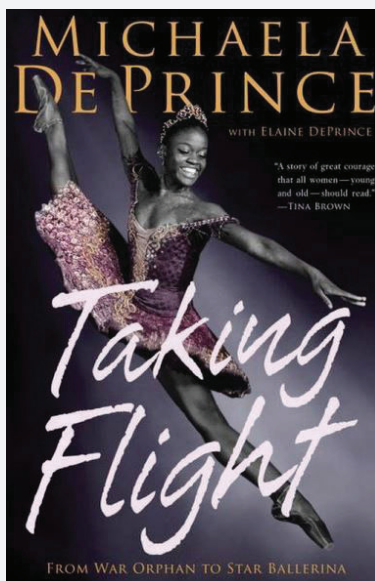


## First Opinion: Giving Hope through *Taking Flight*

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

Karen L. Ford



You just gotta ignite the light and let it shine. Just own the night like the Fourth of July... 'cause baby you're a firework, come on show 'em what you're worth. (Perry)

Remember those days when, for some reason, a song pops into your head and doesn't leave? Everywhere you go, the words keep playing over and over in your brain. Well I had one of those days with Katy Perry's "Firework" the whole time I read through *Taking Flight: From War Orphan to Star Ballerina*, and now I can't even think about Michaela DePrince without that song popping back into my head. For me, Michaela DePrince embodies the kind of grit and explosive talent that Katy Perry is speaking to in her song. It's that same strength of character, determination, and hope that Michaela DePrince shares with us in her life story, *Taking Flight*.

*Taking Flight* is the story of a girl who dared to remain true to her dream in spite of the many obstacles that continually blocked her way. Growing up in Sierra Leone during a civil war was not easy for Michaela, who was originally called Mabinity. The militant rebels killed her father, and shortly thereafter her mother died of starvation. Living with an uncle who resented her, she was often malnourished and mistreated. After being sold to an orphanage, she was

forced to flee for her life when the orphanage was bombed and fell into the rebel hands. Quite an arduous journey for a four-year-old girl!

In 1999, an American family adopted four-year-old Michaela. Clutching her only treasure, the tattered picture of a prima ballerina she ripped from a magazine while fleeing the orphanage, Michaela left war-torn Africa and moved a bit closer to the happiness that she longed for. With her new parents and family, she experienced love and nurturing support. They encouraged her love of dancing and spared no costs or burden to find the lessons and mentors to move her ever closer to making her dreams a reality.

*Taking Flight* is what some might call more adventure story than memoir, but one undeniable strength of the book is the ever present voice of a talented and very determined Michaela DePrince. The shorter chapters make for easy reading, but always reveal her personal thoughts or feelings through a distinct teenage voice. At times, you almost feel as if you are sitting in the room listening to Michaela tell her story. I think my favorite example of Michaela's voice is when she and her mother are discussing whether Michaela should commit to writing a memoir:

'I'm only seventeen . . . what could I possibly have to share' . . . then I realized that I had a responsibility. . . . I saw what I had to share. . . . I had been blessed with a hardy dose of hope . . . it enabled me to survive Africa . . . made me dare to dream . . . and helped that dream take flight. . . . Yes, I would share my hope.  
(DePrince 243)

We live in an age of uncertainty, negativity and often fear; in a sense, so did Michaela. *Taking Flight* is one of those special books that you want every kid, every teenager and, perhaps, every adult to read because it plants a seed of hope. Michaela wanted to be someone who would encourage young people to find a dream and not be afraid to follow it. She wanted to show others how to make talent a part of their dream. She wanted to challenge others to follow their dreams, to never be afraid of living, and to let those who love you into your life. Pretty good thinking for someone who wasn't yet twenty years old! Michaela DePrince is smart, fearless, and definitely a "firework on the Fourth of July" (Perry).

### **Works Cited**

Perry, Katy. "Firework (Official Lyrics)." *KatyPerry.com*. Web. <<http://www.katyperry.com/songs/firework/>>.

### **About the Author**

**Karen L. Ford**, a 1972 University of Kentucky alumni, has been an avid reader all her life. During her first teaching position at Holmes High School (Covington, Kentucky), she became a licensed

reading specialist and began to integrate young adult literature into her history courses in an effort to promote student literacy and make her history lessons more engaging. In 1989, she graduated from the University of Cincinnati with an EdD in curriculum and instruction and a focus in content literacy. She has worked in teacher education since then, first at the University of North Texas (Denton, Texas) and currently at Ball State University (Muncie, Indiana). While teaching reading courses for the department of elementary education, she continued to advocate for the use of young adult literature in subject matter courses. For a time she was actively involved in the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE (ALAN; a division of NCTE dedicated to adolescent literature). Currently she is the director of the master's program in secondary education and teaches graduate courses for the department of educational studies. Still an avid reader, her genre of choice continues to be young adult fiction.