



Walter Dean Myers

Walter Dean Myers, beloved and deeply respected children's book author, died on July 1, 2014, following a brief illness. He was 76 years old.

In a career spanning over 45 years, Walter Dean Myers wrote more than 100 books for children of all ages. His impressive body of work includes two Newbery Honor Books, three National Book Award Finalists, and six Coretta Scott King Award/Honor-winning books. He was the winner of the first-ever Michael L. Printz Award, the first recipient of the Coretta Scott King-Virginia Hamilton Award for Lifetime Achievement, and a recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement in writing for young adults. In 2010, Walter was the United States nominee for the Hans Christian Andersen Award, and in 2012 he was appointed the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, serving a two-year tenure in the position. Also in 2012, Walter was recognized as an inaugural NYC Literary Honoree, an honor given by former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, for his substantial lifetime accomplishments and contribution to children's literature.

"We are deeply saddened by the passing of erudite and beloved author Walter Dean Myers. Walter's many award-winning books do not shy away from the sometimes gritty truth of growing up. He wrote books for the reader he once was, books he wanted to read when he was a teen. He wrote with heart and he spoke to teens in a language they understood. For these reasons, and more, his work will live on for a long, long time," said Susan Katz, President and Publisher of HarperCollins Children's Books.

Walter Dean Myers was born Walter Milton Myers on August 12, 1937, in Martinsburg, West Virginia. Walter's birth mother, Mary Myers, died after the birth of his younger sister, Imogene. His father, George, sent Walter to live with his first wife, Florence Dean, and her husband, Herbert Dean, in Harlem, along with Florence and George's two daughters. Walter would eventually adopt the middle name "Dean" to honor Florence and Herbert.

In Walter's memoir, *Bad Boy*, he wrote, "Harlem is the first place called 'home' that I can remember." This sentiment is reflected in Walter's writing, whether via a love letter to the neighborhood in the picture book *Harlem*; a story of a boy's trial for a crime committed in Harlem, in the novel *Monster*; or the tale of two friends struggling to see a future beyond the community they know in the novel *Darius & Twig*. Walter spent much of his childhood playing basketball on the courts of Harlem and checking books out of the George Bruce Branch of the New York Public Library. Florence Dean taught Walter to read in their kitchen, and when he began attending Public School 125, he could read at a second-grade level. Though Walter struggled through school with a speech impediment and poor grades, and he had trouble with discipline throughout his school career, he remained an avid reader. His love of reading soon progressed to a love of writing.

Walter wrote well in high school and one teacher, who recognized his talent but also knew he was going to drop out, told him to keep on writing, no matter what—"It's what you do," she said. Walter did drop out of Stuyvesant High School, though they now claim him as a graduate (which Walter always found funny). At the age of seventeen, he

enlisted in the Army. Years later, after his safe return home and while working a construction job, Walter would remember this teacher's advice. He started writing again...and he didn't stop.

Walter's body of work includes picture books, novels for teens, poetry, and non-fiction alike. In 1968, Walter's first published book, *Where Does the Day Go?*, illustrated by Leo Carty, won an award from the Council on Interracial Books for Children. Walter and his son Christopher, an artist, collaborated on a number of picture books for young readers, including *We Are America: A Tribute from the Heart* and *Harlem*, which received a Caldecott Honor Award, as well as the teen novel and National Book Award Finalist *Autobiography of My Dead Brother*, which Christopher illustrated. Walter's novel *Scorpions* won a Newbery Honor Medal and the Margaret A. Edwards Award, while gritty teen novels *Lockdown* and *Monster* were both National Book Award Finalists. *Monster* appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list, won the first Michael L. Printz Award, and received a Coretta Scott King Honor Award. His stunning Coretta Scott King Award-winning novel, *Fallen Angels* (1988), about the Vietnam War, was named one of the top ten American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults of all time. Twenty years later, Myers wrote a riveting contemporary companion novel, *Sunrise Over Fallujah*, which was named a *New York Times* Notable Book in 2008.

In *Invasion* (2010), Myers once again explored the effects and horrors of war through young protagonists, this time set in World War II. His upcoming books include *Juba!*, (HarperCollins, April 2015) a novel for teens based on the life of a young African American dancer, and *On a Clear Day* (Crown/Random House Books for Young Readers, September 2014). A graphic novel adaptation of *Monster* (HarperCollins) is also forthcoming.

Walter often wrote books about the most difficult time in his own life—his teenage years—for the reader he once was; these were the books that he wished were available when he was that age. Throughout his life, Walter worked to make sure young adults had the tools necessary to become hungry readers, thirsty learners, and, therefore, successful adults. He frequently met with incarcerated teens in juvenile detention centers and received countless letters thanking him for his inspirational words. Walter also worked with and mentored teenage fan and writer Ross Workman, and they published the novel *Kick* together. As the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature from 2012-2013, Walter traveled around the United States promoting the slogan "Reading is not optional." He strove to spread the message that a brighter future depends on reading proficiency and widespread literacy, not only during his two-year tenure as National Ambassador, but beyond. More than anything, Walter pushed for his stories to teach children and teenagers never to give up on life.

Walter Dean Myers was a compassionate, wonderful, and brilliant man. He wrote about children who needed a voice and their stories told. His work will live on for generations to come. It was an honor to work with him for so many years," said Miriam Altshuler, Walter's literary agent.

Walter lived 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.

About Walter Dean Myers



Walter age 11.

“I was born on a Thursday, the 12th of August, 1937, in Martinsburg, West Virginia. My name at birth was Walter Milton Myers. I was about two years old when my mother died and then I was inexplicably given to Florence and Herbert Dean. I was raised in Harlem by Herbert, who was African-American and Florence, who was German and Native American and wonderful. They loved me very much and I grew to love Harlem.



Walter and his brother Mickey grew up in Harlem

As a child, my life revolved around my neighborhood and church. The neighborhood protected me and the church guided me. I resisted as much as I could. I was smart (all kids are smart) but didn’t do that well in school. I had a speech impediment and often found myself leading with my fists when teased.

I found solace in books. My mother read to me from a very young age. From my comfortable perch on her lap, I would watch as she moved her finger slowly across the page and I’d imagine the characters. Reading pushed me to discover worlds beyond my landscape, especially during dark times when my uncle was murdered and my family became dysfunctional with alcohol and grief.

I wrote well in high school and an English teacher (bless her!) recognized this and advised me to keep on writing no matter what happened to me. “It’s what you do,” she said. I ended up dropping out of high school (although now Stuyvesant High claims me as a graduate) and joined the army on my 17th birthday.



Christopher would one day illustrate books for his father.

After the army, I was struggling through life—holding on just enough to survive. Remembering my high school teacher’s words, I began writing at night. I wrote short columns for a local tabloid and stories for men’s magazines.

A turning point for me was the discovery of a short story by James Baldwin about the black urban experience. It gave me permission to write about my own experiences. Somehow I always go back to the most turbulent periods of my own life. I write books for the troubled boy I once was, and for the boy who lives within me still. It's what I do."

— Walter Dean Myers

Awards

Walter Dean Myers won the Council on Interracial Books for Children contest in 1969, which resulted in the publication of his first book, *Where Does the Day Go?* Since then, he has won more awards than any author for young adults, and is one of the most prolific writers, with more than 110 books to his credit.

He is the recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement in writing for young adults. He has won the Coretta Scott King Award five times and received two Newbery Honors. His book, *Monster*, was the first winner of the Michael L. Printz Award, a National Book Award Finalist, and a New York Times Bestseller. He delivered the 2009 May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture, a distinction reserved for an individual who has made significant contributions to the field of children's literature. Most recently, he served as the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, a post appointed by the Library of Congress. Walter Dean Myers currently lives in Jersey City, NJ.



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.

Critical Responses

In the often difficult world of young adult literature, Walter Dean Myers is considered a leader and a role model. His works draw an audience that crosses racial and economic lines, but in particular he is committed to providing "quality literature for black children about black children." Others have noted the outstanding quality of his works. He was awarded the 1968 Council for Interracial Books for Children Award for *Where Does the Day Go?* The American Library Association has honored his work several times, presenting him with "Best Books for Young Adults" citations for *It Ain't All for Nothin'* (1978), *The Young Landlords* (1979), and *Hoops* (1982). *The Young Landlords* also earned Myers a Coretta Scott King Award (1980). He followed that award with two more Coretta Scott King Awards - in 1984 for *Motown and Didi: A Love Story* and in 1991 for *Now is Your Time: The African-American Struggle for Freedom*. Walter Dean Myers has also received the Newbery honor book citation for *Scorpions* (1989).

Works Published

- *The Life of a Harlem Man*, illustrated by Gene Riarti (Parents Magazine Press, 1968)
 - *Where Does a Day Go?*, illustrated by Leo Carty (Parents Magazine Press, 1968)
 - *The Dancers*, illustrated by Anne Rockwell (Parents Magazine Press, 1972)
 - *The Dragon Takes a Wife*, illustrated by Ann Grifalconi (Bobbs-Merrill, 1972)
 - *Fly, Jimmy, Fly!*, illustrated by Moneta Barnett (Putnam, 1974)
 - *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff* (Viking, 1975)
 - *Social Welfare* (Franklin Watts, 1976)
 - *Victory for Jamie* (Scholastic, 1977)
 - *Mojo and the Russians* (Viking, 1977)
 - *Brainstorm*, illustrated with photographs by Chuck Freedman (Franklin Watts, 1977)
 - *It Ain't All for Nothin'* (V, 1978)
 - *The Young Landlords* (Viking, 1979) – a group of kids take over an apartment building and struggle to maintain it.
 - *The Golden Serpent*, illustrated by Alice and Martin Provensen (Viking, 1980)
 - *The Black Pearl and the Ghost; or, One Mystery after Another*, illustrated by Robert Quackenbush (Viking, 1980).
- Mindless Behavior
- *The Legend of Tarik* (Viking, 1981)
 - *Hoops* (Delacorte, 1981) – a promising basketball player tries not to end up like his former pro-playing coach.
 - *Won't Know Till I Get There* (Viking, 1982) – a 14-year-old boy, his newly adopted brother, and his friends are forced to work in a retirement home.
 - *Tales of a Dead King* (William Morrow and Company, 1983)
 - *The Nicholas Factor* (Viking, 1983)
 - *Motown and Didi: A Love Story* (Viking, 1984) – a young couple's romance, and their struggle living in Harlem.
 - *Mr. Monkey and the Gotcha Bird*, illustrated by Leslie Morrill (Delacorte, 1984)
 - *The Outside Shot* (Delacorte, 1984) – a talented Harlem basketball player goes to college to play.
 - *Crystal* (1987) – about a girl who becomes a model.
 - *Fallen Angels* (1988) – about young men in the army during the Vietnam war
 - *Scorpions* (1990) – a 12-year-old is asked to lead his brother's gang
 - *The Mouse Rap* (1990) – a 14-year-old is determined to find the loot from a 1930s bank heist.
 - *Now Is Your Time! The African-American Struggle for Freedom* (1992)
 - *The Righteous Revenge of Artemis Bonner* (1994) – a 12-year-old boy goes after a man that murdered his uncle.
 - *Darnell Rock Reporting* (1994) – a 13-year-old boy joins the school newspaper.
 - *The Glory Field* (1994) – a family's account of their struggle in America from the 18th century to the 1990s.
 - *Shadow of the Red Moon* (1995)
 - *Slam* (1998) – a young black teen with an attitude problem deals with life on and off the basketball court.
 - *Monster* (1999) - a 16-year-old black boy is charged with murder.
 - *We Were Heroes: The Journal of Scott Pendleton Collins – a World War II Soldier, Normandy, France, 1944* (1999)
 - *145th Street: Short Stories* (2001)
 - *Greatest: Muhammad Ali* (2001)
 - *Bad Boy; A Memoir* (2001) (a part of the Amistad Series). Myers' life as a young boy growing up in 1940s Harlem
 - *Handbook for Boys: A Novel* (2003)
 - *Somewhere in the Darkness* (2003) – a young boy travels to Arkansas with a father he has not grown up with
 - *Thanks & Giving: All year long* (2004)

- *Shooter* (2004) – two friends of a school shooter give an account of him to the police
- *The Beast* (2003) – a 17-year-old boy comes back to his home in Harlem from his boarding school to find that the girl he loves is using drugs.
- *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* (1998) – a 14-year-old boy copes with life in Harlem by drawing.
- *Street Love* (2006) – a poetic novel of a romance in Harlem.
- *What They Found: Love on 145th Street* (2007)
- *Harlem Summer* (2007)
- *Game* (2008)
- *Sunrise Over Fallujah* (2008) – sequel to *Fallen Angels*, taking place in the Iraq War.
- *Dopesick* (2009) – a teenager kills a policeman, and must contemplate his future.
- *Riot* (2009) - a fictional account of the New York Draft Riots in 1863, during the American Civil War, by the 15-year-old daughter of a black man and an Irish immigrant.
- *Amiri & Odette* (2009). Myers takes the classic *Swan Lake* ballet and recasts it into hip-hop verse.
- *Lockdown* (2010)
- *Sunrise Over Fallujah* (2010)
- *Kick* (2011). Written with Ross Workman
- *The Cruisers* (2011)
- *We Were Heroes: The Journal of Scott Pendleton Collins, a World War II Soldier* (2011)
- *The Cruisers Checkmate* (2012)
- *The Cruisers Book 3 A Star is Born* (2012)
- *Darius & Twig* (2013)
- *Invasion* (2013) - prequel to *Fallen Angels*
- *The Baddest Dog in Harlem* (unknown)