

The May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture

The Geography of the Heart

Walter Dean Myers

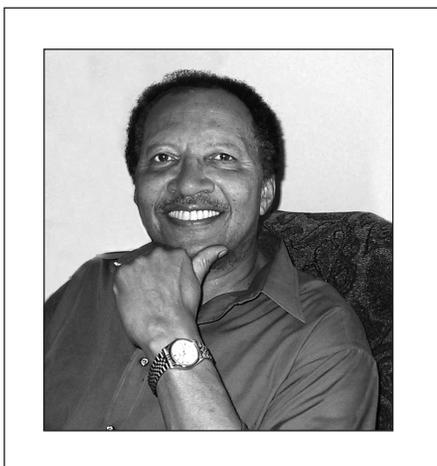


Photo by Dave Rowell.

Walter Dean Myers delivered his Arbuthnot lecture April 18, 2009, at the Children's Defense Fund Haley Farm in Clinton, Tennessee.

It's an honor and privilege to offer this lecture in this place and at this most interesting time in the history of our country. I thank the Arbuthnot Committee for affording me this opportunity.

My life has been, without doubt, one of marked privilege. I've been able to spend most of it doing what I truly love—writing. The returns for my efforts have gone beyond my most ambitious expectations. I've been able to see a great deal of the world and to enjoy the comforts and blessings of my native country. Not the least of my many returns are the relationships I have made and sustained over the years with editors, librarians, teachers, and my fellow writers.

I'm at a point in my career when I'm often being asked by well-intentioned interviewers for a summation of my writing efforts. They phrase the questions nicely. "What do you see as your legacy, Mr. Myers?" or "How would you describe your achievements?" I don't really mind these variations on my epitaph when they come as questions from truly interested parties. What does bother me is that they want an answer far more complex than I'm usually willing to suffer through.

What I do is fairly simple. I write books for the troubled boy I once was, and for the boy who lives within me still. The books that regularly tumble from my head are also fun to work on, but many interviewers are suspect of fun and think they are honoring me by evaluating my work as "serious." Perhaps they are having fun by being so serious. I hope so.

Reading, for as long as I can remember, has always been a good part of my life. My reading habits as a young boy growing up in Harlem, New York, were similar to those of every avid reader. Did I read everything I could get my hands on? Of course I did. Did I read under the desk in school? Certainly. Did I have the flashlight under the covers to finish just one more chapter or one more story before falling asleep? Absolutely.

I can't imagine my life without the books I've enjoyed and the pleasures of read-

ing. As a child I was thrilled with the wonder of language. Now I have grown old with the literature of my life and my soul is richer for the experience.

One of the interesting aspects of being a senior citizen who is both at peace with himself and content with his life is the gift of retrospection. I think back on my life and see, with reasonable clarity, where I have taken the right path and where I've deviated and why. When thinking, in particular, about boys and reading I think it's natural to determine how I came to be a reader.

Although reading is often referred to as a skill, I believe it is actually a creative process for which the mind has to be prepared. When we break the reading process into two broad categories, decoding and ownership, this becomes clearer. Decoding can be viewed as a learned linguistic skill, but "ownership"—that part of reading in which the reader takes the cultural schema of the text into his or her own consciousness—is an act of secondary creation which alters the written material according to the psyche and culture of the person who has successfully done the decoding.

I believe that my reading "mind" was prepared long before I came to my first page of printed material. It began, and I am quite confident of this, in the conversations I had with my foster mom in our tidy Harlem apartment. My mother used to engage me in simple conversations as she did the housework each day. She didn't talk at me, she talked to me and fully expected me to answer her. I remember her asking me what the weather was like and how we should dress if we walked across 125th Street to the market stalls under the train trestle. I would dutifully go to the window, assess the weather, and decide what we should wear.

Sometimes she would ask me what I thought we might see on our crosstown journey and I, pleased to have my opinion heard, would tell her. Would we take the crosstown trolley or walk? If I was asked I knew it meant that Mama had money for the trolley. It was quite all right with her if I made up something

fanciful that we would see or that we might do. She seemed pleased when my ideas stretched the imagination. She was allowing me to be creative.

When I got older, perhaps four, Mama began to tell me about her childhood. Her mother was a German immigrant

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who had married a Native American. Ostracized by her German relatives, my grandmother, a tiny lady with an impossible accent, moved away from her Pennsylvania community to West Virginia. Mama told me stories about her being called a “half breed.” She also told me that some people wouldn’t like me because I was a Negro. And what did I think about that?

Well, I didn’t like it one bit because I was, in my opinion, a very good boy and everybody should have liked me, and I made this very clear to Mama who agreed with me. What this uneducated woman was doing was allowing me to formulate my own thoughts, and to put the words together to express those thoughts and to be creative in whatever manner I could.

I was developing, within the intellectual being I was becoming, the constant possibility of an imagined universe that was both transitory and real. It was transitory in that I could create it for as short or as long a period as I chose, and real in that there were physical and temporal references which I had to constantly reference. I was developing, in short, an intellectual geography based upon the totality of my being, a physical existence in Harlem, the family dynamics as they played out in our railroad apartment, the presence of my parents, their cultural background, and the love that developed within our family structure. I

acquired habits during this period that I still maintain. The most important idea here is that our family structure and the resultant cultural geography, mirrored the larger mainstream culture. We hoped for and worked toward those American goals we thought possible even under the American apartheid of segregation.

It’s important to note that the term “geography” meant to me, at that time, merely an extension of my personal topography and was largely physical. This would change. One day I would come to understand the geography of the heart and its vastly different concepts.

I remember Mama reading to me when I was five. Each day she would do the usual housework which consisted of cleaning anything that needed cleaning, ironing anything that entertained the notion that it could possibly harbor a wrinkle, and putting away everything in its assigned place. Then, for that brief period between housework “done” and supper “started” she would read. Her choice of reading was always the same. True romance, love, heartbreak, jealousy, men as handsome as princes, and women whose bosoms rose and fell breathlessly from page to page. I didn’t understand much about romance but I loved that time with Mama, sitting in our small kitchen, hearing her totally pleasant voice as she read. Did I tell you I was a Mama’s boy? I was.

What I knew about reading was that the print on the page was to be decoded and that Mama and I could do it. And when we did it we could enter the magical world of story. It allowed you to sit on your mother’s lap and lean against her as you recreated the world in your own mind. Interestingly, the concept of intellectual ownership of the text clearly pre-

ceded expertise in decoding. Mama, who had only gone as far as the third grade in the small school in Pennsylvania she had attended, read with a finger moving slowly across the page.

I don’t remember actually learning the decoding process. The vocabulary of those *True Love* and *True Romance* magazines must have been quite limited because I began recognizing printed words by the time I was five. By six, I could read to Mama as she worked, and she would correct the words I didn’t know.

My father, Herbert Dean, did not read. That tragedy wouldn’t catch up with me for decades. I was a Mama’s boy.

In school I learned that I was an American. I learned a version of American history that spoke of pilgrims and how they were kind enough to invite the Indians to dinner at Thanksgiving. Or maybe they just cut out pumpkins or something but, no matter the details, they all sat around after dinner and smoked a peace pipe. They also had turkeys which they did something with—I think they colored them with brown and yellow Crayola crayons, and I don’t think it was the same turkey that they ate but I did understand that turkeys had something to do with me being American. My personal geography was clearly expanding.

I belonged to the Church of the Master, a Presbyterian church on the Western edge of Harlem. Through the church I learned that there were other continents to which we sometimes sent missionaries. Africa was full of black people. At least as many black people as there were in Harlem.

It was through my church that I first traveled around New York City. There was a field trip to Ebbets Field in Brooklyn where the Dodgers played, and I became a lifelong Dodgers fan. There was a trip down to Radio City. We were taken to a synagogue, a Catholic church, Riverside Church, a dance recital, and various museums.

In Bible school (which was really a summer day camp) we learned to make

wallets out of leather and occasionally suffer through lectures by famous Black Americans. The famous black Americans we had to listen to were Josephine Baker, Paul Robeson, and a soft-spoken writer named Langston Hughes.

I didn't like Josephine Baker for two good reasons; the first was that we were dragged out of a basketball game at the church's gym to hear her, and the second was that she sang a song I didn't know and, to make things worse, she sung it in French.

I didn't like Paul Robeson because he also didn't sing anything that I knew.

I didn't like Langston Hughes because I didn't want to sit still in church while he read whatever it was that he was reading that didn't include any real adventures or people being in terrible danger and that might die at any moment the way they might die at the end of the movie serials, and none of the people he wrote about had super powers.

My world, through the church and through my school, was expanding bit by bit despite the fact that my life was solidly centered in Harlem.

Again, my personal geography followed the trend of the dominant culture. I believed I could be like the characters I saw on television. My father worked and had pride in his ability to feed his family, and that pride represented a family value and a sense of purpose. Taking care of one's family colored the soil of the geography we claimed. This was ours. This family. This pride. This hope for a better life. It was intuitive that for me to achieve these things on my own I would have to acquire skills.

School. I arrived with confidence and understanding. I knew exactly what school meant—you had a lot of kids to play with and to tell what to do and to keep in line if they needed it and believe me some of them needed it.

When Miss Dworkin met me in the first grade she quickly discovered that I could read. Mollie Dworkin was a small woman, not quite five feet tall, with shockingly red hair which bobbed as she moved quickly

about the classroom. When the principal of the school, Mary Flynn, found out that one of her first graders tested very well it was suggested that I be moved to the second grade. I was already tall for my age and it was thought that I could handle the harder work. Miss Dworkin agreed that I could probably do second grade work, but she had noted that I had trouble pronouncing words and, after an interview with my mother, kept me in the first grade.

The speech difficulty, I believe, was genetic. When I met my biological siblings years later I discovered we all had the same peculiarity of speech. We all seemed to have the meanings of the words firmly in mind but not the sounds of the words.

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Back to the two elements I recognize as reading—decoding the letters or symbols that form words and phrases and the transition from the decoding process to ownership of the text.

Ownership is successful when the reader completely understands the full range of information offered within the text. A scene describing rainfall in the city, for example, is imagined by the reader based on the author's text. The image that the author had will not be exactly the same one the reader recreates because of the differences of their particular experiences and mindsets but, hopefully, it will be close enough so that the reader becomes comfortable with the information offered.

In my conversations at home, I was used to transferring information from one person to another and in the imaginative process involved. In this sense I was “reading ready” and only had to worry about expanding the decoding process.

In many ways, I also had a head start in decoding. By being taken around the city by my church at an early age and being exposed to different cultures, I was comfortable with the new ideas that I would find in books. I had a relatively wide range of intellectual experiences, even at seven, that served me well.

I didn't think of myself as having a specific cultural “geography,” and I wouldn't for years to come. I understood that there were people more privileged than I was, and there were always the starving children of some far off land but I didn't know what the differences were.

The transition from being a reader to being a writer was, for me, quite natural. I liked to read and I liked to be sociable

but I tended to fight a lot in school which limited my social network. The fighting often stemmed from my speech problems. The frustration I felt as I rattled off my ideas to bewildered teachers and fellow students often ended up with me punching someone.

I was frequently admonished for “not playing well with others.” The problem was that the “others” didn't always do what I told them to do. When I'm writing I create my own “others,” calling them “characters,” and I play very well with them. What I had been doing in my head, creating a constantly shifting parallel world, I began to do on paper. The discipline of forming the details that made up a poem or story was one I enjoyed immensely.

So why, I ask myself, are all young boys not as fascinated by books, not as drawn to reading or writing, as I was? My thinking along these lines over the years was not prompted by my need to find an

audience so much as the need to answer questions in a field in which people assume that I should have some degree of expertise. The truth of the matter is that I have little expertise in the field of reading, but like every prolific writer, and I think my ninety or so books put me into that category, I'm not at all short of chutzpah. So I began thinking about the question and, over a long period of time, began to formulate answers.

I began by making the simple declaration that reading is good for human beings. That sounded reasonable to me and so, after giving myself a brief round of applause, I moved rather quickly to a mythical character of my own creation, a young boy named Jeremy.

“My father worked and had pride in his ability to feed his family, and that pride represented a family value and a sense of purpose. Taking care of one’s family colored the soil of the geography we claimed. This was ours. This family. This pride. This hope for a better life. It was intuitive that for me to achieve these things on my own I would have to acquire skills.”

I decided that Jeremy would be a thirteen-year-old African American and that he has proclaimed to the world, and to a harried seventh grade teacher in particular, that he “didn’t want to read no books.” The teacher looks aghast at Jeremy and tries patiently to explain again why Jeremy should be a reader.

Jeremy is my character, my alter ego, my major concern in these troubled times, and I have to understand him. My first consideration is whether or not Jeremy is intellectually capable of reading. I have historical evidence by a group of experts who have studied the subject extensively and who believed that the Jeremys of the world could easily learn to read. Their studies, while not scientific in the strict sense of that word, carried a lot of weight for me because of the capitalistic implications. The Slave Codes of the 1840s expressly prohibited any white person

from teaching a slave to read. This prohibition against teaching the slaves to read is repeated in the codes of Georgia, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

In short, the slave owners realized a need to prevent the slaves from being exposed to reading. These are the slaves that worked from sun up to sun down, who were humbled in the cotton fields and quarries, who were regarded uniformly as little more than animals to be bought and sold. And yet the slave owners must have noted that some were secretly learning to read. If reading was not intellectually available to them, southern legislators would not have had to spend the time passing such laws. What this suggests to me is that Jeremy

and the inner city boys he represents are clearly intellectually capable of reading. When I ask Jeremy directly if he believes reading is good for him, he offers up a reluctant “Yeah.”

If Jeremy is capable of reading, and he believes it’s good for him, why doesn’t he want to read?

I began my query with the declaration that reading was good for human beings. Could it be that Jeremy knows something about reading that I don’t? Does reading, perhaps, cause terminal chicken pox in some students? Is there a side effect I don’t know about?

But during our conversations, held variously on street corners, in schools, and in juvenile detention facilities, I discover something that at first seems rather odd but eventually looms larger and larger in

our relationship. Jeremy and I are using the same words, so that it sounds as if we have a direct communication using a common language. My assumption was that Jeremy and I, because we have come from a similar urban experience, look somewhat alike and identify ourselves as African Americans, that we have a shared congruency in the cultural geography that defines our words. But I discovered that we do not share as much as I thought, and that we are not at all on the same page despite our use of common phrases. Jeremy, in short, has a different human geography than I do.

I am talking about an array of reading experiences that suit the context of my life and Jeremy was responding in the context of both his life and what he knew I expected him to say. As this became clear to me I began to understand that the act of reading meant something different to Jeremy than it did to me. I also began to understand that Jeremy knew a lot more about my world than I did about his.

In my world, books are indisputably good and useful tools. Jeremy understood everything I was saying about reading and also understood the validity of these concepts in my world. He also understood that my world, that is my belief system, was generally accepted in American culture. We who are a part of mainstream American culture, often find ourselves declaring the existence of universal truths on a broad level and extending those truths to the rank of intellectual canons at a higher level. Jeremy knows this even though he might not be able to articulate it. Recognizing my recitation of what I believe to be the universal truths of the day, Jeremy quickly agreed to them.

Jeremy’s agreement came the same way that we all agree to such basic tenets as “exercise is good for health,” and “we need to get enough fiber.” Jeremy has a parallel system of multiple cognitions. There are ideas he believes are valid for me, and other ideas he believes are valid for himself. The competing truths that Jeremy actually uses in his day-to-day life are, to him, more compelling than mine. He has learned to mimic me in ways that the underclass learns what

is expected of them. The subservient panhandler gets more money than the aggressive panhandler. Tourist trades are often built on the ability of people to act in ways they are depicted as acting on brochures. Jeremy has understood some of the differences between his geography and mine and knows how he is expected to act. He also understands fully that when he doesn't act in this manner, he will be viewed as hostile.

What are the differences between my reading experiences and Jeremy's and what do those differences tell us about how to bring the inner city youth to reading?

Reading for me is an extension of the ideational process that I identify as my essential self. "I think, therefore I am," is extended to "my thoughts define me, they are who I am." A book that does not trigger my own thought responses, that does not push me into a new realm of imagination or a reconsidered logic, does not interest me. I do read for pure entertainment, but even that has to have some level of intellectual involvement. As a writer, I live in an imagined world where characters wander in and out of story contexts primarily to expose some idea, some random flight of fancy which holds some fascination for me, at least for the duration of the writing project. The rather mundane notion that I must live in a physical world, must eat, must spend time on the line at my bank, are mere interruptions that I suffer until I get to the real world within my head.

Some of these ideas are a result of my own thinking, and others were taught to me. But they have all been reaffirmed by my life experiences. I have bolstered the quality of my life through reading. I have friends and relatives who enjoy their lives more because they are readers. The *New York Times* has told me that college educated people, presumably readers at some level, make more money than high school drop outs. In short, I am a believer.

Another way of looking at my beliefs is to look at both my physical and cultural geography. I was born in Martinsburg, West Virginia, a scant ten miles from where my great great grandparents

had been held as slaves. I was raised in Harlem, New York, then the Black cultural center of the world. The society I found myself in mirrored the white society in most aspects. Belonging to a fixed society, with its history, culture, and yes, physical terrain, provides continuity for the individual and the basis of personal hope.

The human experience is one of constantly reproducing itself using the skills and values of the past to push forward to a positive future. Societies become great as they replicate that regenerative process over a period of centuries. The American process began with English civilization and continues and is refined on this continent. This is what I had absorbed far before I had analyzed it to the point of being able to say the words. Learning to read and, later, to write, certainly seemed, for me, part of the social reproductive process. The learning methodology, acquiring skills in decoding, comprehension, and judgment of textual material that could be applied to an increasingly wide range of problems, seemed natural because I needed to understand the past and use the already proven skill sets available to move on. I accepted the values of my parents and wanted to bring those values into my own life, into my own space. I hoped, of course, to improve on my family's circumstances by acquiring more education and more profound skills. I have spent a lifetime telling young inner city children they should do the same.

But about thirty or forty years ago, the world's concept of societal geography changed radically. And as societal geography changed, so did personal geography.

The new geography defines our positions in the world not by the usual topographical references but, rather, by the socioeconomic factors which allow us or prevent us from recreating our particular social segments in a positive manner. To say that we live in New York or San Francisco is no longer significant because those geographical references fail utterly to describe where we are in relationship to American culture. It is far more accurate to say that I am in a position that I cannot perpetuate my

family history because there are no jobs available for me to build an economic base or that my family has become so dysfunctional that recreation cannot be positive.

When we approach the individual inner city child to examine his ability to positively reproduce his individual society, we immediately encounter problems. The most obvious problem is the means. The legend of America throughout the world is that it is a geographical area in which work can be used to climb an economic ladder which, by its ascent, enables the individual to participate in the reproduction of his society. As that economic ladder disappears, as jobs disappear in particular for the inner city family, other means must be found to reproduce the society. Lacking other conventional means, the inner city child will sometimes turn to criminal activities, but will most often abandon the attempt. With the loss of clear possibilities of positive reproduction, there is also the loss of hope.

The idea of incrementally learned skills to tackle the reproductive problems of a society worked in 1940 because the skill ladder to success was available to everyone. Today, that idea of success is missing many of the rungs that were there in the forties. A person with fair reading ability could work in a refrigerator factory in 1947.

Today those jobs don't exist in a nationally meaningful way. In 1948, a high school diploma carried a great deal of weight. Today, it has relatively little meaning. Moreover, the gap between the inner city child and the role models of success our country celebrates is so great that there is little incentive for the inner city child to even want to reproduce his own society. When over 65 percent of all African American children are born outside of family situations, we see that this segment of society is not successfully reproducing itself.

What are Jeremy's experiences? Is he surrounded by success models? Does he see his family reading? Are there people among his close associates who have succeeded through education? Quite possibly not, and this is an important

difference. We often think of education as something that occurs in schools or, in the least, mostly in schools. But in the real world, education happens twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. When Jeremy awakes in the morning, his immediate environment tells him something about who he is and what his prospects are. If he has breakfast, that is a lesson. If he does not have breakfast, that, too, is a lesson.

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If one or both of Jeremy’s parents is employed, the dignity that a job affords is transmitted through the family and becomes part of Jeremy’s understanding. Life assumes a purpose and a direction for the family and suggests a larger plan and an expanded geography which Jeremy can use in his dealings with life. If full employment is not the case, if the dignity of employment and, therefore, self sufficiency is not present, the lesson carries over to Jeremy’s concept of preparing for the future.

When he comes downstairs to start his journey to school and sees young men in his neighborhood who are both jobless and without hope for a future brighter than hanging out on the corner, he internalizes that experience and assigns a reason to it. The reason often assigned is that something about him is unworthy of having that bright future and he experiences the death of hope.

In a recent book, *Game*, I have the coach of Drew, a young basketball player, telling him how he needs to play team ball if he wants to succeed. While my ball-player understands the practicality of the coach’s words, he also understands that there is a level at which he cannot afford to be part of a group concept because the group he most strongly identifies with, his peers in his neighborhood, are seemingly headed for failure.

What has happened to Drew, and to many young people in our inner cities, is that they have been so marginalized that their game plan has evolved in a totally different manner than the one we are trying to impose on them. To be part of a group effort when the group is not doing well doesn’t make sense for Drew or for Jeremy or for the millions of children they represent.

I’m often asked why I write for young people. Over the years I’ve offered up a number of answers as I’ve worked it out in my own head. What I’ve come up with that makes the most sense to me is that my own experiences as a teenager were so intense that I keep coming back to that period of my life to explore and to make sense of in a way that defines who I am today. I’ve used my own experiences to understand the characters I write about. I’ve had a life that mirrors theirs in many aspects but I’ve also been blessed with the ability to closely examine the events in my life and to articulate the parameters of my emotional and intellectual response to those events. I can then draw upon my examined life and my attempts to work out the rationale for who I have become to create believable characters in my novels.

I was considered bright in elementary and middle school. This is important not so much because of what I could accomplish in my early years but rather how the changes in my environment, the invasion of negative factors on my emotional and cultural geography, altered both the perception that I was bright, both my own perception and that of people around me, and my actual academic accomplishments.

When I reached my teens I suffered a series of personal traumas. An uncle who

I admired and who had spent most of his life in jail was finally released, only to be violently murdered shortly afterwards in a Bronx alleyway. He was literally beaten to death.

My foster father lapsed into a major depression after his brother’s death, often sitting in a darkened room for hours upon end without speaking. We had never been well off financially, but now he was sending what little “extra” money we had to a radio evangelist. As a result, I often didn’t have money for school supplies.

My mom, always an alcoholic, responded with a deepening dependence on drugs. It was not unusual to come home and find her lying on the floor in one of the rooms in our railroad flat or to not find her home at all and have a neighbor come to the door to say that she had collapsed in the hallway downstairs or on the sidewalk around the corner.

These are not pretty ideas but they are not unusual in the neighborhood in which I grew up. What they did to me was to occupy my entire being in such a way as to form a constant distraction that could not be ignored. It was like having a jackhammer running constantly in the next apartment. No matter what I was trying to think about or work out, my home situation was always there for me to deal with and to try to deemphasize.

My grades plummeted. I remember being recommended to take a test for the Negro College Fund and being hopelessly confused in trying to fill out the student identification section. What high school was I attending? What borough did I live in? The test started and I left after working on the first page. The brightness had gone. The good student was somehow lost in the *sturm und drang* of his family’s declining fortunes. The angst burden I had developed created a deficit weight in my being, a deficit I had to deal with on a constant basis as so many children do. They do not begin each day at the starting line, but several yards, if not several miles, behind.

The last interesting bit here was the assault on my personal identity. Prior to this period, when I was considered a

“bright” student and enrolled in one of the nation’s leading high schools, I had created an identity for myself consistent with my own aspirations but also consistent with what I understood to be the cultural schema of the majority population.

When I played the role consistent with what I had learned to say about my potential, I was limited only by the willingness to apply myself and the depths of my intellectual abilities. I was also speaking the same language as my teachers and school counselors. But as my grades went down, as I found myself—

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as so many inner city students do—the subject of my teachers’ warnings about my impending doom, I began more and more to look upon the failures in my family and my neighborhood as my true identity models. Yes, the president of the United States is a black man, but the black man who is closest in identity to the inner city child is the one leaning against the bodega entrance with a beer in his hand. As the character in *Game* looks upon the jobless young men in his community, I looked at my father, a janitor, and my cousins who worked as laborers in New York’s garment center as mine. I began to separate the world into a real universe of important and vital people doing the kinds of things I read about in my precious books, and the “other” world which was my threatened reality.

My personal geography was changing. The world I had thought to exist at the

other end of the rainbow was fading away. My response was to turn away from my increasingly dysfunctional family to my very functional books.

These were not conscious thoughts following some precise formula. These were my interpretations of reality that I was not even close to understanding at fifteen and that I can recall now only because I am over the pain of those years.

I still understood, as Jeremy understood, what to say when asked if education was good. I still knew the iconic phrases and

the canon of values, but I was no longer a true believer of those phrases nor did I see myself as having value.

At fifteen, I dropped out of high school. I was found out, made a ward of the state and put back into Stuyvesant. At sixteen, I dropped out again, and on my seventeenth birthday, I joined the Army. The military was a refuge. It was a place where I would be fed on a regular basis but, more important, it was a place in which the shame I felt for having failed in life, for having slipped so far below the predicted successes, was not on display.

What happened to me was personal, but I recognize it when I come across the same traumas in today’s young people. When I talk to young people today about the differences between life as I knew it in the fifties and sixties and life today, I also understand that something else is going on. That something else is the

exclusion of large segments of our youth on a scale unprecedented in my lifetime, an exclusion that threatens not only the potential of these young people, but their civil rights and the well being and security of the nation.

Jeremy does not have my age or the amount of years I have had to contemplate these problems. But he feels them as deeply as I do and there is a level at which he understands them. They are as potent a factor in his mind, as great an angst burden, as my uncle’s murder and my mom’s alcoholism had been in mine. They are the background noises which interfere with his thoughts as he sits in class, and which cloud his memory of whether the figure before him is a parallelogram or trapezoid. His mind, without the hope of positive social reproduction, searches for the transformative event rather than the incremental path we want him to take. He wants to and needs to transform himself from the excluded being he sees as without hope to the included being that our country so proudly advertises. This is true even when Jeremy doesn’t fully understand the transformative goal he approaches. So he puts aside his books and hopes to become a rapper, or a basketball star, or even to sell drugs. And, knowing that we have turned him away, that the powers-that-be have labeled his very existence as excessive, can we blame him?

In 1848, in a speech entitled “What Are the Colored People Doing for Themselves?” the great African American Frederick Douglass said that “unless we . . . set about the work of our regeneration and improvement, we are doomed to drag on in our present miserable and degraded condition for ages.”

I am often asked, challenged if you will, whether or not the marginalization I speak of is not merely an assumptive pose of the inner city child. Are they really on the outskirts of the dominant society or are they actually assuming “victim” status as an excuse for personal failure? The question is fundamental and the answers clearly address the emerging status of the new America.

I tell you today that it is within that regenerative process that hope lies. We

look at our children and we feel that glad expectation that keeps us going despite our setbacks. When that hope is denied us, and it is being taken away in bits and pieces every day, there is only the growing sense of despair that we see more and more in our inner cities.

According to government figures, upward of 60 percent of urban children live in households in which the head of the house does not work a full year. Those who do work a full year, have seen their wages stagnate over the last decade while the cost of living has increased. In 1963, the ratio of fixed housing expenditure throughout the country was the equivalent of one week's salary at minimum wage equaling one month's rent at the lower end of the rental scale. In other words, even at minimum wage, young families could afford apartments and, thereby, a place to raise a family. In 2009, that ratio—minimum wage to minimum housing costs—approached two and a half to one. Barbara Ehrenreich and other sociologists have clearly demonstrated the threat this poses to the traditional lower class family structure.

The opportunities of economic globalization in a world that is divided into the G20 entities and nations approaching stark desperation, is changing the world. We ship those jobs abroad, jobs which at one time represented the ladder poor Americans climbed. Globalization is irreversible and results, considering the world's economic demography, in the very simple idea that to employ or train the full range of our American population, is not a sound economic concept when cheaper labor can be found overseas. The poorest children, often African American and Latino but increasingly Caucasian as well, are simply not needed under this scheme. This damning reality is the beast lurking in our streets, capturing the hearts of our young.

As a teenager growing up in Harlem, I did not and, indeed, could not articulate my self deprecation. I wasn't aware of how much I had devalued myself because I lacked the knowledge range necessary to project a coherent norm. Personal values—identity ranking—can only be accomplished at an intellectual and emotional distance. Reaching a sur-

prising age (whoever thought the world would exist beyond 1984?) has given me that distance.

I speak of the geography of the inner city child. We have talked about the differences in cultural schema, but it is much more difficult to discover our own feelings about our prejudices and our tendency to impose our own values on others as if our values were universal. It's difficult for us to imagine that more than one geography can exist within the same physical location. I came upon this tendency to project my own geography on others in myself a few years ago.

I was working on a biography of Muhammad Ali and came across a phrase in my research that I didn't understand. One accounting of his career said that he was sent to an older fighter, Archie Moore, to learn how to punch. In my mind what fighters did was to punch and all fighters knew how to do it.

I contacted a former professional boxer in Jersey City and asked him about this. Jimmy Dupree invited me to his gym where he now trained young fighters and explained that there were effective and ineffective ways of punching.

"Come into the ring with me," he said. "I'll show you."

Once in the ring, it was clear that he wanted to show me by actually hitting me so I would feel the difference. I suggested that it would be just fine if he merely told me about it, but he was insistent. So he hit me once in the ineffective manner and I held back the tears and the certain knowledge that I was going to develop an ugly bruise. Then he hit me the more effective way, lining up the bones in his arm for maximum effect so that I felt the force of the punch go through my body.

"You should always remember that," he said. "So you can use it if something comes up."

In his world, something might come up where he might be made more effective by lining up his bones and snapping a punch from the shoulder. In my world, the proper response was sniffing on the

way to the police station. I didn't think that punching effectively was going to help me in my world and I'm pretty sure I'm right. But in rethinking Muhammad Ali's biography I came to realize the differences in the mentality of the professional fighter and my own.

How many times had I watched fighters on television and screamed at them to get up from the floor, that they weren't really hurt? How many times had I encouraged them to show more courage? In my personal geographical field, if a blow was really hard, my reaction would be to fall down, to retreat, to run away. And so I created a geography for the fighters I saw which said that they either did not feel pain the way I would have or the punches they were receiving were simply not that hard. I couldn't imagine anyone capable of taking that much pain if the punches were as hard as they looked to be.

What I discovered, of course, was that the punches were as hard as they looked and the damage even more devastating to the human body. The boxers that I studied and interviewed had once been young men in great physical condition, but few had lived beyond middle age and fewer still had survived middle age without serious dementia. How had I not understood this before the interviews? How had I not understood that the fighters themselves knew the damage they were suffering? How could I imagine that they understood their own destruction? When they spoke, they spoke with bravado, the way that inner city children often speak. The fighters said the things they knew we wanted to hear, the way that inner city children paraphrase our well meaning admonitions.

Too many of our children don't think that reading is going to help them escape their predicaments, and they might just be right. When we see how many young men of all races are unemployed or underemployed in our communities, we know that the chances of success are limited. We say, optimistically, that we must attend the possibility of individual achievement. But we must also ask ourselves whether, considering the multiple cognitive states of the inner city student which includes histories of both

failure and exclusion, if our optimistic viewpoint serves a legitimate purpose for the student or only rationalizes our own approach?

“Lastly, I want my books to be portals to not only other books, and to other cultures, but pathways between the unforgiving geography that we are so passively accepting, to the far reaches of every lonely and despairing heart.”

As educators, we want to give each child every advantage we can. We want to bring children to books and reading because we know how handicapped they will be without these important tools. We want to take them out of the confines of their world and bring them to ours.

The first thing we have to do, in my opinion, is to carefully articulate to Jeremy what his world and societal position is and the personal geography he must negotiate. We need to abandon the notion that fairness goes hand-in-hand with self worth and we need to be blunt about it.

“Jeremy, you might not think reading is for you, but you don't really have a choice. You will either learn to read well, learn to read consistently throughout your life, or you will suffer greatly. You will have to make the choice to enter that part of our culture that seems most foreign to you and most threatening, and learn to cope with it even as you learn to criticize it. And, yes, as things stand now, your efforts might well not be successful. You must understand, as we all must understand, that your position in our universe is no simple matter of personal failure but, rather, an economic, histori-

cal, and social complicity that has to be addressed.”

Jeremy is already thirteen and we need to work with what we have. So we need to design a program for Jeremy that will bring him to the skills he needs. Again, I interpret reading as two separate functions, decoding the text and transferring the information into one's own mental state to accomplish ownership. While we tend to think of decoding as simply a phonics and defining operation involving letters and sounds within a text, reading is also a cultural decoding. This cultural milieu is often so familiar to the teacher that the decoding aspect of cultural schema is overlooked. What gives reading a positive value if it is beyond the ownership of the individual?

Cultural selection can be crucial when we bring books to young people who have difficulty reading. But I'm adamant in believing that we can't restrict reading only to books that share a congruency with the reader's immediate life. We have to stretch the boundaries and increase the reader's cultural awareness. We need to lay out the boundaries of personal geography in a way that the inner city child, that all of our young people, can understand that geography. And we need to do it in a place and time that will not embarrass the child, but will give that young reader an opportunity to become intimate with character and language and story. We need to find a world we can all live in, a world in which the heart matters more than the marketplace, where our love for our children extends to the point at which the recreating of their social history is as important to us as the recreation of our own.

In defining the human condition I return again and again to my teen years, to the authors I read then—Balzac, Steinbeck, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Gabriela Mistral—to rediscover the emerging geography of my own heart, of my own soul. And when, in my mind, I once again touch those pleasant intellectual and emotional landscapes, I understand the distance between where I am now and where I was then. I also know where I am now and where the children I look to reach are standing along the distant horizon. I see them in the schools, in the streets, in the jails. I

will not surrender my own geography, but I will forever try to embrace other fields, other meadows, other streets and avenues.

I want my readers to come to me, but I am willing to make the journey to where they are. I will appreciate the valleys of their lives, and the mountains. I will swim the rivers of their doubts and traverse the deserts of frustration they must traverse. It is not a fixed place that we must reach, but rather the common geography of the human heart.

What I am trying to do with my books is to bring familiar cultural elements into my stories while at the same time challenging my readers to expand their horizons.

I want to humanize the people I depict. I want to show them struggling, yes. To show them living within their own cultural heritage, yes. But even more I want to show them in the universal striving for love and meaning that we all experience.

I write about young men testing the boundaries of manhood and young women trying to build relationships. I write about young people abandoned as being excessive to the global economy and who have become within the United States not strangers in a strange land, but strangers in the familiar garden they should be calling home.

I need, we need to bring our young people into the fullness of America's promise and to do that we must rediscover who they are and who we are and be prepared to make the journey with them whatever it takes. We must convince our leaders that it is easier to build strong children than to repair broken adults and, once we convince them of that great truth, we must make them care about it. My conceit is that literature can be a small path along that journey.

Did I tell you I love what I do? Did I tell you that every day I have a creative experience that makes me more than I could imagine ever being? Did I tell you that the boy in me wants to write the stories

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“But wait!” my inner critic spoke up. “What about the boys?”

“Indeed,” I thought, “I should definitely have a craft that would be more appealing to boys.”

But what would possibly be the equivalent of a girly head wreath and still be Ukrainian-themed? I thought and thought and then, as I was preparing a quick-and-dirty rundown of Ukrainian history, I had a “eureka moment”—Viking helmets! The Vikings (or as they were alternatively called, the Varangians or the Rus), were involved in the founding of the Kievan Rus (the kingdom in the 9th and 10th centuries). Though the exact nature of their involvement is often disputed, the “teaching moment” of Viking helmet-making provided another inducement to going ahead with the project.

The helmets had a fairly easy design (or so I thought). They would be constructed from three to four strips of cardstock covered in duct tape. The first two strips would be stapled into a cross, and then the ends stapled onto a band formed by the third strip; a fourth strip could be used to extend the band. The resulting openings would be covered by triangles of aluminum foil and taped from underneath so the duct-tape-covered framework would be visible.

Thankfully, I had the foresight to cover the strips in duct tape before the program; otherwise, I would probably have ended up with thirty-five duct-tape-covered kids. I also pre-cut the foil triangles.

For weeks leading up to the program, I cut out the strips and covered them with duct tape . . . *ad nauseum*, it seemed.

Finally, the day of the program arrived. Everything was going

swimmingly. The kids loved it all, beginning with learning a few words in Ukrainian right through to my abridged history of Ukraine. They ate the Ukrainian cookies that I baked and listened to the stories. However, when the time came to do the crafts, the surprises began.

I asked, “Who would like to make the flower wreaths?” and most of the boys raised their hands first. “All right,” I thought, “I brought enough for everyone.” I then asked, “Who would like to make a Viking helmet?” and all of the girls raised their hands. I was terribly ashamed that my assumptions about gender-linked craft preferences had been so decisively disproved!

I also had not anticipated that everyone would try to do both crafts at once. I spent the next half-hour running around, helping staple helmets and ribbons, fit wreaths, and tape foil. I am relieved to report that no body parts were stapled in the process and that no one was inappropriately glued to any surface.

Looking back (always the best direction for viewing such events), it was one of the most hectic, yet strangely rewarding, library programs I have presented. Despite the chaos, everyone left content and with both crafts (more or less) completed.

Though library school did not prepare me for it, the lessons I learned from this experience were priceless:

1. When presented with a choice of projects, most children will choose “all of the above.”
2. Be prepared to have your assumptions challenged.
3. Duct tape, foil, and cardstock are perfect materials for making Viking helmets. ☺

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that I wanted desperately to read as a teenager? Did I tell you that the stories I write are my way of merging my own small universe with that of my readers and that this is my way of celebrating this wondrous gift of life?

Lastly, I want my books to be portals to not only other books, and to other cultures, but pathways between the unforgiving geography that we are so passively accepting, to the far reaches of every lonely and despairing heart. I hope to offer the discomforts of conscience, and the pleasures of rediscovering our humanity. In this sweet geography even distant hearts can touch.

I was on a subway in New York when I saw a young girl reading

a book of mine, *Monster*. That’s quite a thrill in itself, but after turning a few pages she stopped reading, closed the book, and for a few moments was lost in thought. She had taken my words and ran off with them to her own private place. In that moment all of our boundaries—age, gender, race—had been bridged. If I were dead, it wouldn’t have mattered, for on that page, in that rocking train, even mortality had been put aside. How beautiful a moment for a boy from Harlem who loved to read.

I am grateful for booklovers all over the world. I am grateful for those who teach books and reading and who understand now what books can mean and who understood enough about me when I was a boy to bring me to this process. Thank you all for being part of this process. ☺