these words represents a major theme found in *Taking Flight*. Display each word on the board or screen. Pass out five index cards to each student. Instruct students to create theme cards, writing one word on each card. On the back of each card, have students write a personal definition of each word. As students read and notice an example of each theme, instruct them to write down the corresponding page number on the appropriate index card and to make a short note of why they think the theme is evident in the text sample. Have students refer to these cards during class discussions.



Despite having a belly and face swollen by malnutrition at age three and a half, I'm standing happy and proud because an American visitor just painted my fingernails.

Questions for Group Discussion

PROLOGUE (PAGES 1–3)

- On page 1, the author shares her thoughts as she waits to perform her role in *Swan Lake*: “A sense of unreality grips me. A professional ballerina . . . is that really me? It seems that just yesterday I was an orphan child, a small dirty-faced pikin—hungry, frightened, and clinging for dear life to a dream of becoming a ballerina.” How does this short prologue give the reader a window into the narrator’s state of mind?



Swan Lake photograph used with permission of the Dance Theatre of Harlem/ Rachel Neville.

Dancing the role of the Black Swan in *Swan Lake* with the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

CHAPTERS 1–5

- On page 5, Mabinty’s father laughs when his brother refers to her as “a worthless, spotted girl . . . who will not even bring you a good bride-price.” Why was her father’s reaction important, and what do you think it instilled in Mabinty?
- Mabinty’s parents were determined to educate their daughter. How was their determination a gift?
- In chapter 2, Mabinty and her mother must endure the terrible loss of Alhaji. Discuss the sacrifice that Mama makes for Mabinty’s survival.
- Discuss the superstitions held by Mabinty’s uncle and his wives. How can the ability to read be considered dangerous?
- How does Papa Andrew show his compassion and humanity when he first meets Mabinty?
- When Mabinty’s new friend tells her, “Don’t look down. Hold your chin up high,” what message is she sending? (p. 29)
- When Mabinty realizes that as Number Twenty-Seven, she will receive the smallest serving of rice, she feels that her spots are “on fire.” What does this powerful description reveal?
- Discuss how Mabinty’s intelligence and imagination serve her in chapter 5. What other character traits are revealed in this chapter (bravery, ingenuity)?

CHAPTERS 6–10

- What does it mean to be “stoic”? Why does Mabinty’s stoicism infuriate the aunts?
- How does Mabinty’s plan to trick the abusive Auntie Fatmata demonstrate her intelligence?
- What does Sarah’s optimism instill in Mabinty? After the wind blows the dance magazine to Mabinty, she decides that she will work hard to become a dancer and “be happy too.” (p. 44) Why do you think Mabinty equates the image of the dancer with happiness?
- After Mabinty does not receive a family book, she says, “I felt a big, empty space in my belly. It hurt worse than when I was hungry.” (p. 52) Discuss what Mabinty means by the “empty space.”
- Discuss the violence that Mabinty witnessed as described in chapter 9. Why do you think the child soldier who had been ordered to kill Mabinty hesitated? How does Mabinty Suma’s love and friendship help Mabinty Bangura get through the horrible experience of Teacher Sarah’s murder?
- For Mabinty, how does the magazine cover inspire hope amid “all the madness”? Hope is one of the major themes in *Taking Flight*. Discuss how this theme is revealed in chapters 6–10.



The magazine cover that I found as an orphan in Sierra Leone, which inspired me to become a ballerina.

CHAPTERS 11–15

- Discuss the courageous actions of Mabinty’s adoptive mother in chapter 11. How does her defense of her new daughters inspire hope in Mabinty?
- On page 78, Michaela writes, “With the exception of needles, my new world was a wondrous one.” Discuss how services like electricity and clean running water could be “wondrous.”
- In chapter 13, Michaela describes feeling “giddy with joy” at having so many choices, such as choosing which berries to put on her cereal. How can having choices be seen as a luxury?
- Why did Michaela and Mia beat their dolls? How was modeling good parenting helpful to Michaela and her sister?
- In chapter 14, the reader learns that Michaela is self-conscious about her “spots.” Mama suggests, “Sometimes it’s better to answer the child’s question so that he’ll understand there’s nothing at all wrong with you.” Do you agree with Mama’s advice? What would you say to a child who was struggling with a similar problem?

- Discuss how Nora’s kindness, described on page 94, helps Michaela to not feel like “Number Twenty-Seven.”
- On page 97, Michaela recalls that she and Mia “gained a certain degree of respect from our peers because we knew what dead people looked like.” How did their exposure to violence and brutality give the girls a deeper appreciation for their lives in America?
- On page 100, Michaela states, “I could make no sense of this, but felt immensely thankful for where fate had landed me.” Do you agree or disagree that fate was responsible for Michaela’s new life?



Such a happy day! Mia and me kissing Papa when our adoption was finalized.

CHAPTERS 16–20

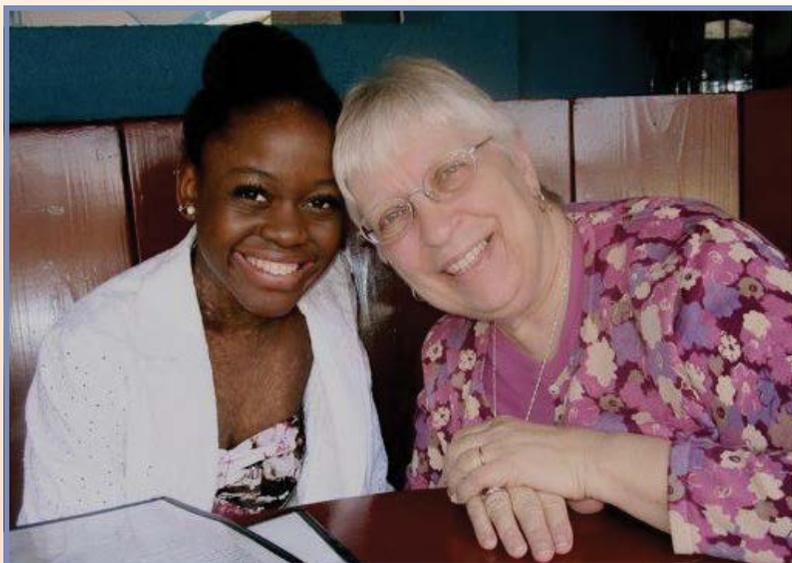
- What does Michaela’s canned-food drive reveal about her values? Why would she not have thought that hunger exists in America? Discuss Michaela’s realization that “giving something on my birthday felt a lot better than getting gifts.”
- In chapter 17, the reader learns that Michaela’s life in America was often marked by fears stemming from her experiences in Sierra Leone. Discuss how typically pleasant things to most Americans—such as dogs, monkeys, and fireworks—represented things to be feared for Michaela and her sisters.
- Chapter 18 focuses on Michaela’s encounters with bigotry, discrimination, and racial intolerance. How did these experiences contradict her initial assumptions about life in America? Discuss some of the presumptions that people made about Michaela as a dancer and how they are grounded in stereotypical thinking.
- How does Michaela reveal her determination in chapter 19? What did Mama’s friend mean when she stated, “To get into the best black sororities in college, you had to have skin lighter than the brown bags used in supermarkets.” Discuss the comments made about black girls’ physiques and how those comments are used to keep black dancers like Michaela out of the world of professional ballet.
- How does the advice from Heidi Cruz (p. 126) not only buoy Michaela’s spirits in the moment but leave a lasting impression for the future?
- Discuss the lessons that Michaela learns in chapter 20: “You don’t always get the role you hope for” and “If you don’t want the role you got, there’s always another dancer who does.” How can these lessons apply to daily life?

CHAPTERS 21–25

- How does Michaela show grit and perseverance after she is not selected to dance the role of Marie in *The Nutcracker*? Discuss the comment made by two adults on page 136: “This city isn’t ready for a black Marie.” What did the initial disappointment of not getting the role of Hoop teach Michaela about patience?
- How did the loss of Teddy affect Michaela, and how did knitting the scarf help her cope with grief?
- What does Michaela mean by “middle school angst”? Discuss Michaela’s need, at age eleven, to be popular over being a good friend to her sister Mia. Why do you think Michaela was embarrassed when Arthur Mitchell introduced her as “Miss Sierra Leone?” (p. 162)

CHAPTERS 26–30

- Describe Michaela’s relationship with her mother. How is the homemade tutu symbolic of Mama’s devotion to her children?
- What does the following statement reveal about Michaela’s character: “I could show the people in my small corner of the world that black girls can be ballerinas too”? (p. 179) How does Michaela’s hunger for learning serve her well?
- How do Michaela’s experiences in Sierra Leone help her to overcome challenges and cope with her anxiety?
- How does Michaela demonstrate her grit and determination in chapter 28? Although Michaela couldn’t win an award in Philadelphia, what non-tangible awards did she receive from the experience?
- How did dancing with the ABT prepare Michaela for the world of professional ballet? Michaela’s favorite saying is “To thine own self be true.” Discuss the meaning of this phrase and the importance of being honest with yourself.



Mama and me in Los Angeles for my appearance on *Dancing with the Stars*.

CHAPTERS 31–36

- How did being in the film *First Position* help Michaela’s aim to “make the world aware that black girls can be ballerinas too”? (p. 211)
- How is Michaela’s realization that she didn’t like the “grumpy, pushy, selfish girl who would sometimes appear” a sign of maturity?
- In the beginning of chapter 32, what does Michaela mean by growing up “as a human being”? Discuss Michaela’s insight about acting grown up and asking for advice.
- What does Mama mean by telling Michaela that a boy who really likes her will “let you soar and not try to clip your wings”?
- What does it mean to be an “activist for change,” and how does Michaela activate change? Why is she such a positive role model?
- Why did it take enormous courage and fortitude for Michaela to return to Africa? Discuss the line of text from page 230: “After I returned from speaking to those kids in South Africa, I found my voice.” How does Michaela use her frustration and anger with the lack of black ballerinas in classical ballet in a positive way?
- What is “integrity,” and how does Michaela demonstrate it in her dealings with the Dance Theatre of Harlem?

EPILOGUE

- Michaela writes that both her adoptive mother and the ballerina on the magazine cover “profoundly impacted” her life. Discuss the impact that each woman had on Michaela’s life. How are they similar—and different?
- How is *Taking Flight* ultimately a story of hope?
- What life lessons are you able to glean from reading Michaela’s remarkable memoir?

About the Authors

MICHAELA DEPRINCE studied on scholarship at the Rock School for Dance Education and the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School at the American Ballet Theatre. Michaela is now a professional ballerina. She was named the youngest principal dancer for the Dance Theatre of Harlem and is dancing with the Dutch National Ballet, one of the top classical ballet companies in the world. Michaela starred in the ballet documentary *First Position*, which was nominated for an NAACP Image Award. She has also appeared on *Dancing with the Stars*, *Good Morning America*, *Nightline*, the BBC, and news programs in the United States and internationally. In 2012, the *Huffington Post* named her one of their 18 Under 18: HuffPost Teen’s List of the Most Amazing People of the Year. You can visit her online at michaeladeprince.com or on Twitter at [@michdeprince](https://twitter.com/michdeprince).

ELAINE DEPRINCE is Michaela’s adoptive mother and co-author of *Taking Flight*. She is also the author of *Cry Bloody Murder: A Tale of Tainted Blood*, as well as a songwriter and owner of Sweet Mocha Music LLC, an Indie record label and music publishing business. A graduate of Rutgers University and former special education teacher, Elaine, after raising five sons, took a leave of absence from law school in 1999 to adopt a child from war-torn West Africa. She often says that the need was so great that she ended up with six West African daughters. Elaine lives in New York City with her husband and five youngest girls.

Common Core Correlations

The discussion questions in this guide can be correlated to the following Common Core State Standards:

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS:

○ CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1

Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

○ CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2

Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.

○ CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

○ CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

○ CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3

Analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

CRAFT AND STRUCTURE:

○ CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.4

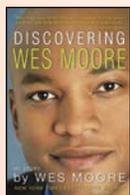
Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes.

INTEGRATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS:

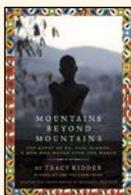
○ CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.8

Explain how an author uses reasons and evidence to support particular points in a text, identifying which reasons and evidence support which point(s).

Related Titles



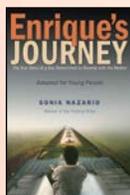
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Grades 7 & up



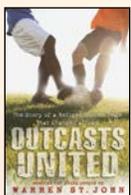
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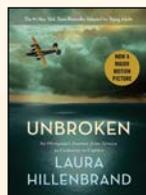
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Unbroken (The Young Adult Adaptation): *An Olympian's Journey from Airman to Castaway to Captive*
Grades 7 & up

This guide was created by Colleen Carroll, children's book author, writing teacher, curriculum writer/developer, literacy specialist, and education consultant.