

# CHILDREN'S LITERATURE LEGACY

## AWARD ACCEPTANCE SPEECH



Photo Credit: Constance Myers

Walter Dean Myers received the 2019 Children's Literature Legacy Award for his substantial and lasting contribution to literature for children. His son, Christopher Myers, delivered these award acceptance remarks at the Newbery Caldecott Legacy Banquet on Sunday, June 23, 2019, during the American Library Association Annual Conference.



Hey Pop,

It's been a minute since I've written you a proper letter, mostly because I don't know your address or even if they have email wherever you are.

When you were around, we'd write each other lots of letters, even if we knew we'd be meeting up for breakfast the next day. It's still nice to go through my inbox and see things you wrote me from years ago. I miss this way of talking to you.

I'm writing to tell you that you won the Legacy Award. Which is to say you changed the game. Which I guess you already knew. But it's nice to hear people say it too.

I wish you were here to give this speech, if only to hear you do the thing where you talk about getting the call: "When I got the news, it was early in the morning around cloud seven. I was with Chinua Achebe,

Gabriela Mistral, Li Po, and Langston Hughes, having breakfast, talking about how much work you could get a verb to do in a sentence, when Saint Peter said, 'Hey Walter, you got a phone call from Earth, I hear lots of people giggling on the other side.' I said, 'Man, do we have a phone up here? Who found out the number?!' To which Saint Peter replied, 'I think it's librarians, they are good with information.'"

People have said so many things about you in the past five years.

They put up a plaque at the George Bruce Library on 125th Street, where you used to spend hours and hours as a kid. I imagine telling kid-you that they would have a plaque up with your name: "Harlem Bad Boy, Done Good."

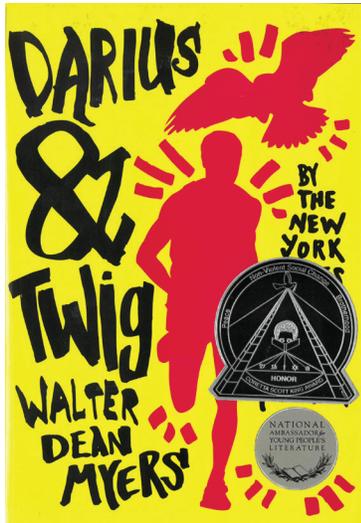
They named a bunch of things after you. There are some grants, and some reading rooms. There's even an award

Born in West Virginia in 1937, Walter Dean Myers was raised in Harlem where he "found solace in books." After serving in the U.S. Army, he began writing in the 1960s, eventually publishing more than 100 titles for young people. Among his many award-winning works are two Newbery Honor Books—*Somewhere in the Darkness* (1993) and *Scorpions* (1989), and the Coretta Scott King (CSK) Award-winning *Now Is Your Time!: The African-American Struggle for Freedom* (1992). Myers received multiple CSK Awards (5) and Honors (6) over his prolific career. His book, *Monster*, was the first winner of the Michael L. Printz Award, a National Book Award Finalist, and a *New York Times* bestseller. Myers was the 1994 recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement in writing for young adults and the inaugural winner in 2010 of the CSK Virginia Hamilton Award for Lifetime Achievement. He delivered ALSC's 2009 Arbutnot Honor lecture, entitled "The Geography of the Heart" and hosted by the Langston Hughes Library at the Children's Defense Fund Alex Haley Farm in Tennessee. Myers was named the 2012-13 National Ambassador for Young People's Literature by the Library of Congress. He lived with his family for many years in Jersey City, New Jersey, often creating books collaboratively with his son, Christopher. Walter Dean Myers died in 2014.

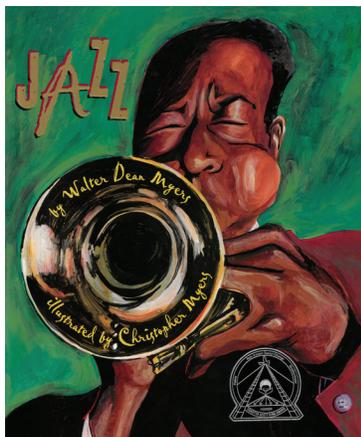
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*Darius & Twig*  
Walter Dean Myers  
Amistad/HarperCollins, 2013



*Jazz*  
Walter Dean Myers  
Illus. by Christopher Myers  
Holiday, 2006

called “The Walter.” (Which my friend Jason—remember him?—has won now, like, fifty-three times.)

People sort of invoke you, whenever they want to say that they’re doing something important, or real, or if they want to say that they’re caring for black children, or young people of color, or poor kids, or boys, or whoever they want to say they’re caring for.

I’ve heard so many stories of significant things you said to various folks. You’d be surprised how many significant things you said. They all talk about your voice being deep and that you were tall. Lots of folks say, “You know how Walter was,” like: “Walter Dean Myers was in the elevator, he loomed above me, and looked down at me with his warm, brown eyes, and said in that voice of his . . . you know how Walter was . . .” then everyone in the audience half-laughed and half-sighs. Then they follow up with some deep, affecting thing you said, a pearl of wisdom, at which point there’s a smattering of applause, and general agreement.

“Once I began to read, I began to exist.”

Nobody ever quotes the silly stuff.

“When a baby is born you shouldn’t say discouraging things about it, like ‘Hey, I seen prettier dogs than that baby . . .’”

Which is probably for the best, though you are still funny and still make me laugh.

All this, quoting and remembering, the stories...the significant moments in elevators, classrooms, juvenile detention centers. They’ll quote you on

tote bags and bookmarks, at the beginnings of their essays, and at the ends of their speeches. It’s their way of claiming you, and it’s beautiful.

Sometimes, the *you* that they claim is unfamiliar to me, like a cardboard cutout of what they think a writer is. Some sort of Moses-come-down-from-the-mountain, with stone tablets that lay down commandments about young people, literature, and how to change our literary landscape to better reflect the people around us. James Earl Jones voice, stentorian tones, wisdom, and vocabularies crowded with gravitas.

It’s still a part of you, and I’m thankful for it...even when I don’t agree or know you wouldn’t agree...but it’s not you.

People write and rewrite you.

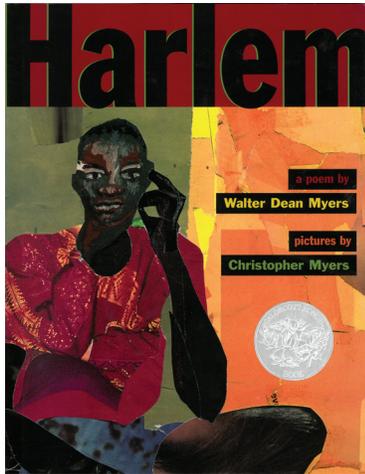
I saw somewhere where they said that your gift is that you wrote with an authentic urban voice. That you kept up on all the latest slang. I wonder what books *they* were reading. I remember a few times reading a manuscript and suggesting maybe you drop “Jim” from some character’s speech, as in “What’s happening, Jim!” unless that character was born in the 1930s and hit his stride in 1960s New York, like you.

The people who write such things, I imagine them imagining you, walking around Harlem or Jersey City on a summer day, scribbling in your anthro-linguistic notepad—“The youths are saying the word *Gucci* for *good*, I must include this in my next novel.” I even hear other writers touting their own “down-ness,” “I listen to hip-hop—that’s my music, that’s how I stay relating to the kids.” And I

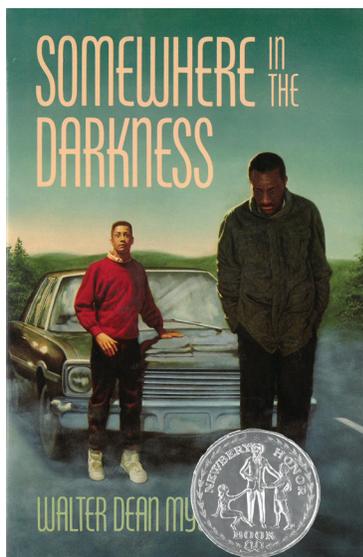
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*Harlem*  
Walter Dean Myers  
Illus. by Christopher Myers  
Scholastic, 1997



*Somewhere in the Darkness*  
Walter Dean Myers  
Scholastic, 1992

wish you could magically appear, and whisper a little advice in their ears, write them a letter.

I wish I could give them my memories sometimes: You are listening to Cesária Évora or Dulce Pontes as she twists a mournful fado from the little radio behind your desk. You are laughing at a funny thing you wrote, in that way that you enjoyed writing for its own sake. You are looking up at the collage Mama made for whatever your latest project was. Yelling at the cat to stop giving you the evil eye as you typed.

Another person once said to me, “Your father was *real*, he wasn’t afraid to tell the truth about the hood. No matter how harsh.” I never really know what they mean. I smile and say *thanks*. I can’t imagine a “faux” you as opposed to the “real” one they imagine.

I see a fair number of books published that try to do that thing, of being a particular version of real, sort of sadness competitions. These books depict young people who see themselves more through the eyes of others than through their own eyes. As if poverty or oppression was a thief that could rob you of humor, love, family, and everything else you held dear.

These are books that speak to what other people imagine it’s like to be black or poor or whatever else we are, refugees or queer or any number of things to which society doesn’t show love.

And sincerely I think, for them, if they were to wake up in Harlem in 1947 and be ten years old and poor and confused about what exactly they were supposed to dream of being,

because on one hand they were told they were intelligent and good writers, and on the other hand they saw the glass ceilings of race and class slicing through what their dreams could have been, if those people had to imagine being you, it might be just sadness. They wouldn’t have sisters, and comic books, and parents who loved them through the struggle, and dime-store candy, and roller skates. I smell somewhere, in all that writing, reading, publishing, the books that reduce our lives to suffering—a hunger for our pain.

I remember when you went to that school somewhere out West—this was in the 1980s, and the teachers were doing an exercise in which they were talking to a grade-school class about slavery. They made all the kids lie on the floor, packed tightly together. Then they shut off the lights. They said, “Now imagine, you’ve all been kidnapped from home, and you’ll never see your families again.” And the little white kids, who maybe hadn’t seen any black people before, began to cry. When those kids grow up, they will hopefully have sympathetic hearts, and they will imagine the African American experience as a horror story and read books that confirm their ideas about what it is to be you, or me, or us.

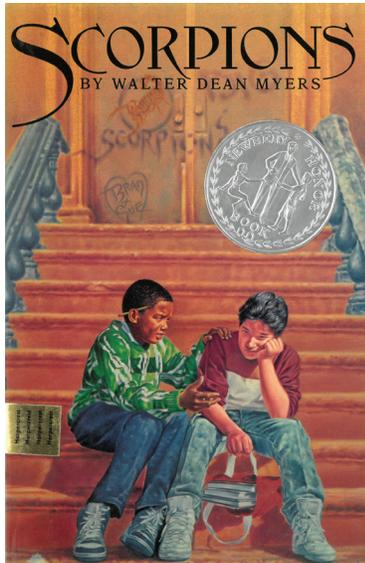
You told me that after the lesson, they got up to ask you questions, and one little boy, still tearful from his ordeal, raised his little hand and asked in the tenderest, most sympathetic voice, “Were you a slave?”

I imagine that the books written, in your name, telling the “harsh truths,” are created by people like those. Or even people like us, who got the message that the only thing important

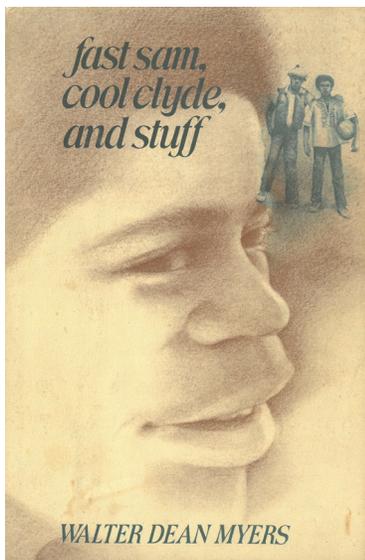
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*Scorpions*  
Walter Dean Myers  
Harper, 1988



*Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff*  
Walter Dean Myers  
Viking, 1975

about our stories is our pain. Well-meaning, but maybe missing the point.

To tell the truth, Pop, there's a whole slew of people missing points.

There are people busy condemning books they haven't read.

And people trying to regulate who is allowed to write what.

I remember how many thin years we had, when you were trying to write almost anything to put food on our table, and those agents and editors who thought themselves clever to say that you should "write something urban," because it had been successful before, and besides, what did you know about the Arctic (where you had been stationed in the Army), or the flute (which you played almost every morning), or Tarik ibn Ziyad (the African Muslim who conquered Spain in the year 711) ... "Shouldn't we leave those books to be written by eighth-century representatives of the Caliphate?"

Thank goodness for Mom, who was always your harshest reader and ardent supporter. Who said things like, "Well, I don't think the main character is likable," or very occasionally—"This one is just good, Walter." You always said, "There is a special love in someone who will be honest with you about your work; your mother loves me like that." And as I continue making things in the world, I see how rare it is. The editors you swore by, like Phoebe or Regina.

And Pop, don't get me started on Twitter. You'd be amazed at the number of people who think they can say something nuanced and important

and worth the time it takes to type it, in 280 characters. I don't think they love language the way you taught me to, at least most of them don't.

But all of them, the ones who get it and the ones who don't, they appreciate and claim you, they say nice things about you. They talk about what you've done, and how it makes what they want to do possible.

And in between all the missed points there is something there. Some common thread, and it's easy to identify what it *isn't*...But just the way your hands flashed through the air when you spoke, as if doing an interpretive dance of whatever speech you were giving—I want to capture the thread of what it *is*, too.

LAST WEEK I was at the maximum-security facility for girls in upstate New York. It's where they've moved all the hard cases since they shut down Spofford and the juvenile detention facilities you and I went to when I first started making books. I still go to these prisons, make it my business to be there.

It's strange the times when I feel you with me. Every time, for example, when I enter a juvenile detention center. I must have been twenty or twenty-one when we first went to one together, not much older than the oldest inmates. It's still scary, the layers of chain link cutting into the sky, the barbed wire, the clank and buzz of electric gates. The list of contraband—no sharp pencils, no hard candies, no paperclips, no phones.

It's still as much of a shock when the inmate children shuffle out from their rooms to whichever auditorium, drab classroom, or gym we are

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about to do a presentation in. Their brightly colored jumpsuits slouching off their teenage shoulders. Laceless shoes barely hanging on to their feet. Awkward as puberty or children in jail. How can their clothes fit them, when even their limbs don't?

In every jail I have ever visited, your name is the passport. The thing that gives me street cred: I worked on *Monster*, with my father Walter Dean Myers. In even the sparsest prison libraries there are a few tattered copies of *Monster*.

I begin talking with the girls about stories, about the idea that we are bounded by the stories that have been told about us. This for them is a truth they recognize. This is a truth you taught me.

(From time to time people ask how I relate to young people in such desperate circumstances. They are most often abused, hurting, and scared. They are as responsible for their current situation as any eleven, twelve, or thirteen-year-old is, which is to say not very. People who don't visit kid prisons wonder if I adjust my language, or attitude, if I stay up on the latest lingo. I remember the countless times we were in these places together and laugh at the thought of you slanging it up for some young people. You always told them what you thought was true—and that, especially for these young folks, is always passport enough.)

They tell me the stories they feel have risen around them, that cut into their skies, like the barbed wire and chain link fences.

I think of you again, a boy in Harlem, who looked at the stories that

limited you—what cut into your sky. I remember how you saw yourself in these girls, in the boys on the news that were arrested, on trial, or dying. They're still turning us into hashtags, Pop.

We would leave every jail and you would shake your head. "I think we got to them. I hope I wasn't too late."

I would tell you, "Dad, it's not your fault." And every time you'd ask, "Isn't it?"

You talked often about getting to them.

We're still having the same conversations now—Jackie, Jason, Phoebe, Meg, Akwaeke, Kwame.

The publishers, the librarians, the people who know how important stories are.

Seems like the whole world is now caught up, worried about getting to them—

and all the various them that you wouldn't have imagined

but would have worried about all the same.

REMEMBER a few years ago, that village I went to in Papua New Guinea?

I wished I could have talked to you about that whole experience.

There was one day I felt you with me so strongly.

Papua New Guinea is made of thousands of little tiny islands. Each one has its own language, culture, customs. The people there are Black, but

a Black from before-before.

Where we came to the U.S. from the continent within the last couple hundred years,

they say their migration from Africa was made over thirty thousand years ago.

But they listen to reggae, dancehall, hip-hop, and soul. They look at us as at least cousins.

The barbers know what I mean when I walk in and say, "Give me a double zero."

There was one island about the size of Central Park, surrounded by endless crystal water, dotted with thatched huts teetering on bamboo poles. There was no electricity, save for the D batteries in the one portable radio tuned to the local reggae station broadcasting from Alotau, the nearest island city, which was several days' boat ride away. There was one school on the island, a fragile building made of corrugated tin and scraps of linoleum tile with a smattering of outdated books, colonial holdovers, the occasional poor drawing of a Dick or Jane. Otherwise, the tiny island in the clear water was almost devoid of pictures.

There were no mirrors; there were two photos pinned to the side of one thatched hut, of someone's grandfather who had ventured off the island and played soccer. A faded silkscreen of Bob Marley stared out from a hand-me-down T-shirt, probably distributed by an NGO. I thought of how many times I'd written the words *image famine* when referring to the op-eds we'd written in the *New York Times*. My first instinct was to

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draw every kid there. I asked them all to stand in a line, and—watercolors splashing about in a plastic tub of sea water—I did my best. The line became a crowd of brown little ones, their mothers and fathers, extended families. The sun was setting, I wanted to draw the grandparents too, a little boy described to me a friend he'd lost...it was all too much. And so, I turned to you.

When I travel, I carry my watercolors, but also, I carry books, because children's books are a valuable commodity all over the world. And I pulled out a copy of *blues journey*. They looked at the pictures, the brown faces I'd painted in blue ink, and together we sang your blues lyrics.

I was standing at the crossroads, didn't know which way to go

Standing at the crossroads, didn't know which way to go

My heart was pulling one way, my head said take it slow

And for a moment you were there with me, those parents, and their children. A thousand-million miles from Harlem, from New York, from anywhere you would ever have been, your words were serving as a mirror for the entirety of an island. And even though I was far away, and you'd been gone from the Earth, there you were getting to them. Sharing your blues, your laughter, your songs, your words.

GETTING TO THEM, and me and us, getting through to us, never meant speaking the exact same language, or a hobby-like fascination with pain and hardship. It means being vulnerable and honest, giving that vulnerability as a gift.

It means caring more for the story that you are telling, for the young people and communities reading that story, than for what the story represents, or someone else's poor imagination of what our lives ought to be. (I know how tired you were of books whose main purpose seemed to be supplementing or correcting other people's poor imaginations of us. So much more loving and fun to expand on our rich imaginations of ourselves.) It means truly believing in the power of words, in the art, in the writing, as giving a little piece of yourself.

You told us about young people like you were, ambitious and fearful, guarded and loving, intimidated and brave. Mixed-up and beautiful. You told me that the reward of a story was in the growth of a character, that no one cared about superheroes unless they had a weakness, a vulnerability that was a strength. That is what every child, in classrooms and prisons, riding subways or walking through cornfields, recognizes in these books you'd written and themselves. Kids who have been painted with masks, like *thug* or *good-for-nothing*, *threat* or *fear*; first you saw in them, yourself, and then articulated all that vulnerability, lightness, sweetness, and love.

Poppa, you gave us so many pieces of yourself, keys, a way of rendering other people visible. Your generosity allowed you to cross the fences and barbed wires of the poorest imaginations. The ones who look at children in cages at the borders, or homeless, or solidly middle-class kids with that quiet desperation of never being seen, all marginalized children in danger of being swallowed by the stories that threaten to erase them. All

the fragments that people remember to me of you, they're all true in their way. Just the way every young person is really a set of possibilities, a group of futures. You saw all of these kids, and wrote lifelines, stories for them all.

BACK AT THE correctional facility for teenage girls, I ask the inmates (strange to call babies such an impersonal word) to tell me a story of themselves ten years in the future, when they are twenty-three or twenty-five. One, whose smile for a moment cuts through the layers of gray paint and cinderblock, looks at me sideways. "I don't know if I will be here then."

I think again of you.

You are a storyteller, which is another word for magic.

You made stories that resurrected babies who imagined themselves nowhere in five years.

You made stories that give those children a possibility of tomorrow, Poppa.

I think more than any one book,

any poetic turn of phrase (and you had many),

or heartbreaking saga.

I think that this is your legacy.

All the young people who couldn't imagine themselves, and the imaginations that you let loose.

They are standing in an endless line, like those children in Papua New Guinea, waiting to be drawn.

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And they will read your books and see themselves, in vulnerabilities of the characters, in the humor, in your artistry, in the magic that happens in between the words that invites every reader to be a part of the story.

You made a space for them.

And you couldn't anticipate where they would go.

Jackie is an institution. Jason is pumping out stories until his heart bursts, like some sort of literary John Henry. I wish you could have met Akwaeke, you would have said it's unfair for someone to be that charming and that good of a writer. We're all trying to keep up the good work, Poppa.

You'd be excited by so much of what's happening.

Tomorrows that you wrote into being.

Stories that you started long ago and that hopefully will not end.

I REMEMBER ONCE, it was in Brooklyn, we went to a high school.

And a kid looked at you and said,

"So you supposed to be a famous writer?"

and you said something like,

"Well, I'm kind of well known."

And then he said, "But you look like an old dude from my block, like a regular person."

We went for a walk after that, through one of those parts of Red Hook,

made of chain-link and brick towers, the kind of place we feel at home.

And you smiled, and you said, "I think I got through to that one."

Meaning, that maybe he got that key that took you from the George Bruce Library on 125th Street, through hundreds of books and poems and stories. That maybe he understood, that yes, we are bounded by the stories that are told about us,

but we too can write our stories.

And in that sense of giving someone a tomorrow,

You said, "I think I did good."

Dad, I think you did good too.

We all do.

Love, Chris

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For more information about the Legacy Award, visit <http://bit.ly/alsc-legacy-award>.

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