

Walter Dean Myers:

A Monster of a Voice for Young Adults

Walter Dean Myers, award-winning author of young adult literature such as *Monster* and *Fallen Angels*, is well represented in school and public libraries across the nation. His novels have become standard elements as teachers and librarians work to connect students to literature. *The ALAN Review* was fortunate to visit with Myers about his literary career. Lori Atkins Goodson, co-editor of *The ALAN Review*, became hooked on Myers's works several years ago when she read *Glory Field* to her eighth-grade students. She recently conversed with Myers through email—during his stay in London for the theater season, while Jennifer Funk, middle school language arts teacher, reviewed one of his latest works.

We appreciate Mr. Myers taking time from his busy schedule of writing and personal appearances to share his thoughts for this issue.

As a young child, Walter Dean Myers struggled with a speech problem that hindered his ability to share his ideas. Decades (and a growing list of awards) later, teenagers demonstrate his ideas are coming across loud and clear, and in an extremely powerful manner. Through the years, he has become an established, respected voice in young adult literature.

Myers, who has numerous books in various stages today (a minimum of two are scheduled for publication this year alone), credits a fourth-grade teacher with encouraging him to put his thoughts on paper.

"I spent a great many years as a youngster in speech therapy," Myers said. "What was going on in my head was being lost in the translation my mouth

produced. This was painful to me, and my reaction was to vent my frustrations on those who couldn't understand me.

"When we were told (in 4th grade) to write a poem, the teacher (Mrs. Parker) noticed that my recitation of the poem was clearer than my normal speech. She also liked the poem. What a surprise that she liked anything I did. With this encouragement I began writing dozens of poems. Since we were reading British poets, my poems were largely odes to anything I saw."

And, from there, Myers found his writing to be a powerful outlet. In his years of writing, he continues to be enthralled with the writing process, something that undoubtedly has propelled him into various genres.

"I find everything about writing fascinating," he said. "The subject matter of a project covers my current interests, but I'm also interested in the different parts of the story. Can I approach this subject in a way that will make it fresh to the reader? Can I find a way to tell it that is particularly challenging to me, or fun? Will I give myself the chance to play with language? With concepts?"

Through the years, his writing has welcomed a much more diverse audience, from rural to urban to suburban.

"Unless a reader identifies himself or herself racially, I no longer assume that they are African American," Myers said. "This, of course, is how it should be. Although it was James Baldwin who gave me the much needed permission to write about my own Harlem community, I grew up loving the writers I

was introduced to in high school—Balzac, Gide, Loti, and Thomas Mann.”

Since then, he’s found that reading others’ works is especially encouraging and educational to him as an author. Specific authors provide specific focus in his development as a writer.

“Avi, for example, is so intellectually nimble that his books challenge us to rethink what we are doing. Sometimes, when I’m alone at my computer, I pretend that I’m in the mind of Cynthia Voight or Sharon Creech. I love what I perceive to be their interior processes and the resulting quiet revelations in their prose. Judy Blume, who I don’t see very often these days, dares me to be courageous. Richard Peck’s clean, precise lines prevent me from being satisfied with sloppy writing. All of these people, and others (I’m currently reading John Green) set such high standards that I have to really work hard to be anywhere in their company.”

Myers said he also must give credit to his publishers, who have provided the support to let him venture into various types of writing.

“Publishers have given me a tremendous amount of freedom to try what I want,” he said. “They’ve also been very supportive of me, promoting my books widely and encouraging their use in different venues. In turn this has allowed me to be more creative in my approach to YA literature and to take chances I couldn’t have taken while trying to break down the doors.”

He also continues to stay focused on the writing process, creating a routine of writing about five pages a day, five days a week.

“At that pace I don’t allow my typing to get ahead of my thinking,” he said. “Writing is easier because I know the editors looking over my shoulder are all on my side. It’s a bit more challenging because people expect consistent work from me. But isn’t that good?”

“Unfortunately, I will never live long enough to complete all of my ideas,” he continued. “Or maybe fortunately. Or maybe that’s an idea for a book – an older writer has his best idea on the way home from the doctor who has just told him he has a terminal illness. Should he write faster to finish the book and perhaps turn out a sloppy and inconsequential work? Should he shelve it and do the easier book he has already started to bring his total volume count to 100? And how about the bright 18-year-old he has just met

who is burning with the excitement of literature but whose current idea is another boring biography of a long dead hero? Hmmmm.”

Some of his earlier “ideas” have become staples in classrooms throughout the country.

“Of course I’m pleased with the use of my books in the classroom,” Myers said. “I’ve seen the books used as springboards for discussion, many heated, or simply put on a list as possible extra reading. Considering the thousands of letters I receive each year, I’m clearly limited in the amount of time I can give to responding to student letters. I would like to see more use made of teleconferencing, especially when a book is required reading. That would mean to me that I could go to an easily accessible location near my home and spend an hour or two responding to questions.”

Myers has also found that, to keep his writing current and believable, he needs to keep an eye and an ear on what young people are doing, thinking, and talking about.

“I pay close attention to what they are listening to in music, what they wear, what devices they buy to get them through the day,” Myers said. “I talk to kids in juvenile detention centers, and I get an endless stream of letters in my mailbox. I am not adverse to missing my bus stop to overhear the end of a conversation between a group of teenagers. My own grand-

“The older I get, the more I appreciate my foster parents and, although they have both been dead for years, the more I know about them,” Myers said. “Since my foster father was illiterate and my mom read sparingly, at best, I thought I had escaped childhood without an intellectual inheritance. But now I sincerely believe that, through their informal teachings around the dinner table and through my early reading, I had developed both a clear moral sense and a sense of who I was that extended well beyond personal ego needs.”

“At first I thought it only natural that the inmates separate themselves from the crimes they had committed,” he said. “No one wanted to be portrayed as ‘evil.’ But as I pored over the trial transcripts and their arrest records, I came to the conclusion that it was their ability to separate themselves from their acts that permitted them to commit those acts in the first place. With this revelation came the idea to write *Monster*.”

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“As I worked my way through the prison interviews that formed the backdrop of *Monster*, I was shocked to find out how many of the inmates whose stories I was hearing were surprised to find themselves in prison. They all understood the crime that brought them there, but they did not understand that road that led from the innocence of childhood to a life in which crime was clearly permissible. They uniformly thought of themselves as good people who had made some mistake, which had taken them afoul of the law.”

Those prison visits gave Myers insight into his character, Steve Harmon, as well as how individuals

children are a bit shocking—how do they know so much?!—and yes, I read their blogs.”

Specific books provide special family connections for the author, as well as for his audience. Among those is *Monster*, featuring illustrations by his son Chris; the book triggers an appreciation by Myers for the upbringing his foster parents provided.

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can find themselves paying severe consequences for their mistakes.

“It was a common occurrence to find an interviewee speaking of himself (yes, or herself) in the first person when talking about their upbringing, and then switching to third person when speaking of the crime of which they had been convicted,” Myers said. “One inmate, a man whose scheduled execution for killing two guards in a bank robbery had been overturned only by the moratorium on the death penalty, confided in me that he felt a strong kinship to me because of our similar backgrounds. We had both been raised in New York, attended public school there, and even worked as laborers in similar places.

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And it triggered numerous discussions—in school cafeterias, classrooms, and hallways—regarding the innocence . . . or guilt . . . of Harmon. Adults, teenagers, and education majors in university classes have all discussed and debated the character and his situation. Myers weighed in on the discussion, as well.

“Steve Harmon had every right to walk into the store, and every right to walk out again inasmuch as it was a public venue. In this highly technical sense there is no legal guilt involved. In my opinion, and in the opinion of most of the lawyers I consulted, the verdict was supportable. But, mentally by separating himself from the implications of his walk into the store on that day, he was walking the same slippery slope as the above mentioned murderer who claimed that the killings were the fault of the bank guards for their failure to do the logical thing under the circumstances, give up the money in exchange for their safety.

“Steve Harmon (Harmon is the name of the electrician working on my house at the time I was writing the book) exposed himself to the vagaries of the juvenile justice system and,” Myers explained, “more importantly, to the monster that is the human without a moral compass.”

The Glory Field remains a favorite of the author,

although it's not as frequently used in schools as some of his other works.

"After the Civil War many African Americans owned land in the rural south," he said. "The land, like most land in the region, was not particularly valuable. But, as the South became less rural, as developments grew and cities expanded, the land values increased exponentially. Land that was once virtually worthless now was a tempting target to speculators who could use racist laws and shoddy banking to snatch it away. As a child I often heard families talking about owning 'a little piece of land down the way.'

"After the Second World War when industry came to the South and brought with it the wealth that demanded golf courses, resorts, and room for industrial expansion, families began to lose their land. Banks wouldn't lend money to pay taxes, some land was taken under eminent domain rules, some was lost through collateral schemes and some through simple neglect. It's a story that can be touched at any Black family gathering.

"The book is not used as much as others I have written, nor is it as controversial, but it's well loved and for that I have great appreciation," he said.

As his name becomes rooted as one of the mainstays in the genre, Myers keeps an eye on emerging authors in the field of young adult literature. He sees several who continue to become stronger voices for the genre.

"I love Christopher Paul Curtis and feel he has much more to say and the knack for saying it well," he said. "My friend Laurie Anderson continues to be a wonder. John Green is very interesting and will be a major artist. Sharon Flake is a fine writer, and I'm still waiting for Nikki Grimes to break through big time."

But, he said, he's disappointed not to see more young African Americans enter the YA field.

"It's hard to support yourself as an author, even harder than when I was young," he said. "I at least had a number of magazines that accepted short fiction and articles. They're mostly gone now."

And one of those new voices has a connection. Myers said his son, Chris, would watch him write, from the time his son was four years old. The younger Myers first explored artwork connected to his father's writings.

"Since I was writing 'stories' and 'stories' meant

picture books to him, he came up with the idea that since my stories didn't have pictures, he would draw them for me," Myers said. "He would listen to my synopsis of a piece, imagine his own characters, then draw and present them. To me they were kid drawings, and I would admire them (he's my kid) and put them aside. His mother evidently saw more than I did and began to save them. By the time Chris was ten, his drawings were quite good and at twelve he was published in *Merlyn's Pen*.

"He was away at Brown when I revisited an earlier story I had written called *Shadow of the Red Moon*," he continued. "I remembered that Chris had done drawings for the story years before and wondered, now that his art was considerably more sophisticated, if he wanted to try to do spot illustrations for the book. There were no promises, of course. He would have to do them on speculation. He did, and they were accepted by Scholastic."

Today, he has watched Chris shift into writing, as well, creating another connection for the father and son.

"Chris is one of my first readers on everything I write, although he doesn't show me everything he writes," he said. "I love working with him, and we've developed a good professional relationship. Chris was also lucky enough to meet my friends in the business. Tom Feelings, Jerry Pinkney, Ann Grifacolni, and Lawrence Jacobs all encouraged him at an early age. I am unabashedly proud of his work and his character."

But don't expect him to turn over the reins too quickly to the next generation. Myers has a half dozen books in the works, from picture books to a documentary of African Americans to novels. He offered a brief rundown of upcoming projects. His travels have taken him to London recently, where he was finalizing

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selections for a documentary history of African Americans, to be published by HarperCollins. But that's only the beginning.

"*Game*, a basketball coming of age story, will be published by HarperCollins in the winter of 2008," Myers said. Summer 2008 saw the publication of *Sunrise Over Fallujah*, a novel about the war in Iraq which involves the nephew of the soldier in *Fallen Angels*.

"It's a Scholastic title, as was *Fallen Angels*," Myers said. "The fall of 2008 will bring another HarperCollins novel with the working title of *Kelly*. I have two picture books in the works, both by HarperCollins. One is a picture biography of Ida Wells.

"After 9-11 there was a flurry of patriotism throughout the country," Myers said. "It seemed to me, however, that 'patriots' were being depicted primarily as white males. My son Chris and I are putting together a book about our love for America which depicts an array of cultures and races."

And so it continues. Myers's strong and eloquent voice draws readers of all ages—but particularly young adolescents—into the pages of his books. He continues to be a powerful literary connection for young adults, maintaining a vital place on bookshelves across the nation.

Lori Atkins Goodson has taught middle school language arts and high school English and newspaper in Wamego, Kansas. Also an instructor at Kansas State University, Manhattan, she received National Board Certification and a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction. She has received numerous teaching awards, including NCTE's 2007 Hoey Award, a 2008 top 10 finalist for the NEA Excellence in Teaching Award, and the Kansas Master Teacher Award. She is coeditor of *The ALAN Review*; a co-director for the Flint Hills Writing Project, a site of the National Writing Project; and is completing her term as chair of the NCTE middle level nominating committee. Goodson writes a regular column for the ALAN website on using young adult literature in the classroom (bookbusiness.lorigoodson.com). She can be reached at lagoodson@cox.net.

Sunrise over Fallujah

Reviewed by Jennifer Funk

You would be hard pressed to find a book on the war in Iraq that doesn't have a clear agenda jumping off every page—especially a fictional one with believ-

able characters that is appropriate for kids. What Walter Dean Myers realizes, however, that many seem to forget or dismiss, is that when the war in Iraq ends, it will be those young Americans sitting in our classrooms who will face its certain ramifications. This is why Myers' *Sunrise Over Fallujah*, a novel that fills in this critical missing gap in war literature, should be a welcome addition to middle and high school libraries across the country.

Sunrise proves the power of fiction to sort through the "fog of war" that seems to exist not only on the battlefield but also in the media. National newspapers and cable news programs produce a ceaseless news cycle on the war in Iraq. Books with titles like *So Wrong For So Long* and *Fiasco* line the bookshelves at every Barnes and Noble. The war's many faces — both at home and abroad — are emblazoned in our minds in a chaotic collage of confrontational talking heads, defensive White House news conferences, angry war protesters, and Iraqi civilians cheering one day and crying the next. If this is how many American adults view the war, imagine what goes through the mind of the average American elementary or secondary student. Twenty years after Myers's acclaimed Vietnam War novel *Fallen Angels* was published, his new war novel—despite its different setting, modernized army, new characters and cleaner language—accomplishes the same mission: cutting through the cacophony straight to the core of questions facing both military personnel and civilians during any war, at any time. In the opening page, protagonist Robin Perry, nephew of *Fallen Angels*' Richard Perry, writes to his Vietnam veteran uncle, "I was thinking that maybe your eyes wouldn't recognize today's army but I'll bet your stomach would" (1). Yes, Myers knows that war is war and the best place to begin understanding it is in the field on the frontlines with those who know it best.

In *Sunrise*, recent high-school graduate Robin "Birdy" Perry has been assigned to a Civil Affairs team in charge of the fourth and final phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom, building a democracy in Iraq. The novel picks up with Perry's recent arrival in Kuwait just before the war begins. While acclimating to their surroundings, uncertainty and speculation about their purpose in Iraq, the reality of combat, and the ability to identify the enemy, dominate the soldiers' conversations. Myers's main characters make up a youthful and diverse group of troops, which along with Perry

include the “little different” blues man Jonesy, the sharp-tongued and tough Marla and a number of order-barking captains who sometimes open up to add some seasoned introspection on the war.

The heart of the novel lies in the innocence of the soldiers, all of whom, to a certain degree, are searching for meaning in their experiences. Perry’s decision to join the army and forgo college put a wedge in his relationship with his father, a consequence he is reminded of with each letter from home. “I felt like crap after 9-11 and I wanted to do something, to stand up for my country,” he explains to his uncle (2). Spurred on by equally intense desires to make a difference and to return home quickly, Perry is believable in his “follow orders now, ask questions later” mentality. His unique role in the army to be the “human face” of war by establishing relationships, feeling out acceptance from Iraqi civilians and meeting various needs as they arise, allows readers to be exposed to the less glamorous side of war, diplomacy.

As an educator, I am especially encouraged by Myers’s attention to this part of Perry’s mission. Perhaps the most controversial tenet of the war in Iraq is its oft-stated purpose to create and establish the American system of democracy in a key Middle Eastern country. While students may be familiar with the images of fighting, based on years of watching action-packed war movies, the likelihood most have thoughtfully considered the aftermath of war is slim. Perry and his comrades are sent on missions without clear expectations; they are sent to bring medical supplies to livestock only to discover the supplies may actually be used for enemy combatants; and they are sent to pay the distraught mothers of children killed in the accidental bombing of a schoolyard. Each mission presents an opportunity for the troops to represent American benevolence or American power depending on the sentiments of Iraqi civilians, and they must be prepared for either at a moment’s notice. It is a potential decision that always weighs on the soldiers’ minds. Through these situations, engaging students in dialogue, whether in a version of reader’s workshop or Socratic seminars, could be easily achieved.

Then there’s the setting. My seventh-grade social studies class is studying Southwest Asia. Before beginning a new unit—especially in a subject like social studies where prior knowledge can be a bit scattered—I like to ask the students a few guiding questions to determine what they already know. So,

recently I posed the following seemingly simple question: Do you know where Iraq is located? Two hands shot into the air—those of students who have familial ties to the region. Another three raised their hands with obvious uncertainty, prepared to claim “just stretching” lest they be asked to prove their knowledge. For most, Iraq is a country familiar in name only. This is where the use of *Sunrise* in the classroom can be an invaluable resource. Any student can look up Iraq, Kuwait, Baghdad and the Euphrates River in an atlas, but Myers’ book brings these distant places to classrooms, living rooms and dining room tables. Instead of tuning out when a conversation is seasoned with talk of the Middle East, kids who read *Sunrise* will be able to share about scorching heat and desert sand storms, but also about how Doha, Kuwait, is “squeaky clean and beautiful,” and its Grand Mosque is breathtaking. Myers’ awareness of stereotypes about the region is evident in Perry’s preconceived notions about Iraq and surrounding Arab countries. “Before arriving at Doha I had imagined being on a desert with camels wandering by and palm trees swaying in the wind” (17), but the reader learns from Perry’s experience in Middle Eastern cities. “One of the guys I was with . . . told me that I would never get used to the architecture in the Arab countries,” he shares, “‘It changes your whole perspective about the people over here’” (17).

Fans of *Fallen Angels* may find *Sunrise Over Fallujah* to be a compelling though less gritty and gruesome war narrative. The consequence of which translates into greater accessibility for teachers and younger students. *Sunrise* should be praised for its clear picture on the realities of war as faced by the men and women fighting it. I might be biased about the potential of novels to supplement teaching, more so than any other medium available today, but that could be because I’ve witnessed the powerful connection kids make to characters they meet in books. And the character of Robin Perry in *Sunrise Over Fallujah* is no different. “It was as if, little by little, I was bringing the crash of war inside me. As if, little by little, the war was becoming part of me,” he says (96). Little by little, Perry’s experiences become a part of the reader. That is the true mark of a book worth reading.

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