

Walter Dean Myers Writes for Inner-City Students

By Kerri Gallagher Blumenstetter

Walter Dean Myers was born in Martinsburg, West Virginia in 1937 during the Great Depression. Because of family hardship and the death of his mother, Myers was informally adopted and raised by Florence and Herbert Dean. The family moved to Harlem in New York City where Myers' foster father worked as a janitor and in factories. Myers loved to read and write and was admitted to the prestigious Stuyvesant High School, however he dropped out of school at age seventeen to join the army. After three years, he returned to New York where he worked in construction, at the post office, as a messenger, and for the New York State Bureau of Labor. In the 1960s, Myers began to submit stories to magazines and in 1968 he won a competition for writers sponsored by the Council on Interracial Books for Children.

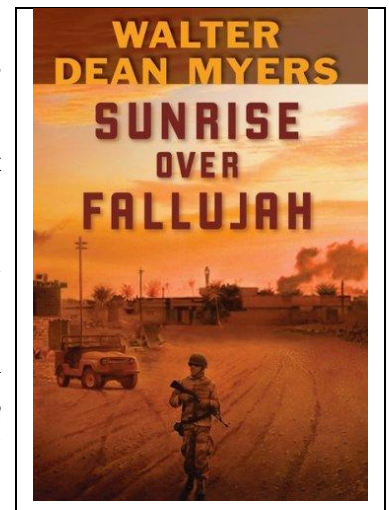
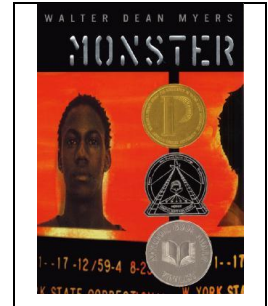
I used Myers' book *Monster* as a special education teacher in Rockaway Beach, Queens. Many of my students considered themselves "no good." They lived in the "projects," had been left back in school, and generally got into trouble on the weekends. *Monster* is a book about a sixteen-year-old boy named Steve Harmon who finds himself on trial for murder. He is accused as acting as a lookout for the young men who committed a robbery at a Harlem drugstore and killed the store's owner. The author faces life in prison. The story is presented from his viewpoint in the form of a screenplay and with his journal entries.

While the book was at a higher reading level than most of my students, they responded immediately to the cover that showed a mug shot of a young African American man with the word MONSTER printed in a graffiti-like font. For many of my students, this was their first experience with a book that seemed real to them. Myers captured the world they live in every day.

Because the book is written as a screenplay, I assigned "roles" to students. Because it was a difficult book for them, I told them we would read it together and I would help them if they were willing to participate and act out their parts. The book began with the robbery scene and immediately captured their interest. Many of them were laughing and talking about the book as if it were a television show or a movie. We took turns reading our parts and stopped to question and talk about the text. Although there were some struggles with comprehension, I was amazed I was actually having a book talk with my class. Each day students asked when we were reading the book. They started to see the main character as a friend, as someone they knew, or most importantly as, themselves. We were able to make text to self connections and I honestly believe if my students got nothing else out of that school year they walked away knowing that there are books out there for them, about kids that were not "good," "smart," and growing up in the perfect home. Walter Dean Myers gave me a feeling of accomplishment as a teacher in a classroom where I did not think that feeling was possible.

Myers has written many books for young adults. He is able to write about He writes as well in the genre of non-fiction as he does in fiction, including writing history in a way that is not boring or dry. His books, including *We Are America*, *Here In Harlem: Poems in Many Voices*, *I've Seen the Promised Land*; *Patrol: An American Soldier in Vietnam*, and his newest, *Sunrise Over Fallujah*, pinpoint significant points in history.

In *Sunrise Over Fallujah*, an African American young man decides to join the army after the events of September 11, 2001. He is assigned to a Civil Affairs Unit during the war in Iraq and is expected to help build the trust of the Iraqi people. Soldiers, along with readers, learn that the war in Iraq will not be easily resolved and that much of what he encounters there will never be reported in the news. I am considering using this book in my 5th grade classroom with a higher-level reading group. It is difficult to get young boys to read and stay interested in a book and I think that Myers is the author to go to with struggling young male readers.



Recommended Books by Walter Dean Myers

Historical Fiction

The Glory Field (1994). An African American family's struggles from the 18th century to the 1990s.

Riot. A fictional account of the New York Draft Riots in 1863 (2009). Told by the 15-year-old daughter of a Black man and an Irish immigrant.

War

Fallen Angels (1988). Young men in the army during the Vietnam war.

Sunrise Over Fallujah (2008). A sequel to *Fallen Angels* that takes place in Iraq.

Urban Life

Hoops (1981). A promising basketball player tries not to end up like his former pro-playing coach

Scorpions (1988). A 12-year-old is asked to lead his brother's gang.

Monster (1999). A 16-year-old Black boy is charged with murder.

Bad Boy: A Memoir (2001). Myers' life as a young boy growing up in Harlem.

Shooter (2004). Friends of a school shooter give an account of him to the police

History

Malcolm X: By Any Means Necessary (1993); *Amistad: A Long Road to Freedom* (1997); *The Hellfighters: When Pride Met Courage* (2006).