THE STORY OF A BOY
SEARCHING FOR A NEW HOME
ON A PAINFUL JOURNEY ABOARD

THE ORPHAN

Compare and contrast In “The Orphan Train” and “Magnificent Michaela,” you will read about the extraordinary journeys of two young people. As you read, look for similarities and differences in their experiences.
It was March 1926. Lee was 8. He was on a train heading west. His two younger brothers, Gerald and Leo, were with him. So were 47 other kids who had no parents or whose parents could not care for them. A matron was in charge of the kids. Her job was to keep them safe.

Lee’s mom had died. His dad was out of work and could not care for his kids. For two years, Lee had lived in a New York City orphanage. It was an awful place. There was never enough to eat. Fights broke out.

Now, Lee and his brothers were being sent west to find new homes. “This is an orphan train,” the matron told Lee. “You’re very lucky to be on it.”

Lee didn’t think so. The other kids might have been ready for new homes. But Lee missed his dad, who had come to the train station to see them off. With tears in his eyes, his dad had given Lee a pink envelope with his address on it and told him to write. Lee was sure his dad wanted them back.

On the train, Lee thought of how glad his dad would be when the boys came back to him.

**Children on the Streets**

The orphan-train program began in 1854. At the time, thousands of kids lived in orphanages and on the streets in New York and other eastern cities. Like Lee, many of these kids were not, in fact, orphans. Their parents were alive but could not care for them.

City life was hard for the poor. Many were recent immigrants from Europe. They worked long hours for low pay. When a parent lost a job or got sick, there was often nowhere to turn for help. Some kids went to orphanages. Others wound up on the streets. They begged and stole to survive. Many people saw these “street urchins” as dangerous pests.

But others wanted to help. In 1853, Charles Loring Brace founded the Children’s Aid Society. This group gave food, shelter, and schooling to New York City’s abandoned kids. Brace came to believe that the dirt and crowds of city life were unhealthy for kids. He had read of a program in Europe in which poor kids were sent to the countryside to find good homes. He thought a similar idea might work in the U.S. At the time, thousands of Americans were heading to the frontier to start new lives as farmers and ranchers. Brace believed that these farm families could care for needy kids. And what better way to bring kids to new towns than on America’s new cross-country railroad system?

Brace called his plan “placing out.” Trains
would bring groups of kids to towns in the West. Residents would gather to pick a child.

In 1854, Brace tested his plan with 46 kids. They went to Michigan with two chaperones. By the end of the trip, every child had a new home. Soon, thousands of kids were riding orphan trains each year.

**Pink Envelope**

Most kids were told only a night or two in advance that they would be going west. They were given a bath and new clothes. Lee and his brothers were dressed up in knickers, neckties, and suit jackets. Girls wore new dresses. Matrons warned the kids to keep their clothes neat. That was not easy on a train trip that could last a week or more.

That first night, Lee took off his jacket. He laid it out neatly. He checked to make sure the envelope his dad had given him was safe in the pocket. It was. But when he woke up, the envelope was gone. Lee searched for it. He called the matron for help. She told him to get back in his seat. “Where you’re going, you won’t be needing that envelope,” she said. “You must forget it.”

Lee knew she had taken it; she wanted him to forget about his dad. Lee felt helpless. First his mom had died. Then he’d spent two years at an orphanage. Now he’d lost his only link to his dad. “Nights on that train, I’d lie there with tears rolling down my cheeks,” Lee later said, “my heart breaking again and again. How had I lost so much?”

**Finding a Home**

Even before an orphan train set off, the Children’s Aid Society was working to line up families in towns along the route. Notices of “homes wanted for children” ran in newspapers. When the train stopped in a town, the matrons led the kids to a gathering place, such as a church or hotel. Then people would line up to meet the kids. Families would make their choices. Kids who weren’t picked got back on the train. They did this again and again until someone chose them.

Many of these trips ended well. Needy kids found good homes. But some families just wanted free farm labor or someone to clean the house. Agents for the Children’s Aid Society were supposed to keep track of every child. That way, they could get kids out of bad
situations. But the system failed sometimes. Some kids were treated poorly. Some ran away.

**The Journey Ends**

At first, Lee’s trip seemed to be heading that way. After several stops, half the kids had been picked—but not Lee. In one town, a farmer felt Lee’s muscles and stuck his hand in Lee’s mouth to feel his teeth. It made Lee angry.

At the end of a grueling week, the train stopped in Clarksville, Texas. One couple chose Gerald. Another chose Leo. They took Lee too, but after a few days, they decided Leo was all they could handle. Next, Lee lived with an elderly couple. But that didn’t last either.

Then Lee met Ben and Ollie Nailling. At their home, he was astonished to have his own bedroom. Still, he did not speak to them the first day. The next morning, he woke up to the smell of biscuits, ham, bacon, eggs, and potatoes. It was the most food he had ever seen at one time.

After breakfast, the Naillings took Lee to town. They stopped at each house along the way. Each time, they introduced Lee as their “new son.” Lee’s plans to run away faded.

**Riding the Train**

The last orphan train left New York in 1929. By then, there were new programs to help the poor. Fewer kids wound up on the streets.

Nearly 200,000 kids rode the orphan trains. There are no studies to show what happened to them. Many did go on to lead happy lives. Others suffered.

Lee never reunited with his dad. But life with the Naillings was good. Lee’s brothers lived nearby. He saw them often. He went to college. He married and became a father, a grandfather, and a great-grandfather.

“I’ve always felt that I had a guardian angel watching over me,” said Lee, who died in 2001. “When I got off that train in Texas, I was a bitterly unhappy little boy. The good Lord saw to it that I ended up with the Naillings. That was where I belonged.”

What do Lee’s and Michaela’s experiences have in common? What wisdom do you think they could share with other orphans? Send two to three paragraphs to “Orphan Train Contest” by Jan. 15, 2014. Ten winners will each receive a copy of *Home of the Brave* by Katherine Applegate. See page 2 for details.

**WRITE TO WIN**

**FIND AN ACTIVITY ONLINE!**
Magnificent Michaela
Orphaned by a war, this amazing teen made her dream come true

Michaela DePrince can twirl and leap in the air. She wears lovely tutus and tiaras. In July 2012, she became a professional ballet dancer. It was a dream come true.

But Michaela’s life was not always happy. She was born during a civil war in Sierra Leone, a country in Africa. When she was 3, soldiers killed her dad. Then her mom starved to death.

Michaela was sent to an orphanage. The workers there teased her because she has a condition that turns patches of her skin white. They thought she was the least likely to be adopted out of all 27 kids there. So they called her “Number 27.”

Michaela’s best friend, Mia, was “Number 26.” The two girls shared a sleeping mat. When Michaela had nightmares, Mia would tell her stories. The friends dreamed that one day they would be adopted and have a mom who loved them.

One day, Michaela was playing in the yard. A page from a magazine blew against the fence. On it was a photo of a beautiful ballerina. Michaela hoped that one day she’d be as happy as the dancer.

She kept the photo.

When Michaela was 4, a couple from New Jersey decided to adopt Mia. The orphanage workers told the couple that no one would ever want Michaela. The couple proved them wrong. They adopted both girls.

Michaela’s new parents signed her up for dance classes. She has been dancing ever since. At times, it’s been hard.

When Michaela was 13, she lived far from home at a ballet boarding school. She practiced 6 to 10 hours a day, sometimes 7 days a week. Her work paid off. She earned scholarships to ballet school. She has won competitions.

Now the girl who once dreamed about a magazine photo appears in magazines herself. She was on Dancing With the Stars. And she was in an award-winning movie, First Position. In August 2012, she joined the prestigious Dance Theatre of Harlem in New York City.

Michaela hopes to start a ballet school in Sierra Leone one day.

“My life is proof that no matter what situation you’re in,” she says, “as long as you have a supportive family, you can achieve anything.” —Blair Rainsford