WALTER DEAN MYERS

Walter Dean Myers is a pioneer of young adult fiction. His novels about urban teens and the challenges they face have won him both a devoted readership and dozens of book awards. His eighty-plus titles include *Monster*, *Scorpions*, and a memoir of his own youth, *Bad Boy*. Once thought to have been aimed at the so-called "at-risk" reader, Myers's books have stood the test of time as "poignant, tough stories for and about kids who don't appear in most storybooks," asserted Sue Corbett in a Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service report. "Children whose fathers are absent or jailed. Children who share playgrounds with drug dealers and gangs. Teens struggling to maintain their dignity while living with poverty, violence and fear."

Raised by another family

Born in 1937, Myers's own early life was marked by challenges, but they were those of a different era. He was born in the midst of the Great Depression (1929–41), and spent the first few years of his life in a hardscrabble West Virginia town called Martinsburg. It was about ten miles away from the former plantation on which his ancestors had once toiled as slaves. His family was extremely poor, and his mother died when he was a toddler, while giving birth to another child. A married woman who had been a friend of his mother's, Florence Dean, adopted him. Such informal adoptions were not unusual during the era. Though he was christened Walter Milton Myers, he later substituted "Dean" for his middle name in honor of the foster family who raised him.

The Deans soon moved to New York City and settled in Harlem, the northern Manhattan neighborhood that was the center of black life in the city. His foster father, Herbert, worked as a janitor and also in factories, often holding down two jobs to make ends meet. Both he and his wife had little formal schooling, but Florence had taught herself to read, and she then taught her adopted son by letting him read the *True Romance* magazine stories she liked. He progressed to reading comic books, but a teacher discovered him with one in class at P.S. 125 one day. "She grabbed my comic book and tore it up," Myers recalled on a biography that appeared on the Scholastic Web site. "I was really upset, but then she brought in a pile of books from her own library. That was the best thing that ever happened to me." He became a bookworm, and regularly checked books out of his local library—but he carried them home in a paper bag so that other kids would not tease him.

"I'm not interested in building ideal families in my books. I'm more attracted to reading about poorer people, and I'm more attracted to writing about them as well."

A caring community

Although Harlem would later become a violent, drug-troubled area, it was a far more balanced community when Myers was growing up there. Because neighborhoods elsewhere were not welcoming to African Americans, Harlem was home to black judges, doctors, and other professionals, as well as to ordinary working families. Myers even lived near the poet Langston Hughes (1902–1967). Hughes was one of the leading names of the Harlem Renaissance, the flourishing of African American music, literature, and other forms of art that began in the 1920s. Myers once spied the famous writer sitting on his front steps "drinking beer, but I didn't think much of him," he told Jennifer M. Brown in a *Publishers Weekly* interview. "He didn't fit my stereotype of what serious writers should be. He wasn't writing about Venice."

Major Works by Myers

Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff (novel), Viking Press, 1975.
Mojo and the Russians (novel), Viking Press, 1977.
Hoops (novel), Delacorte Press, 1981.
Fallen Angels (novel), Scholastic, 1988.
The Great Migration: An American Story (poems; paintings by Jacob Lawrence), HarperCollins, 1993.
Malcolm X: By Any Means Necessary (biography), Scholastic, 1993.
The Glory Field (novel), Scholastic, 1994.
Slam! (novel), Scholastic, 1996.
Harlem: A Poem, illustrated by Christopher Myers, Scholastic, 1997.
Amistad: A Long Road to Freedom (nonfiction), Dutton, 1998.
At Her Majesty's Request: An African Princess in Victorian England (nonfiction), Scholastic, 1999.
Monster (novel; illustrated by Christopher Myers), HarperCollins, 1999.
145th Street: Short Stories, Delacorte Press, 2000.
The Blues of Flats Brown (picture book; illustrated by Nina Laden), Holiday House, 2000.
Bad Boy: A Memoir, HarperCollins, 2001.
Handbook for Boys (novel), HarperCollins, 2002.

Myers retreated into books in part because he suffered from a speech impediment. When other kids made fun of him, he sometimes hit them. One teacher realized he could read aloud in class with little difficulty if he was reading words that he had written himself, and encouraged him to write more. Another teacher found a speech therapist for Myers, and also channeled the child's bossy nature into a role as the class leader. "He gave me permission to be a bright kid, permission to be smart," a *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* article by Jim Higgins quoted Myers as saying.

During his teens Myers became disillusioned over his lot in life. He continued to get into trouble at school, and realized that not many avenues would be open to him once he left high school. Even though he was a bright student, he knew there were few resources available for blacks. "My folks couldn't send me to even a

free college," he told Amanda Smith in *Publishers Weekly*. "There were days when I didn't have clothing to wear to high school, and I just didn't go." He dropped out of Stuyvesant High School, and, on his seventeenth birthday in 1954, he enlisted in the Army. He served three years and returned to New York City to take a series of low-paying jobs. He worked in the post office, as a messenger, and as a factory interviewer for the New York State Bureau of Labor.

Entered writing contest

Myers had been writing since his school days, and had even won awards for his work. He had never thought that his short stories could provide a career for him, but in the 1960s he began to submit his work to magazines. He also found freelance work for publications like the *National Enquirer*. In 1968 he entered and won a competition sponsored by the Council on Interracial Books for Children for African-American writers. His winning entry became a picture book, *Where Does the Day Go?* Its simple, charming plot involves a walk in the park led by a kindly African American dad; he takes along several children from different ethnic backgrounds, and all offer their various ideas about the sun, moon, and passage of time.

In the early 1970s Myers wrote several other picture books for young readers, including *The Dragon Takes a Wife* and *How Mr. Monkey Saw the Whole World*. He was hired at the Bobbs-Merrill publishing house, and spent seven years there learning the book business from the editorial side. He went on to earn a college degree from Empire State College. His first novel for teens, *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff*, was published in 1975. It came about entirely by accident, thanks to a short story he had submitted to his agent, who sent it on to an editor. The editor assumed it was a chapter in a book, and when she ran into Myers at a party she asked how the rest of the project was going. As he recalled in the interview with Smith, "I said, 'It goes like this,' and I made it up on the spot. She offered me a contract."

Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff tells the story of the summer when Francis, a.k.a. "Stuff," moves to 116 th Street in Harlem. He and his friends, Clyde and Sam, shoot baskets and try to steer clear of the dangers on the streets. The book became a classic of young adult fiction, praised by readers for its humor, and taught in schools for its message about self-esteem and community. Myers found a steady market for his novels after that, and began publishing one every year. His 1979 title *The Young Landlords*, about a group of teens who are given an apartment building to manage on their own, was the first of his works to win a Coretta Scott King Award from the American Library Association. The annual honor is given to the top book for young readers by an African American author.

Teen titles won devoted audience

Myers would win the King award several more times for other books. *Motown and Didi: A Love Story* was the next to earn the honor. The 1985 novel is set in Harlem, where Didi and her boyfriend, Motown, fall in love. He wants to find a good job, while Didi hopes to go to college, but their more immediate goal is to keep her brother out of trouble and away from the local drug kingpin.

Four years later, Myers won again for *Fallen Angels*, about a Harlem teen who enlists in the Army during the Vietnam War (1954–75). Myers called upon his own recollections of military service to write it, but the work was really written in honor of his younger brother, Sonny, who followed in Myers's footsteps and enlisted in the Army in 1968. Sonny was sent to Southeast Asia at the height of American involvement in the Vietnam conflict, and was killed in combat on his first day. Like most of Myers's works, it became a staple on school and public library bookshelves. Years later, he said the best letter he ever received from a reader was from a young man who had wanted to enlist in the military because of the Persian Gulf War in 1991. "He was so excited he couldn't wait until he turned 17 to join up," Myers recalled in the interview with Smith. "He read my book and changed his mind."

Scorpions, which also appeared in 1988, recounts the story of Jamal, a middle-schooler who unwisely accepts a gun when an older teen asks him to hold onto it for him. The plot was inspired by a true-life tale: Myers and his sons once played ball in their neighborhood park with another kid, who later disappeared. They later learned he was involved in a shooting. *Somewhere in the Darkness*, which won the King award in 1993, is a characteristic Myers tale, both in its challenging fictional premise and in the compelling story the author weaves around it. This novel involves Jimmy Little, who lives in Harlem with his foster family. His father, Crab, has just been released from prison, and arrives to take Jimmy on a road trip. On their journey down South, Jimmy begins to realize his father is fatally ill and wants to clear his name of the crime that sent him to prison.

Collector of vintage images

Myers has written historical fiction as well as his contemporary novels for young adults. He has also written poetry and compiled photo albums that feature images of African American families over the generations. Myers collects these historical photos from rare book dealers and antiques stores during his book tours across the United States. One of these works is *One More River to Cross: An African-American Photograph Album*, which depicts families' journeys, from the slavery era to the migration to northern cities in the early years of the twentieth century. The idea for these books, Myers said, came when he was teaching writing to youngsters in a Jersey City elementary school near his home. As an assignment, he had them bring in images of their grandparents when they were children. "The kids loved the photographs," he explained to

Brown. "They wanted to learn why their grandparents would wear those kinds [of] clothes, shoes, what kind of house they lived in."

Myers has worked with his son, Christopher, who illustrated *Harlem: A Poem*, another Coretta Scott King award-winner. His 1999 novel *Monster* won that award, as well as the Michael L. Printz Award, another honor from the American Library Association. *Monster* recounts the terrible chain of events that lands sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon on trial for murder. Steve, who comes from a stable household and had hoped to become a filmmaker, was asked by some tougher kids in his neighborhood to serve as lookout during a store robbery. The owner is killed, and the teens are arrested. Myers spares no detail when describing Steve's fear of being preyed upon by the veteran teen criminals with whom he is housed. Patty Campbell, in a review for *Horn Book,* compared Myers's latest work to the classics *Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger, S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders,* and others. She asserted that Myers's "stunning new novel ... joins these landmark books. Looking backward, *Monster* is the peak achievement of a career that has paralleled the growth of the genre."

Myers has written dozens of books over the years, including biographies of Malcolm X (1925–1965) and Muhammad Ali (1942–). He finally chronicled his own fascinating life story in *Bad Boy: A Memoir*, which appeared in 2002. He dedicated it to the sixth-grade teacher who found him professional help for his speech difficulty. Myers writes of his teen years in Harlem, and his flirtations with the criminal element, but also details his path to becoming a successful author. His story is all the more remarkable when he reveals that his foster father never learned to read—a discovery Myers made only after the man died. "Sometimes my father would have me read something to him," Myers wrote in his autobiography, "telling me it was because of his weak eyes." Many years later, when his father was dying, Myers gave him a book on which he and his son had collaborated, but his father never commented on it. "After his death, I went through his papers and saw the childlike scrawl that he used to fill out forms, and the misunderstandings he had of those forms.... Other correspondence indicated that his business affairs were being supervised by a friend at his job. It was then I realized that he had never commented on any of my books because he couldn't read them"

Who is Walter Dean Myers

Born in Marinsburg, West Virginia in 1937, Walter Dean Myers is one of the premier authors of books for children. His mother died very early in his life–an event that propelled him into experiences that later influenced him to write. It was difficult for Myers' father to raise eight children alone, and eventually, a nearby couple, Herbert and Florence Dean, took in three-year old Walter and moved to Harlem, New York. "Harlem became my home and the place where my first impressions of the world were set," says Myers.

As a child, Myers went to school in his neighborhood and attended bible school almost every day of the week. Myers had a speech impediment which made communicating difficult for him, and often found himself in fights, defending himself against kids who taunted him. After a while, one of this teachers suggested to his class that they could write something to read aloud. Young Myers began writing poetry to give voice to his thoughts and feelings, and at age sixteen, won a prize in an essay contest and a set of encyclopedias for a long narrative poem. Later, his father bought him a used typewriter, which he used to churn out a seemingly endless stream of stories.

Along with the many things he was discovering about himself, Myers was also learning how to survive. One day he had the courage to break up a fight between three gang members and a kid who had just moved into the neighborhood. He became a marked man–and felt his life was in danger.

For example, once, he was sitting in the tree in Morningside Park, across from the building he lived in, reading O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, when some gang members spotted him and surrounded the tree. Myers jumped to the ground, flashed a stiletto in order to fend them off, and made a mad dash for his building. He escaped, but he never forgot the incident. Later he enlisted in the army, got married, had a child, went through a turbulent creative struggle, got divorced, got married again–and during all of this, kept writing, whether his work pleased him or not.

But Walter Dean Myers' life is not the story of a tormented, embittered artist. Rather it is the story of a gifted, complex person committed to sharing that gift with young readers. Myers' stories and novels paint a powerful picture of the pressures of growing up on big city streets. Yet, he emphasizes close relationships, trust, and personal growth.

It seems that one of Myers' greatest struggles was to understand what type of writer he wanted to be. As the years passed and his books became more and more popular, Walter Dean Myers came to believe that his work filled a void for African American youths who yearned for positive reading experiences and role models. He frequently writes about children who share similar economic and ethnic situations with his own childhood. "But my situation as a parent did not mirror that of my childhood," he says. "While my parents were quite poor, my children are thoroughly entrenched in the middle class experience. To them African prints go well with designer jeans, pizzas go down easier to a reggae beat, and shopping malls are an unmistakable part of their culture."

It is clear that Myers' understanding of both the world he was raised in and the world of his children allows him to bring an authority to his work that resonates with his young readers. It is one of many attributes that has made him one of the most important children's and young adult authors writing today. Among his many honors are two Newbery Honor books for *Scorpions* and *Somewhere in the Darkness*. He is also a two-time recipient of the Coretta Scott King Award for *Now Is Your Time!* and *Fallen Angels*. In addition, Myers has received the Margaret A. Edwards Award for his contribution to young adult literature.

Myers' novel, *Darnell Rock Reporting*, is a warm and humorous story about thirteen-year-old Darnell Rock–a boy who works on his school newspaper. The book is sure to appeal to reluctant readers. Myers' recent picture book, *How Mr. Monkey Saw the Whole World,* is a cautionary fable about a watchful monkey who sees that a greedy buzzard gets his comeuppance.

Myer's *145th Street: Short Stories* (A *Boston Globe-Horn Book* Honor Book) captures the heartbeat of one memorable block in Harlem, New York. These powerful, often gripping stories range from humor and celebration to terror and grief.

Recently, Myers was named the 2012 National Ambassador for Young People's Literature. The National Ambassador for Young People's Literature raises national awareness of the importance of young people's literature as it relates to lifelong literacy, education and the development and betterment of the lives of young people.

Walter Dean Myers, the father of three grown children, lives with his wife in Jersey City, New Jersey.

Walter Dean Myers Talks to Scholastic News Online

By Donna Carrillo

Q: How come you know so much about bullying?
Myers: In talking to young people who are incarcerated, I find many of them are bullied as kids. When they got older they turned around and become bullies themselves. Many kids in detention centers, they are emotionally young. When I saw that, I saw how prevalent it was.

Q: Were your children ever bullied? What did you tell them when it happened?
Myers: My son Christopher was quite young when he went to school. In sixth grade he was only about 10. That was very difficult. Although there was not that much of a physical difference, there was an age difference. I found out that the boy doing the bullying was considerably older. I told my son it was not his fault, he was not lacking.

Q: Do you think it's up to parents to stop their kids from being bullies, or should schools have some responsibility too?
Myers: Schools have to have policies that state that the bullies cannot get away with it. They have to have a policies that there will be no bullying in the school. One reason is to put the onus on the bully. Also, it allows other kids a device to speak up when they see it. There are some schools around the country that have almost no bullying at all because they have experienced bullying and they have ways to stop it. Understand it has to be an announced policy. Many schools will just say, let's see if it happens again. A school HAS to have a clear and definite no-bullying policy.

Q: We're an 8th grade class from Niagara Falls, NY. We have been reading *145th Street Short Stories,* and it's very realistic. What inspired you to write the book?
Myers: I like that street very much. I hang out on that street. I like the small shops and the people and I wanted to give them a voice. Some of the stories are actually true stories that I remembered from growing up in Harlem. I reproduced the entire neighborhood.

Q: Where do you get your ideas for your books?
Myers: Whatever bothers me becomes an idea for a book. Example: bullying. I see that so much so often. I go to juvenile detention centers and I see the young people in juvenile detention centers, so I write about those kids. Whatever I see inspires me. When I see things I like — like 145th Street, — that becomes an idea for a book

Q: Are you working on any new books right now?
Myers: I'm always working on a new book. I'm working on one non-fiction, one fiction. The non-fiction is about black soldiers in WW1. The fiction book is about a young man in the Harlem renaissance in the 1920s.

Q:Have you ever been bullied?
Myers: No. I've never been bullied. I was always big kid, so people did not want to mess with me very much. I also played sports. What happens is that kids are bullied very often by kids who don't have a lot of friends, who don't belong to groups. If you belong to sports groups, that keeps bullies away.

Q: How has the Internet changed bullying?
Meyers: One of the things the Internet has done that is really good, it takes the bullying out of the idea. People know about it now. They know how much it is done. I did a radio show, and to speak about it on the radio, lit up many, many people who called to say that they were victims of bullying. Same thing with the Internet. People are openly talking about it and that's good.

Q: Was your son Christopher actually bullied when he was so young? How did he deal with it?
Myers: One thing, he knew that I supported him. I was not going to look at him and tell him that he was going to have to fight better. I was on his side. I was supporting him. I would do anything to not allow him to be bullied.

Q: What makes a person a bully?
Myers: Number one, they think they can get away with it. And they'll do it. Next, the kid's somehow not so sure about himself. He does not feel good about himself. To make himself feel better, he picks on other kids.

Q: Do you think of yourself as an African-American writer or just a writer? I was wondering, because it seems like most of your books are about African-American characters. Myers: I think of myself as sometimes an African-American writer and sometimes a writer. When I do a book about Antarctica, or poetry, it has nothing to do with being an African American. What happens is that I think about what characters should I put in this subject. I just happen to choose African American characters because I am African American. I also like to see African Americans celebrated.

Q: How many books have you written?
Myers: I've written 90, but only published 85. The other five? They stink. Nothing going to happen with them.

Q: Do you enjoy doing research for your books?
Myers: I love doing research for books. I love learning something new. I do research all the time. I'm going to London Friday and when I go to London, I will do research. Wherever I go — I went to Prague this summer — I did research on how they play basketball there. In London, I'm researching about a dancer, Jubba, who went to London in 1850. I'm very much interested in what happened to him after he went to London. I'm also researching Irish children from England who came to American and the West Indies in the 18th century.

Q: Were there any books that you especially enjoyed writing?
Myers: I enjoy all of them! I enjoy all the books. I especially enjoyed writing *Falling Angels*, because that was a book about my brother who was killed in Vietnam. This is a very good job. For kids who want to do this job, you should develop excellent reading habits. You have to be able to read to write. Every writer that I know reads a great deal. Second thing is discipline. I write 5 pages a day, 5 days a week, all year long.
It's the combination of discipline and reading. I make a living by pre-writing. I'm a great pre-writer. I plan my stories. I plan very carefully. What I do, is I outline a story in six boxes. Six-part outlines. Expand it to scenes. I keep expanding the outline, until I see that I have a complete spectrum for a book. If it doesn't turn out, I destroy that idea. I outline every single book, every single story I write.

Q: We know that you play basketball and include it in a lot of your books. What is your favorite basketball team?
Myers: There's only one really great team around and that's the New York Knickerbockers. The Knicks are my favorite.

Q: Is *Kitty and Mack* a true story or is it fiction? We read it as part of our author study and we loved it!
Myers: *Kitty and Mack* is not a true story, but it is based on a true story. There was a really great athlete and he was injured. He thought his life was over.

Q: When did you start writing?
Myers: I began writing in school. I had my first poem published in the fourth grade. I was 9 years old. I've been at it ever since.

Q: Do you have a favorite author?
Myers: I don't have a favorite author. I read lots of authors. Right now I'm reading a story by Avi. Avi and I went to the same high school, briefly. We weren't there long. I'm reading a story by Sharon Creech. And poetry by Seamus Heaney. I read a lot of authors. Primarily adult authors, but I like to see what my colleagues are doing. The young adult stuff especially.

Q: What would you do if you weren't a writer?
Myers: And if I wasn't a professional basketball player? If I had finished college I would have gone into law.

Q: When you start a new book, do you know you want to focus on an issue like bullying or racism? Or does that happen as you go along?
Myers: I know exactly what I want to say, I know exactly where I'm going with a book. The only things that change are the way the characters react. I think I know how a character will react, but that could change. Otherwise I know exactly where I'm going.

Q: What is your favorite story that you ever wrote? Why?
Myers: One favorite story is the Legend of Tarik. I enjoyed doing the research on that book. I went to Spain and North Africa. I liked writing the story.

Q: Do you think your books help kids?
Myers: I think that many of the problems I put into the books help kids engage problems intellectually before they confront them on the street.

Q: How old were you when you wrote your first book?
Myers: I think I was 26 when it was published. Where Does the Day Go. It was a picture book.

Q: How did you get started as a writer?
Myers: I started writing sports for newspapers and magazines. I wrote about kickboxing, basketball, bull fighting, and other sports.

Q: Do you give everything you write to your kids first?
Myers: Most of it I give to Christopher. He reads everything first. He reads it, my wife reads it, then they write their comments. My wife reads the manuscripts. Sometimes I hire teenagers to read the books. They tell me if they like it, or if they found it boring or interesting. They have very good comments to make. If I go to a school, I'll find teenagers. Sometimes kids write to me and ask me if they can read.

Q: Do you like to write? What's the hardest part?
Myers: There are no hard parts. It's all work and you have to put your mind and heart in it. It's work. It's all good. I like all of it.

Q: Why do you write mostly to teenagers?
Myers: I think I write mostly for teenagers because my own teenage years were difficult years for me. I look at those years, and they were so difficult, and I had questions about what life was about. Even when I try to write for adults, I find myself switching to teenagers, to teenage points of view.

Q: Do you handwrite your books first?
Myers: No, I don't. I have been working on a typewriter since I was 13 and now on a computer.

Q: Have you ever met any famous people?
Myers: This weekend, I had a snack with R.L. Stine. Gary Pickney, too. I've meet all the young adult authors. I've met James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, E.L. Doctorow, lots of authors.

Q: What was your first job as a kid?
Myers: I worked in the garment center. Carrying packages to post offices. I was 14.

Q: Has New York changed a lot since you were young?
Myers: In some ways New York has always been a bustling wonderful city. It always has been, still is now. Sometimes a particular street will change. It's always exciting. It hasn't changed that much.

Q: Are most of your books about people you know?
Myers: No. Most of my books are composite characters. I take two or three people and make one character out of them.

Q: Do you have any examples about how NY has changed?
Myers: When I was a kid growing up n Harlem, Harlem was more of an integrated community. In the 60s and 70s, it became all black. It's going back to being an integrated community again. It's in a transitional period. Neighborhoods change. Neighborhoods go up and down. New York is one of the finest cities in the world I think.

Q: Do you think your books will make little kids stop bullying?
Myers: No, my books would not make kids stop bullying. But I hope that when the questions come up, that the kids who do the bullying, will stop being looked upon as tough guys, or as cool guys. I think the whole idea of being bullied is a very bad thing and I think my books will do that.

Q: Do you speak in schools?
Myers: I speak at schools occasionally. Not that much, but occasionally.

Q: Will *The Autobiography of My Dead Brother* be made into a movie?
Myers: Right now, there are no plans to make it into a movie. There's an option on the *145th Street Stories*. Whoopie Goldberg optioned *At Her Majesty's Request. The Young Landlords* was made into a movie. The author doesn't get to work on the movie much. They hired someone else to do the script writing. You have to wait to see what the movies looks like when it finished. I wasn't happy with the movie, but I was happy with the money.

Q: Can you talk about your book *Shooter*?
Myers: After the Columbine incident, I was upset. I went out to Colorado and spoke to some people out there. What I saw was kids being bullied, pushed around, sometimes by fellow students, sometimes by family members. These kids would get so angry and upset. I saw kids being bullied, and I saw them reacting to being bullied.

Q: How did you decide how to tell that story?
Myers: One of the things I knew was that I could cover the entire story. When I looked into the case, I saw that these kids were pushed around so much in that school, they had been pushed around, looked down upon, that both the physical and

emotional bullying, I wanted to use the same technique the official investigators used. The point of the investigation was to predict that kind of incident. I don't think that can be predicted. They only looked at the incident, not the causes.

Q: Were you ever a member of a gang?
Myers: I was never a member of a gang. I fought against the gangs. My brothers and I were involved in a gang fight. The gang tried to push us into actions we didn't want and we had to fight them. I have half brothers, I was a foster child. Nine of us altogether.

Q: Was there one person who inspired you to become so involved in reading and writing?
Myers: My teachers encouraged me to read in school. I found that books were a way of me reaching out to the world that I could not do otherwise. My writing was a way to do that too. Walking into a library was my way of being a part of a reading and writing community. I could walk into a library and be part of that world and that was wonderful.
As a last comment, reading good books opens the world to you. We all need to read more.

Walter Dean Myers Biography

Walter Dean Myers, noted author of books for young adults, was born in Martinsburg, WV, in August 1937 to an impoverished family. His mother died when he was only 3, leaving his father with seven young children and a family in chaos. Unable to manage on his own, Myers' father gave custody of his young son and two of his daughters to Herbert and Florence Dean. The Deans became Walter foster parents. They moved their new extended family to the Harlem district of New York City, where both parents found blue-collar jobs to support their children. The children attended an integrated elementary school; young Walter grew up with Irish and Jewish friends.

Walter was labeled a "bright" student and steered toward college-preparatory courses. He had begun writing as a child to overcome a speech impediment (reading his own words allowed him to avoid words he had trouble pronouncing), and he won several awards for his writing. But for a poor, African-American child, writing as a career seemed improbable at best. Writing in the *SATA Autobiography* series, Myers explained, "I was from a family of laborers, and the idea of writing stories or essays was far removed from their experience. Writing had no practical experience for a black child. . .Instead they convinced me that even though I might have some talent, I was still defined by factors other than my ability." Despite not really seeing college as a possibility, he continued to write, buying a second-hand typewriter with money earned at a part-time job.

After 17, he joined the military. After three years of service, Myers used the G.I. Bill to pay part of his college tuition. He earned a bachelor's degree from Empire State College in 1984, married, and worked as a series of jobs-including Employment Supervisor for the New York State Department of Labor-to support his family, but he continued to write. Occasionally one of his pieces would be published, often in*The Liberator* or *Negro Digest*. Through it all Myers looked for himself, struggling to define what he wanted for his future.

By 1970, Myers' marriage had ended, but his writing career was beginning to flourish. His first book, *Where Does the Day Go?*, was published in 1969. A picture book for children, *Where Does the Day Go?*featured a group of children from different ethnic backgrounds sharing their ideas about day and night with a wise and sympathetic black father. The book won a contest sponsored by the Council on Interracial Books for Children and helped established Walter Myers as an author who understood and reached out to the needs of minority children.

During the 1970s, he worked as a senior editor for the Bobbs-Merrill Publishing Company and continued to write. He released additional picture books and began writing the young adult novels that would make him famous. Two of his earliest teen novels, *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde* and *Mojo and the Russians*, focus on the characters growing up in large cities where negative choices and influences surround them and on the idea that close friendships have a positive and nurturing effect on teens. *Contemporary Black Authors* writes that "Myers has presented characters for whom urban life is an uplifting experience despite the dangers and disappointments lurking in the streets."

Walter Dean Myers is now considered one of the leading authors in the young adult literature market. His work explores many genres-including fairy tale, fable, and science fiction-and strives to provide quality literature about black children for black children while at the same time reaching out to an audience that crosses racial and economic lines. His work has received numerous awards including the Coretta Scott King Award and the Newbery Honor Book citation.

Myers and his second wife Constance live in New Jersey.

Walter Dean Myers writes books troubled teens can relate to

By Whitney Eulich**, Staff writer** June 29, 2012

Juvenile book author Walter Dean Myers writes stories troubled teens can identify with. He knows their world because he once was one of them.

NEW YORK — When Walter Dean Myers was researching "Monster," his book about a teenager in juvenile detention, he conducted interviews with everyone from teen inmates to prison guards. But it was his conversation with a defense lawyer that really resonated.

"He said the most difficult part of his job was to humanize his [teenage] client in the eyes of the jury," Mr. Myers says. "And I realized, it's the same for me."

Today Myers is traveling the country as the 2012 Library of Congressnational ambassador for young people's literature, promoting literacy and starting candid conversations about what he describes as "a real crisis": More and more kids – especially those from poor and minority families – can't read.

He encourages adults to become mentors and parents and others to read to children. But his books exemplify another important idea: To get kids and teens reading, create characters they can identify with.

"These kids are looking for welcoming stories," Myers says. "But when they read a book, so often it's not about their lives. If what I read doesn't reflect my life – whether I'm gay or Latino or on welfare – doesn't that really mean that my life is not valuable?"

Tall and casually dressed in light jeans and an untucked, green-collared shirt, Myers sits in a large leather chair at his home in New Jersey. Three large, wooden bookshelves take over the office wall behind him. He frequently pushes himself out of his seat to walk across the room and pull one of his many books off the shelf.

The author of 104 children's and young adult books, Myers doesn't write your average teen drama. Prom queen characters are replaced by high school dropouts or young soldiers, vampires by children growing up in single-parent homes.

"With my writing, what I want to do is humanize the young people I write about," Myers says. There are 2 million kids in the United States who live below the poverty line, and 5 million who have had someone in their family go to jail.

Kids and teens from troubled backgrounds look for characters like themselves in books, Myers says. They "want to read these stories, because they want to know they're going to be OK," he says.

Myers knows the audience he wants to reach: He was once a part of it. Growing up as a foster child in the Morningside Heights neighborhood of New York City, Myers dropped out of high school at age 17 and joined the Army. An uncle was killed when Myers was still a teen, which set off a series of heartbreaking events in his foster home, which included adults who dealt with alcoholism and depression. "My family disintegrated," Myers says.

But when he felt overwhelmed by problems at home or in his neighborhood, Myers says, "I could turn to books. I could move myself away."

He always liked to write, and teachers told him he was bright. Three years after joining the Army he started writing for magazines. It was "a small hobby," he says, writing after work and taking workshops. He got into writing for young people, in part, because it gave him an opportunity to explore what he had gone through as a teen.

"When my family fell apart, it was such a troubled part of my life.... I think I could understand what I was going through, but I didn't have the vocabulary for it," he says while flipping through the pages of a book. Writing for teens as an adult "felt natural," Myers says. "My young adult stuff was genuine."

Today, he writes five to nine pages every day, five days a week, every week. When asked about retirement, he says, "I've decided [retirement] means I just send back the checks....

"I'll never live to write all the stories I have in my head," he says, laughing and tapping his thigh with the paperback book in his hands.

Some people tell Myers his books are too gritty (his 1988 award-winning novel "Fallen Angels," inspired by his younger brother, a soldier who was killed on his first day in Vietnam, has been banned in some schools due to its language and vivid portrayal of war).

Though his books may sound depressing, Myers says they aren't. "I'm a hopeful guy, so all my stories end up that way. I tuck them all into bed," he says. Take the story "Lockdown." It's about a young man in juvenile detention who feels hopeless about his future as his release nears. He knows his mom is using drugs, and that he may end up right back in jail.

But he's given an opportunity to work at a senior center, where he meets an older gentleman who tells him how he survived internment in a Japanese war camp. The old man endured by finding something outside himself to love.

The boy listens and has an idea: Once he's out of jail, he will dedicate his life to sending his younger sister to college. At the end of the book he's very hopeful she is going to make it.

"And I think if she makes it, then he'll make it, too," Myers says.

Joan Enders, a high school librarian at Robert A. Long High School outsideSeattle, says she's grateful for Myers's work. "The reason I select [his books] ... is they really speak to students having to face extraordinary hardships and a need to make choices," Ms. Enders says.

More than 50 percent of students in her district qualify for free or reduced-cost lunches, and she knows many come from difficult living situations. "They need to be buoyed up by stories giving hope," she says.

Myers visited Robert A. Long as part of his national ambassador tour this spring (he makes about two trips a month to speak at schools and community groups). "Reading is not optional," he told a student assembly there.

"A lot of us go 'yea,' of course," Enders says. "But for that student who says 'school doesn't matter,' [Myers's] message and his books are incredibly important."

Reading provides "cheap experience," she says. "You don't have to go out and make a mistake and maybe end up pregnant or in jail. Literature brings an experience to you."

Melissa Johnson, a high school junior, agrees. She normally prefers to read fantasy books because they engage her imagination, she says. But she was happy to find Myers's books "The Beast" and "Sunrise Over Fallujah."

"You could experience what [the characters] were feeling and how lost they were," she says. "That's what made the book. [He] ... stepped into their shoes and got inside their heads in a way that the readers were experiencing the same thing. I really got into that."

Myers also conducts collaborative writing projects and leads workshops. He worked with a group of elementary school students in Harlem, N.Y., to write a series of poems, which were illustrated by Myers's artist-son, Christopher.

He also co-wrote a book with a 13-year-old fan, Ross Workman. The teen wrote Myers a letter saying that he liked the way Myers wrote. They collaborated via e-mail: Four years later, the book "Kick" was published.

"I like writing with kids," Myers says. He also likes teaching. At Robert A. Long he met with about 20 aspiring writers after the assembly, going over how to structure a book, develop characters, and create an engaging plot.

Jakob Collins, a senior, attended the workshop; he said his greatest takeaway was the need to believe in himself and his ideas. "I asked how to format a book so that you like it, and your readers like it," Jakob says. "He had a really good response: Don't sacrifice your own ideas so readers will like it; because if you believe in something strongly enough, then [readers] will enjoy it, too.' "

Myers, who has book contracts lined up through 2017, says he'd like to be remembered as someone who was "useful." "I don't think you can ask for more than that," he says.

"There will be some kids who will find a voice in what I'm saying to them," he says. "There will be some whose lives will be validated because I've included them."

A PROFILE: WALTER DEAN MYERS

By: Sharron L. McElmeel 2001

Walter Dean Myers grew up down the block from Langston Hughes and clearly remembers the day Hughes chased his brother down the streets of Harlem for throwing a candy wrapper into Hughes' tiny garden plot. Not until Myers was an adult did he really appreciate Langston Hughes's short stories and his column in the black newspaper that came to influence Myers's own work. "I was surprised that anyone would publish stories about what I called 'ordinary life,'" said Myers. It is from his own memories of the ordinary life in Harlem that Meyers has created the rich tapestries of the dozens of books that have earned him five Coretta Scott King Awards, Newbery honors, the Margaret A. Edwards award, the first Michael L. Printz Award, and the first Virginia Hamilton Literary Award. In a New York Times article, Myers said he tries "to create characters so compelling that kids will identify with them and with their positive decisions." Many feel that Myers understands the problems of young African Americans better than any other author today.

Harlem

Myers was born into a large family in Martinsburg, West Virginia, but when Myers's mother died in childbirth, a friend of hers offered to raise Walter. His father, struggling to care for his large family, agreed. So at age three, Walter was put on a Greyhound bus and sent to his foster parents, Herbert and Florence Dean, and to Harlem. Walter found Harlem a vibrant and exciting place. His earliest memories are of reading with his foster mother, a woman who had little education but had taught herself to read. His foster father was a factory worker.

Walter's life, although filled with love, was not an easy one. He was a "troubled young man." When he spoke he stuttered; his classmates ridiculed him. With the encouragement of his fifth-grade teacher, he found that he could speak in front of a group if he read words he had written, and he began writing poems. His teachers classified him as "bright," but a '"know-it-all" friend of an aunt discouraged Walter by telling him he did not speak distinctly enough. He wanted to become a lawyer but knew his parents did not have the resources to send him to college. There was much discouragement and no other support system. Walter covered up his lack of confidence with bad behavior. He spent many of his school days in the principal's office or suspended. From the time he was ten or eleven, he filled notebooks with his writing, but he never thought of writing as a career.

Myers played in the streets; later he ran with a gang. By the time he was fifteen, he had quit school. He went back but quit again at the age of sixteen. At that time, "black kids with no place to go were welcome in the Army." So that is where Walter went. In 1957, after three years of Army duty, he returned to Harlem, where he worked at any job he could find: factory hand, clerical worker, and postal clerk. "Few of the jobs," Myers says, "were worth mentioning. Leaving school seemed less like a good idea." But writing was still on his mind, and it was a way to earn a few extra dollars when he could sell an article or two. He wrote "adventure stuff" for the National Enquirer and advertising copy for cemeteries.

The Beginning of a Career

Myers obtained an undergraduate degree from Empire State College-despite not having graduated from high school-worked for the Department of Labor, and for seven years worked as an editor at Bobbs-Merrill Company. He managed to get some poetry, stories, and articles published, but it was when he won a contest sponsored by the Council on Interracial Books for Children that he was able to seriously consider writing as a career. That book, ***Where Does the Day Go?*** was published by Parents' Magazine Press in 1969. Interestingly, the book won in the picture book category, and his first few books were in that genre.

Myers's first novel was ***Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff*** (1975). His books were set in Harlem and focused on survival when faced with negative influences. ***The Young Landlords***(1979) featured teens who learned responsibility when they were given a ghetto apartment building to manage. The chief protagonist in ***Hoops*** (1981) gained insight into life when he observed an older friend's involvement with gamblers. Several of Myers's books infuse basketball into the

plot. Those scenes, as well as characters named for Myers's friends (Binky, Light Billy, and Clyde) came straight from his childhood experiences in Harlem.

After 20 years of writing at night, the idea of becoming a full-time writer surfaced when Myer's was laid off from a publishing house that was cutting back its staff. Myers's wife, Constance, encouraged him to use the opportunity to freelance. He decided that if he intended to make money as a writer he would have to structure his writing schedule. He first submits his book ideas to a publisher, and if the editor thinks the idea has possibility, Myers spends about a month shaping the book in his mind. He creates an outline and a complete profile of each of the main characters. He cuts out pictures of all of his characters and his wife creates a collage of them, which he hangs on the wall over the computer. He then creates the story's first draft. Although the first draft is usually very close to the final version, Myers stresses that revision is very important. He doesn't view himself as particularly talented but views his writing as a matter of work ethic: He feels that most writers who fail simply fail to finish. Early in his career his goal was to write 10 pages per day-and he usually did. In recent years he has cut that goal back to seven so that he has "more time to annoy my family."

The Settings

Walter Dean Myers uses memories from his days in Harlem to construct his novels and tries to show more than the poverty and negative attitude found in many books set there. He uses humor, realistic dialogue, and hopeful scenarios to depict the Harlem he knew. Other stories have come from other experiences. ***Fallen Angels***, a story of a 17-year-old from Harlem, fighting in a war he doesn't understand, came from Myers's own days in Vietnam. The book is dedicated to Walter's younger brother, Thomas Wayne "Sonny" Myers, who died in Vietnam in 1968. ***The Nicholas Factor*** grew from a trip Myers and his wife made to Peru. The story involves Peruvian Indians and an elite group who feel they have the right to impose their views on society. Myers' books, regardless of the settings, always tell an entertaining story. In ***Motown and Didi, A Love Story*** (1984), he sets a love story in Harlem, against a backdrop of junkies, threats, danger, and death. He tells of a long-absent father suddenly entering the life of a 14-year-old in ***Mouse Rap*** (1990). ***Somewhere in the Darkness***(1992) is about a father, just released from jail, who whisks a teenage boy away from a foster home. Myers has addressed suicide, teen pregnancy, adoption, and parental neglect and has written historical novels and novels about historical characters.

In ***The Glory Fields*** (1996) Myers addresses the subject of slavery and prejudice through the story of five generations of the Lewis family-a family that began in Africa and was brought to South Carolina. The story idea for ***At Her Majesty's Request: An African Princess in Victorian England*** (1999) began when a London used-book dealer handed Walter a packet of letters concerning an African princess who had been a protege of Queen Victoria's in the mid-1800s. When research acquainted Myers with the fact that 30 percent of the cowboys in the American West were either African American or Mexican, he penned ***The Journal of Joshua Loper: A Black Cowboy on the Chisholm Trail, 1871*** (1999). He focused on contributions by African Americans during World War II when he wrote ***The Journal of Scott Pendleton Collins: A World War II Soldier, Normandy, France, 1944***(1999). This soldier's diary begins during basic training at Fort Dix and continues to the days of battle in France.

The First Recipient of the Michael A. Printz Award

In 2000, Walter Dean Myers's ***Monster*** earned the first Michael A. Printz Award. The manuscript came to HarperCollins editor, Phoebe Yeh, as a play that told the gripping story of Steve, a teenager on trial for murder. During his trial, Steve, a budding screenwriter, tells his own story as he writes the screenplay about the predicament he is in. Sensing that the story would be difficult for readers to grasp because all the information about the crime and the events that surrounded the situation would be filtered through the dialogue, camera angles, and setting, Yeh suggested that Myers incorporate Steve's journal entries into the retelling. In this way, Myers could use Steve's journal to take readers through some of the situations that might be more difficult if included only as part of Steve's

screenplay. Meyers's youngest son, Christopher, created the illustrations for the jacket and for 15 interior illustrations. A photographer took pictures of various subjects posing as characters in Walter's book. Jackie Harper, from HarperCollins, posed as Steve's mother; a brother of Chris's girlfriend posed as Steve himself. Chris used scans of these photographs to help create the final illustrations. The fingerprints are Myers's.

The year 2000 brought *145th Street: Short Stories, 10 stories of life in Harlem*. In 2001, *Patrol*, a story of an American soldier in Vietnam, was published, as was Myers's story of a professional baseball player in *The Journal of Biddy Owens, the Negro Leagues. A biography of Muhammad Ali, The Greatest: the Life and Career of Muhammad Ali* and a poetic journey into the blues, *Blues Journey*, are also scheduled for publication, with illustrations by Christopher Myers. In 2002, Myers will take a look at his own growing up in Harlem, in*Bad Boy: A Memoir*.

At birth Myers was given the name Walter Milton Myers. In his adulthood he took the name of his foster parents as his middle name-thus honoring them for their love, patience, and guidance throughout his youth. Despite his troubles as a young man, Meyers learned along the way to love reading and writing, a love that eventually brought him to the place where he is an admired icon in the realm of literature for young readers. The father of three children-Karen, Michael Dean, and Christopher-Myers moved from Harlem to Jersey City, New Jersey, where Christopher was raised and where Myers lives with his wife Constance and continues to write.

Update: Walter Dean Myers died July 1, 2014, after a short illness. At the time of his death Walter was living in Jersey City, New Jersey, with his wife Constance. He is survived by Constance, as well as his two sons, Christopher and Michael Dean. He was predeceased by his daughter, Karen. He had been raised by his father, George Myers's first wife, Florence Dean, and her husband Herbert Dean. Only after his foster father's death did Walter learn that his father had not known how to read. So when Walter Dean Myers was named the 2012-13â€"National Ambassador for Young People's Literature he made it part of his mission to encourage literacy. -- Walter Dean Myers b. 8.12.37- 7.1.14 RIP.

By Sharron L. *McElmeel*