

Walter Dean Myers: Social Realism in Contemporary Novels for Young Adults

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Several authors who write with a youthful audience in mind have created poignant and compelling stories that depict contemporary issues of cultural change, racial inheritance, and survival in a daunting environment. These stories present teenagers (and sometimes younger children) in hardship. They are honest in their depiction of life and unafraid to deal with the issues that contemporary youth face in their day-to-day living. Some of their stories bridge eras. One of the best authors of contemporary realism who deals with issues that continually affect American society is Walter Dean Myers. A resident of Harlem when he was growing up, Myers often sets his novels in his old neighborhood. Myers has won numerous awards for his books, including four Coretta Scott King awards and two Newbery honors. In addition, Myers was the first winner of the Virginia Hamilton literary award in 1999 and the first winner of the Michael L. Printz award in 2000. His candid portrayals of hard hitting issues such as drugs, violence, racial discrimination, and contemporary war have caused young readers to turn to him again and again, often becoming consummate followers of his career. Some of his books, including *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde and Stuff*; *Fallen Angels*; and *Hoops*, have been challenged for their appropriateness as literature for adolescent readers. Like many authors of contemporary realism, Myers writes about conditions that still exist, carefully and honestly representing the lives of youth in city neighborhoods. Biographical information about Myers, his life, and his writing is available at *Contemporary Authors Online*.

In May 2008, Scholastic Publishers released inexpensive paperback editions of four Myers novels that relate to American social history and are at least partially set in urban neighborhoods. They give the young readers a glimpse of Myers's style and content. *Fallen Angels* won the Coretta Scott King award in 1988 and was also voted a Parents' Choice Award.

Within this highly realistic novel, Myers deals with a young man's emotional trauma as he comes to grips with the realities of war. At the same time, Myers addresses racial inequity in the ranks, an issue that causes his protagonist to question the standards set for soldiers and for the military. *The Glory Field* has been compared by earlier critics to the television series *Roots*. In this 400-page novel, Myers recounts the long journey of Muhammed Bilal and the subsequent lives of his ancestors in America, first as slaves, later

moving to Chicago and New York, and finally reconnecting on the plantation where Bilal lived and worked. The novel has been used in history classes where teens explored slavery and its consequences for Blacks in the US. Newbery Honor and Coretta Scott King award winner *Somewhere in the Darkness* takes Jimmy Little and his escaped-convict father on a journey towards acceptance of the past and resolution for the future. Jimmy is fourteen years old and uncertain about his life with “Mama Jean” when his father appears and takes him to Arkansas. His experiences there make him realize that he needs to return to his home and Mama Jean. Finally, *Slam* is a carefully constructed basketball story that reveals the problems of growing up in one neighborhood and going to school in another. Greg “Slam” is happiest when he is playing ball with his friends in Harlem. When he gets transferred to a mostly white magnet school, he feels out of place. His difficulties in school, at home, and with his best friend in Harlem are carefully embedded in a fast moving basketball story. *Amazon* reviews by young readers marvel at Myers’s earnest depiction of basketball, the Harlem streets, and the importance of school in *Slam*.

Myers’s contribution has not been limited to the teen audience. In addition to novels and nonfiction written specifically with young adults as his target audience, he and his son Christopher Myers have created three beautiful picture books for all ages, *Jazz* (Holiday House 2006), *Blues Journey* (Holiday House 2003), and *Harlem* (Scholastic 1997). These large sized books contain excellent poetic introductions to Black history and its links to contemporary culture that could be shared in the family circle as well as in schools or libraries.

Works Cited

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