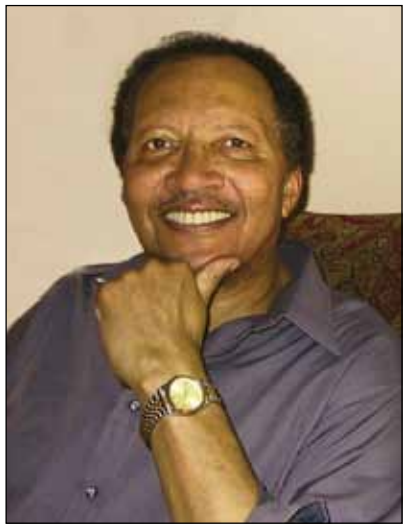
by Deb Aronson

A Labor of Love: WALTER DEAN MYERS Writes to Encourage Young Adults



Walter Dean Myers always loved to write and was encouraged from a young age, but for many years he didn't know one could make a living as a writer.

The prolific author has certainly made up for lost time. Myers, one of the preeminent writers for young readers, has published more than 100 works, including novels, historical fiction, short story collections, poems, biographies, collections of historical photographs, and a memoir. He even co-wrote a book with a young man he met through a fan letter.

Much of Myers's work revolves around young people struggling to figure out who they are and how they will survive against a backdrop of violence and turmoil. More recently he's been intrigued with the idea that there's a lack of knowledge being passed from one generation to the next. Young people, especially inner-city kids, are not getting the basic tools to cope with their lives, he says. *All the Right Stuff*, an examination of the social contract published this year, is his effort to address this.

Myers, who was born in 1937 and grew up in Harlem, often writes to and about his own teen self. He experienced the kinds of turmoil he writes about. He was informally adopted as a toddler; his foster parents were kind and loving, but struggled, and when an uncle was murdered, his father became severely depressed and his mother became alcoholic.

His home life in disarray, he often picked fights and could have had a very different life story. Luckily he had teachers who encouraged him. One caught him reading a comic book, ripped it up, and brought to class a pile of books from her own library. He remembers it as the best thing that ever happened to him. There were other teachers who made a difference too. One teacher found him professional help for his speech impediment. Another realized he could read out loud in class if he read something he had written, using words he knew he could say. That teacher encouraged him to write.

It would be a shock to many teachers to know that their students think they became teachers simply by being smart.
—*Walter Dean Myers*

Revisiting His Own Youth

It is not surprising that when Myers began writing he chose to relive those vivid and knotty childhood memories.

"I believe that my own teen-age years were so angst driven … that I'm drawn to that period in my writing," he says.

Still, his first novel for teens, *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff* (1975) came about as an accident. He had submitted a short story 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, asked how the rest of the project was going. As he recalled in a *Publishers Weekly* interview, "I said, 'It goes like this,' and I made it up on the spot. She offered me a contract."

The book, which follows three friends shooting baskets and trying to steer clear of the dangers on the streets, became a classic of young adult fiction. It was the first of many books that earned a Coretta Scott King honors award (see sidebar)

Besides doing something he loves, and revisiting his own youth, Myers's larger goal is to bring the stories of young, urban, poor African Americans to life on the page.

"I write about the millions of children who live in poverty, who come from broken homes, who have difficulty in school and in the home. I include them and their culture in my books, and thus humanize them," he says.

Myers's critically acclaimed works also have a devoted fan base and are in schools everywhere. His advice to teachers considering teaching his books, or any young-adult novels, is to "remember that art is best observed as a glance into our common humanity."

His books have been described as gritty; some, particularly *Fallen Angels*, have been frequently challenged. Critics often single out *Fallen Angels* for its language and graphic depiction of the Vietnam War. Myers, however,

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believes his stories have an encouraging tone and send a message of taking personal responsibility—a message of value to kids and teens from troubled backgrounds, who look for characters like themselves in books. They "want to read these stories, because they want to know they're going to be OK," he has said. "There will be some kids who will find a voice in what I'm saying to them. There will be some whose lives will be validated because I've included them."

Myers does not wait for the muse to visit, but arrives at his desk at the same time every day, ready to write. He spends the morning producing new pages. His goal for many years was 10 pages per day. These days the 75-year-old aims for six pages. He prints those pages out so he can hold in his hand what he has produced. The rest of the day he spends researching or outlining his next project or rewriting his current project.

"Rewriting is a lot more fun for me than the writing is," he said.

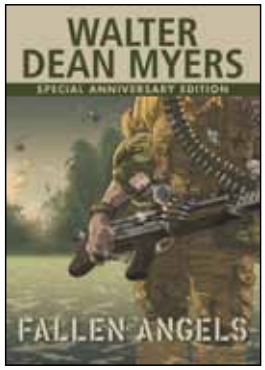
Writers as Geniuses

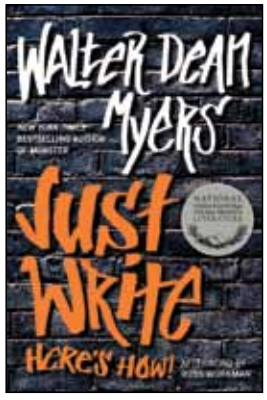
When he starts a new book, Myers makes "copious outlines. The outlines have forced me to think the book through and guide me—not restrict me—as I write. I also look for photos of my characters. The photos go on my wall over the computer screen so I see them each morning when I go to work."

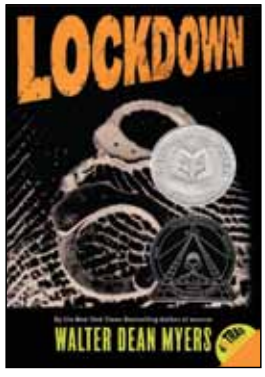
"What held me back (initially) was the idea that all writers were 'geniuses' and that working at the craft indicated you were not a genius," he says. "I believe that the people who succeed at writing are the ones who are willing to make sufficient effort."

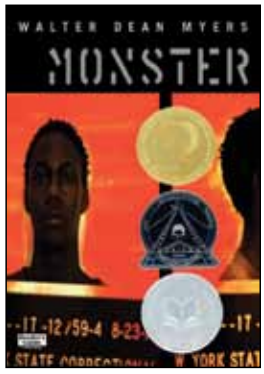
He advises young writers to do the same; to put in the effort. Myers asserts that there are three steps to success and young people today, especially urban kids, need help understanding that.

"First; identify success," he says. "Many urban kids don't have close role models, and so they choose rappers or athletes because they at least see









CENTER IMAGES: Some of the bestselling titles for young adults authored by Walter Dean Myers

them appearing wealthy. We need to understand that merely giving titles (lawyer, doctor, accountant) to kids is not a sufficient form of identity."

The second step is to identify the steps and the work they need to do to succeed. Many urban kids don't see what successful people do.

"It would be a shock to many teachers to know that their students think they became teachers simply by being smart," he says.The final step is simply to put in the effort.

Myers Hopes His Books Are Useful

"As clear as this seems, I'm finding young people who don't understand the concept of work," says Myers. "It's not their fault. If they haven't been around people who can demonstrate what work is they often don't have an idea of how much effort is needed to succeed. And there are no models on television for them to watch. Office work on the tube is all about wise cracking and sexual innuendos, not real work."

Continued on page 14

The awards that Walter Dean Myers has received include the following:

- **Newbery Honors** for *Somewhere in the Darkness* and *Scorpions*
- the **Caldecott Honor Award** for *Harlem*
- the **Inaugural Michael L. Printz Award** for *Monster*
- **American Library Association (ALA) Coretta Scott King Awards**: *Young Landlords* (1979); *Motown and Didi: A Love Story* (1985); *Fallen Angels* (1989); and *Slam* (1997)
- *Lockdown*, *Monster, Autobiography of My Dead Brother,* and *Crystal* all were finalists for the **National Book Award**.
- the **Margaret A. Edwards Award,** honoring an author for a "significant and lasting contribution to young adult literature"
- inaugural recipient of the **Coretta Scott King-Virginia Hamilton Award for Lifetime Achievement**, which honors an African American author who has made a significant and lasting literary contribution to literature for children and/or young adults

The author, who has book contracts through 2017, says ideas are everywhere. "We live in a world of great ideas. You simply have to expand your particular universe to the thinking, exploration, and creativity of the millions of people around the planet."

Beyond doing what he loves and humanizing teens who are often invisible in literature, Myers hopes his books are "useful."

"One time a mother told me that her son was going to drop out of school to join the Army during the early days of the Iraq war. She begged him to at least finish the year, and he agreed. During this time he read *Fallen Angels*, and changed his mind about joining the Army. The mother was grateful, and I was delighted."

Ambassador for Young People's Literature

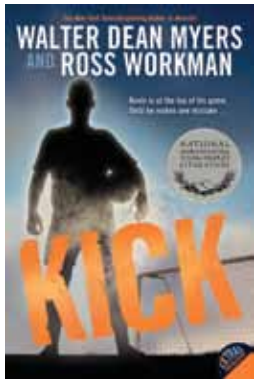
This year Myers was named the Library of Congress's National Ambassador for Young People's Literature. He is the third author to serve as ambassador since the position was created in 2008. Candidates are selected based on their contribution to young people's literature and their ability to relate to children. He follows Jon Scieszka and Katherine Paterson.

Being ambassador is "an opportunity to promote reading and literacy." Myers says literacy, or lack thereof, is a root cause of the educational divide. He plans to use his platform to address this problem. His dream is to engage not just children but their parents, and to send the message that to make one's way in today's society, one must be a reader.

"Kids need to read, especially poor kids and kids in urban areas."

Having long ago overcome his speech impediment, Myers is a powerful public speaker. "He has such a presence when he speaks, he just commands a room," Scieszka told *Publishers Weekly* in a January 2012 interview. "Little kids, big kids, adults—everyone sits up when he starts speaking. He's like a combination of Darth Vader and Pat the Bunny."

Even before becoming ambassador, Myers encouraged young people to not only read but also write. He conducts collaborative writing projects and leads workshops to encourage young writers. He worked with a group of elementary school students in Harlem, New York, 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 fan letter, they collaborated via e-mail; four years later, the book *Kick* was published.



Myers is not just making a living at writing, he is making a difference by connecting with, encouraging, and humanizing millions of young people across the country.

***Deb Aronson** is a freelance writer based in Urbana, Illinois.*

To Do

- ○ **Dec. 31:** nomination deadline for the Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children
- ○ **Jan. 10:** deadline for submitting petitions to add candidates to the 2013 NCTE ballot; send email inquiries to **elections@ncte.org**
- ○ **Jan. 11:** postmark deadline for program proposals for the 2013 Annual Convention in Boston, MA; proposals submitted online are due **Jan. 18**
- ○ **Jan. 15:** nomination deadline for the 2013 Whole Language Umbrella (WLU) elections; nomination deadline for the WLU Service, Lifetime Membership, and Reclaiming the Joy in Teaching Awards
- ○ **Jan. 31:** program proposal deadline for the 2013 WLU Literacies for All Summer Institute; entry deadline for the Edwyna Wheadon Postgraduate Training Scholarship Fund
- ○ **Feb. 1:** nomination deadline for the Edwin A. Hoey Award and the CEL Exemplary Leadership Award
- ○ **Feb. 13:** entry deadline for the Promising Young Writers program and the Achievement Awards in Writing program
- ○ **Feb. 24:** nomination deadline for the 2013 CCCC Elections
- ○ **all of Feb.:** African American Read-In
- ○ **Mar. 1:** application deadline for the Promising Researcher Award
- ○ **Mar. 1:** nomination deadline for the David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English
- ○ **Mar. 6:** nomination deadline for the TYCA Fame Award
- ○ **all of Mar.:** register for Literacy Education Advocacy Day in Washington, DC, Apr. 18

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For more information about these and other Council awards, see **http://www.ncte.org/awards;** for details on professional development, including Web seminars and conventions, see the NCTE homepage at **http://www.ncte.org.**