

Summary of *Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina*

Characters

Primary Characters	• Misty Copeland
Secondary Characters	• Erica Copeland, her sister • Lindsey Copeland, her half-sister • Sylvia DelaCerna, her mother • Doug Copeland Jr., her brother • Chris Copeland, her brother • Harold Brown, her ex-stepfather • Robert DelaCerna, her ex-stepfather • Elizabeth Cantine • Cindy Bradley • Olu Evans • Kevin McKenzie

Setting

Misty Copeland's memoir recounts her journey to becoming the first Black female principal dancer with the American Ballet Theater. It largely takes place in Southern California, where Copeland was raised, and in New York City, where she rose to fame.

Summary

Prologue: The memoir begins the day of Copeland's debut as the star of a Stravinsky ballet at the American Ballet Theater (ABT), one of the most prestigious companies in the world. Copeland reflects on the importance of this performance for the Black community and young Black girls; she will be the first Black ballerina to perform the iconic role of the Firebird.

Chapters 1–2: Misty Copeland was born in Kansas City, Missouri, and grew up with six siblings in California. She first discovered her love of the stage at age five at a talent show performance with her siblings, later becoming enamored with dance after discovering the gymnast Nadia Comaneci. She choreographed her routines in her crowded house to pop and hip-hop songs. She found that performing was the perfect distraction from her busy home life, moving from house to house with her mother's boyfriends and husbands. Her classically trained drill team coach, Liz Cantine, introduced her to ballet when she was made the drill team captain in middle school. At first, Copeland disliked ballet and that she didn't understand it, but her teacher at the Boys & Girls Club, Cindy Bradley, convinced her to stick with it. Though she was older than the rest of her classmates—starting ballet at thirteen, rather than in preschool like many

ballerinas—she excelled despite her insecurities. Bradley taught at a dance school in a wealthy neighborhood and offered Copeland a scholarship to attend. Copeland grudgingly accepted; she preferred the drill team. However, the longer she studied ballet, the more apparent it became that she was a natural, and Copeland began to believe in her skill.

Pages 9–19 (skipped pages)—share with students:

- Misty was born in Missouri but lived in California for most of her childhood.
- Her family is multiracial. Misty's mother and father are both biracial—African American and white.
- As a child, Misty moves around frequently, as her mother breaks up with husbands/boyfriends and moves in with others.
- Misty has five siblings.
- Misty is an anxious, quiet, introverted child who strives to be perfect in everything she does.

Chapters 3–4: Copeland's siblings continued to jump from house to house with their mother's new partners until their mother lost her job and they moved into a motel with her boyfriend. When her mother told her it was too difficult to continue to commute to ballet classes, her teacher, Cindy, asked that Copeland move in with her to continue her studies, and her mother agreed. While living with the Bradleys, Copeland refined her dancing and began to watch American Ballet Theater recordings. She visited her family on weekends, but her mother grew irritated with the way Copeland began to judge their unhealthy eating habits. Increasingly, she began to perform on weekends, making it difficult to continue to visit. At fourteen, she starred in Debbie Allen's *The Chocolate Nutcracker*, an all-Black production of *The Nutcracker*. She left the drill team to focus on ballet and later won a competition that introduced her to Gerald Arpino, a famous artistic director.

Pages 75–89 and 97–99 (skipped pages)—share with students:

- Misty enjoys living with Cindy, her husband, and her son, and begins to feel like part of their family.
- Misty's mother feels uncomfortable and upset with the way that Misty is changing while living with Cindy's family and thinks that Cindy is overstepping.
- Misty continues to receive accolades for her ballet performances and begins to get attention from major dance companies that want her to come study with them.

Chapters 5–6: At fifteen, Misty attended the summer program with the San Francisco Ballet, one of the most prestigious in America, after being rejected only by the New York City Ballet, likely because she was Black. Though they invited her to stay on for the year to continue her studies, she returned home, at Cindy and her mother's guidance. When her mother decided that it was best for her to move back into the motel and away from Cindy's influence, Copeland attempted to

emancipate herself, but eventually withdrew her petition after the stress of Cindy and her mother's fighting. She enrolled in the Lauridsen Ballet Centre, and her mother found an apartment for the family to live in, without a boyfriend.

Pages 100–114 (skipped pages)—share with students:

- Misty participates in a summer ballet intensive in San Francisco, where she makes many friends, develops her craft, and receives significant positive feedback.
- Misty is offered a full-year scholarship to study with the San Francisco Ballet Company, but she does not accept it because both Cindy and her mother feel she needs to be closer to home.
- When Misty returns home at the end of the summer, the conflict between her mother and Cindy has intensified.

Chapter 7: The following year, Copeland attended the summer program at ABT, fulfilling a dream of hers. At the end of the program, ABT offered her a spot in the training academy, and this time, her mother said it was up to her. Deciding to finish school first, she told them she would return the next year, which she did. While with ABT, Copeland traveled around the world for performances, meeting her close friend Leyla Fayyaz. At nineteen, she was promoted to the corps de ballet, the company's chorus, her next step to becoming a principal dancer or a soloist. The corps was far more competitive than the Studio Company, and Copeland had to try harder to prove herself. She also felt far more apart from them than she had with the dancers in the Studio Company, feeling left out due to her Blackness and her working-class background. Even during off weeks, called layoffs, Copeland attended classes and other engagements to hone her technique. There are no auditions within ABT; instead, dancers are selected to help with the creation process and then observed as the group learns the choreography. A year into her contract at ABT, Copeland discovered she had a stress fracture in her back. Just after, she was offered the role of Clara in *The Nutcracker* that year, but had to turn it down to recover. The changes in her body that would take effect during her twelve months of rest would make it so that she was too old to play Clara ever again.

Pages 136–154 (skipped pages)—share with students:

- Misty arrives in New York to complete her summer intensive with the American Ballet Theater. While living in New York, Misty meets her idol, Paloma Herrera, and though she is initially disappointed by Herrera seeming aloof, she marks this as the beginning of a longtime friendship.
- Misty makes many friends at ABT, has a successful summer, and is invited to join the Studio Company. However, she decides to return home to finish high school and be with her family, and ABT agrees to reserve a spot for her after she graduates.
- Misty returns to New York and ABT after completing high school. She completes an apprenticeship with the Studio Company, travels abroad to perform in China, and is

quickly promoted to the corps de ballet.

Chapter 8: Copeland returned to San Pedro to recuperate, cared for by her mother. During a routine physical in New York, she learned that at nineteen, it was time to accelerate into puberty on birth control pills; she then had her first period and gained ten pounds, becoming a different dancer than before and growing insecure. ABT told her she needed to "lengthen," a euphemism for losing weight in the ballet community, to maintain a classical line. As a form of rebellion, she began to binge eat. Eventually, she learned how to balance her diet, cutting out sugars, flour, salt, and red meat. After seeing how hard Copeland pushed herself to prove she didn't need to lose weight, ABT stopped telling her to lengthen, and she realized that her curves are a part of who she is as a dancer, not something she needed to lose.

Chapter 9: While rehearsing with the rest of the corps for *Swan Lake*, a role where one needs to be perfectly in sync with the rest of the corps, whispers of racism began to emerge. Despite her talent, many thought the color of her skin made her stand out in a performance meant to be about conformity. *The New York Times* released an article about numerous Black dancers shut out of the New York City Ballet, ABT, and others due to their skin color; despite being saddened by it, Copeland also felt affirmed by the stories. She felt starkly alone at ABT at times, with white ballerinas constantly failing to understand her experience or care. She made friends with the Black boys who came through the company, especially Eric Underwood, bonding over their shared experiences. She befriended Victoria Rowell, the ballerina-turned-actress, and Susan Fales-Hill, a writer who was also a socialite, and was mentored by these two influential Black women. Despite these relationships, she continued to feel alone at ABT due to her Blackness and the loss of her classical body. She met Arthur Mitchell, the co-founder of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, the first Black classical ballet company, and he offered her a soloist contract; he had noticed that ABT was taking a toll on her. Though she badly wanted to join the company, she decided that to do so would be to run from her problems as her mother did.

Chapters 10–11: Copeland found comfort in the anonymity of New York City while struggling at ABT. While out clubbing with Leyla, she met her first boyfriend and gained confidence in her body. He helped her push for what she deserved at ABT, meeting with Kevin McKenzie, the artistic director. As she became more confident in her role at ABT and rose through the ranks, she decided it was time to meet her biological father. Her younger brother, Doug Jr., had met him when they were teens, and he accompanied her to Wisconsin to meet him. She grew close with his family and returned to ABT with a renewed drive to become the first Black female soloist in twenty years. While on break from ABT, Copeland filmed a music video for Prince and later went on tour with him to Europe to perform, meeting Erykah Badu and Rachel McAdams. She later went on tour with him in the US as well, learning to love the feeling of being the principal dancer in those shows.

Pages 188–202 and 212–228 (skipped pages)—share with students:

- Misty starts dating a man named Olu, who encourages her to pursue her dreams.
- Misty begins to feel more confident in herself and secure in her place in the ABT company.
- Famous musician Prince invites Misty to perform with him, and they develop a bond as they continue to work together over several years. Copeland writes, "Working with Prince helped me to become a whole artist" (pp. 220–221).
- Misty continues to find support and inspiration from older Black women in the arts.

Chapter 12: Copeland met Raven Wilkinson, a Black ballerina who moved to Holland to escape the threats of the Ku Klux Klan when she danced with the Ballet Russe, and they became close friends. In 2007, she was selected to be one of two dancers representing ABT in the famous Erik Bruhn Competition. Though they did not win, ABT asked her to be a soloist a few weeks after returning. She was honored by the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, where she was first introduced to ballet.

Chapter 13: As Copeland became more famous, she experienced harsh criticism—she was accused of not belonging in the community and misrepresenting ballet in her performances with Prince. In 2011, the ABT told her to prepare for the role of the Firebird, but she would not learn until later, while with the Dance Theater of Harlem, that she would be one of two principal dancers to dance the part. The entire company was overcome with emotion over the significance of Copeland's casting. She first performed the role to critical acclaim in Orange County, close to home and in front of her family. Just six months before her debut as the Firebird at the Met, she began to feel immense pain in her shin while also rehearsing for another grueling role. She was pushing herself to the limit "for the little brown girls." The night of her debut at the Met, she knew that the pain would overtake her dancing after the performance. Her family, mentors, friends, and strangers who had never seen a ballet before were in the audience for this momentous event, and she received effusive praise from nearly everyone, from family and friends to critics. Days after the performance, however, the pain began to settle in. She discovered that she had six stress fractures in her tibia and sat out the rest of the season.

Pages 234–237 (skipped pages)—share with students:

- Copeland responds to the criticism she has received and explains how she has learned to block out the judgment of others by continuing to practice and focus on the young dancers of color who are counting on her success.

Chapter 14: Copeland had surgery in 2012, months after her first, and only, performance as the Firebird. Five months after her surgery and intense physical therapy, she began rehearsal once more with ABT, and two months after that, she performed in *Don Quixote*, but performed below her ability. Despite this, she kept pushing herself hard and refused to back down from her injury.

She worked harder on her goal to share ballet with those who do not have access to it or may not be aware of it at all. She began a program that formalized her rise in ballet, sending experienced dancers from ABT to Boys & Girls Clubs across the country to scout for new talent and offer them opportunities to hone their technique and learn dance history. Copeland would go on to become a soloist at twenty-four, one of only a few Black female principals with ABT in history.

Pages 248–259 (skipped pages)—share with students:

- Misty finds out that she has stress fractures in her shin, which require her to drop out of the rest of her performances so she can have surgery.
- This is very emotionally challenging for Misty, who worries about what this injury will mean for her future as a dancer.
- She returns to dancing with ABT, but her recovery is slow and takes a lot of hard work.