

**Author Study of Walter Dean Myers,
an Award-Winning African-American Writer
of Books for Children and Young Adults
Yujin Chang
EDU P& L 834
Dr. Beverly Gordon
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Overview

Walter Dean Myers is an African-American writer of books for children and young adults. He has won many outstanding awards including Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Literature for Young Adults, Jane Addams Children's Book Award, Margaret A. Edwards Award for his contribution to young adult literature. In 2012, Walter Dean Myers was sworn in as the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature. His contribution to young people's literature is significant.

Walter Dean Myers was born in West Virginia in 1937. His mother died when he was two years old and he was raised by foster parents in New York City's Harlem and spent most of his childhood and young adult life there. His foster parents loved him very much and his life as a child centered around the church and the neighborhood. He had a speech impediment when he was a child, which made it difficult for him to communicate with others, but he overcame the difficulty by expressing himself through writing short stories and poems. He started to learn reading at the age of four from his foster mother and began to write fiction when he was ten- or eleven-years-old.

During the teenage years, Myers began to feel that opportunities are limited for African-American male who had talent in writing and career choices were defined by his race and social economic status rather than by his ability. He dropped out of high school in 1954 and joined the

army. One of his high school teachers recognized his talent in writing and advised him to keep on writing.

After the army, Myers held many positions with various agencies but he never stopped writing. In 1969, he won a contest organized by the Council on Interracial Books for Children with his first published children's book "*Where does a day go?*," and this became a turning point in his career. He has since become one of the most popular African-American writers for children and young adults.

Myers often writes about the most difficult period of his own life, the teen years, and many of his books deal with the lives of African Americans living in cities. The settings of his books are often Harlem where he used to live. His books also deal with some history of African-Americans including slavery and civil war, as shown in his books, "*The Glory Field*" or "*Now Is the Time: African American struggle for freedom.*"

Therefore, an author study of Walter Dean Myers will provide students with opportunities to learn about an award-winning African-American writer, appreciate some of his works and relate the stories to students' own lives, and learn about experiences of African-Americans including some important history.

The three objectives of this unit are: students will be able to 1) learn about the author, Walter Dean Myers through their own research, 2) relate the stories in the book to their own lives through relevant activities, 3) learn about some history of African-Americans and learn their experience through reflections and discussions.

In order to achieve these three objectives, the unit will begin with students' research on Walter Dean Myers (through JIGSAW activity). Then students will read "*The Glory Field*" and participate in the suggested activities related to the story in the book.

"*The Glory Field*" consists of six sections, where each of the six characters who are from the same family, the Lewis family, faces a turning point in his or her life in a different time in American history. Each member's conflict and problems such as issues of racism, poverty, and identity are closely related to the historical time. By telling stories of ordinary people, Myers brings African-American history to life.

After all students read and discuss "*The Glory Field*", they will choose another book of Walter Dean Myers among the three choices in the following list based on their own interests. Along with the book titles, a short description of each book will be provided as follows. Students will form a group depending on their choice and read the book and have group discussions.

<Reading Choices>

Monster By Walter Dean Myers

"Walter Dean Myers creates a unique look into the life of a young man in trouble in *Monster*. Steve Harmon is a sixteen-year-old boy on trial with his neighborhood acquaintance, twenty-three-year-old James King, for felony murder. Myers tells the story of Steve's experience through Steve's own writing. The novel is actually a screenplay that Steve is writing to work out some of the stress that the trial is putting on him and to share the story of this life-changing experience with other people. The screenplay includes not only court room scenes, but also flashbacks to the incident and to other parts of Steve's life before prison." (from <http://faculty.salisbury.edu/~elbond/monster.htm>)

Scorpions By Walter Dean Myers

“The Scorpions are a gun-toting Harlem gang, and Jamal Hicks is about to become tragically involved with them in this authentic tale of the sacrifice of innocence in the inner city. Pushed by the bully, Dwayne, to fight, and nagged by the principal, Mr. Davidson, Jamal is having a difficult time staying in school. His home life is not much better, with his mother working her fingers to the bone to try to earn the money for an appeal for Jamal's older brother, Randy, who is in jail. The leader of the Scorpions, Randy wants Jamal to take his place until he is free, but the other gang members, especially Angel and Indian, don't like the idea. Only Mack thinks Jamal should be the leader, and it is Mack who gets Jamal a gun.

Jamal wants to do the right thing and earn the money to free his brother by working, but he is afraid to go against the Scorpions. He longs to get rid of the gun, but part of him just can't bring himself to do it. As things heat up within the gang, everything comes to a boil when Mack kills Angel and Indian is thrown in jail. Jamal eventually pulls free of the gang's bad influence, but only through the narrowest of escapes.

Five-time winner of the Coretta Scott King Award, Walter Dean Myers has written a chillingly real depiction of the inverted values of poverty-stricken teens. The relationship between Jamal and Tito sensitively explores the loyalty and love between best friends faced with some hard choices. This Newberry Honor Book will challenge young men to consider their own decisions as they come of age in a complex and often frustrating society”. (from <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/book/scorpions>)

Now is the time: African-American struggle for freedom By Walter Dean Myers

“History has made me an African American. It is an Africa that I have come from, and an America that I have helped to create.

Since they were first brought as captives to Virginia, the people who would become African Americans have struggled for freedom. Thousands fought for the rights of all

Americans during the Revolutionary War, and for their own rights during the Civil War. On the battlefield, through education, and through their creative genius, they have worked toward one goal: that the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness be denied no one.

Fired by the legacy of men and women like Abd al Rahman Ibrahima, Ida B. Wells, and George Latimer, the struggle continues today. Here is African-American history, told through the stories of the people whose experiences have shaped and continue to shape the America in which we live.”(from <http://www.harpercollinschildrens.com/books/Now-Your-Time-Walter-Dean-Myers/?isbn13=9780064461207&tctid=100>)

Students will also be encouraged to read other books of Walter Dean Myers although they will not be covered in class. Other recommended books are as follows.

<Other Recommended Books>

Riots By Walter Dean Myers

“During a long, hot July in 1863, the worst race riots the United States has ever seen erupt in New York City. Fifteen-year-old Claire, the beloved daughter of a black father and Irish mother, finds herself torn between the warring side” (from <http://www.walterdeanmyers.net/biblio.html>)

Looking Like Me By Walter Dean Myers with Christopher Myers

“This jumping, jazzy, joyful picture book with artist Christopher Myers celebrates every child and everything that child can be”(from <http://www.walterdeanmyers.net/biblio.html>)

We Are America By Walter Dean Myers

“New York Times bestselling author, Walter Dean Myers and Caldecott Honor artist, Christopher Myers, the father and son team who created HARLEM, celebrate the freedom dream that is America: our struggles, our ideals, and our hope that we can live up to them” (from <http://www.walterdeanmyers.net/biblio.html>)

Cruisers By Walter Dean Myers

“Zander Scott and his friends, Kambui, LaShonda, and Bobbi are in trouble. Even though they are students at DaVinci Academy for the Gifted and Talented in Harlem, their grades are slipping and Mr. Culpepper, the assistant principal and chief executioner, is ready to be rid of them. The first book of a series that will have readers cheering for a group of outsiders who just may be the coolest kids in town.” (from

<http://www.walterdeanmyers.net/biblio.html>)

Activities

1) Beginning activity: getting to know Walter Dean Myers

In this activity, students will do research on Walter Dean Myers as a group using a JIGSAW format.

- Have students form groups of four by counting off one through four. These groups are called “learning groups”
- Each learning group member will be given a topic that he/she needs to focus on.
 - (1) Member 1 of each group should be an “expert” on Walter Dean Myers’s personal history focusing on his childhood and young adult life.
 - (2) Member 2 of each group should be an “expert” on his personal history after he got his first publication in 1969.
 - (3) Member 3 of each group should be an “expert” on his award winning history including the meaning of each award.
 - (4) Member 4 should be an “expert” on his book list focusing on some of his most popular books including brief descriptions.

- After students collect information about their own parts using the author’s official website and other website resources, autobiographical materials, and interview video clips, have them meet with other groups’ experts on the same topic as an “expert” group. Have the students who are responsible for the same topic from each group discuss what they found and plan how to teach the information to their learning group members.
- Have students return to their learning groups bringing their expertise and have each group discuss the four topics and develop good understanding about Walter Dean Myers. Students will also discuss what the most interesting and important findings about the author are.
- In the end, each group will present to the whole class what they discussed.

2) ***“The Glory Field”* Post-Reading Activities**

All students are supposed to read the entire book “The Glory Field” before the following activities.

(1) Quote Collection Activity

- Have students form groups of five. Have students pick their favorite quotes in the book and think about what the quotes mean, why they like the quotes, how they are relevant to their experience. Have them make the quotes applicable to their lives and share their thoughts in groups.
- After group discussions, each group prints out the quotes and cut them into strips. Put each strip on a large wall paper so that a collection of the quotes

will be made. Students will be encouraged to look at other groups' choices and share their thoughts.

(2) Character Study

- Have each student pick one character of the book, identify each character's main problems, and think about how the problems were resolved. Have them think about the time period when the character had the problems and try to understand what it means to have the experience in that era.
- Have students draw an illustration (i.e., visualize) about the character's issues and the consequences.
- Students will share their drawings and thoughts in their group.

(3) Family History Research

- As "The Lewis Family" tree diagrams in the book, have students create their own family tree diagram by doing research and interviewing with their family members. In addition to their names and dates, students are asked to provide more information about their professions or other major characteristics. They are also encouraged to include pictures if they can find some.
- For their immediate family members, have students create a timeline and put some information about their major life events.
- Students are asked to think about some similarities and differences among their family members regarding their characteristics, appearance, professions, or major life events.
- Each student will present their own family tree diagram and timelines to class.

(4) African-American History Research Report

- Among the topics about African-American history that were chronicled in “*The Glory Field*,” have each group pick one topic (e.g., civil war) and come up with a research question regarding the topic. Have each group collect information to examine their research question using relevant books and websites.
- Have each group present what they found and discuss how it affected the characters’ lives in “*The Glory Field*”.
- Have each group submit a well-organized research paper as a final product.

Bibliography

Burshtein, Karen. *Walter Dean Myers*. Rosen Publishing Group, 2003.

Funk, Jennifer. Walter Dean Myers: A monster of a voice for young adults, *The ALAN Review*, Fall 2008, 26-31. (<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v36n1/goodson.html>)

Myers, Walter Dean. *The Glory Field*. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1994.

<http://comminfo.rutgers.edu/professional-development/childlit/myers.html> (Learning about Walter Dean Myers)

<http://faculty.salisbury.edu/~elbond/monster.htm> (Classroom activities for Monster)

<http://faculty.salisbury.edu/~elbond/slam.htm> (Classroom activities for Slam)

<http://www.classzone.com/novelguides/litcons/glory/guide.cfm> (Lesson ideas for “*The Glory Field*”)

<http://www.fcps.edu/fairfaxnetwork/mta/resource/activityguides/myers.pdf> (Activities for Walter Dean Myers' books)

http://www.glencoe.com/sec/literature/litlibrary/pdf/glory_field.pdf (Study guide for "*The Glory Field*")

<http://www.infoplease.com/black-history-month/> (Black History Month activities, timeline, ideas, facts and quizzes)

<http://www.nypl.org/author-chat-walter-dean-myers> (Author chat with Walter Dean Myers)

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/> (Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery)

<http://www.readingrockets.org/books/authorstudy/> (Author Study Toolkit)

<http://www.readingrockets.org/books/interviews/myersw/> (A video interview with Walter Dean Myers)

http://www.slaveryinamerica.org/amliterature/amlit_lp_gloryfield.htm (Lesson plan for "*The Glory Field*")

<http://www.theroot.com/views/reading-not-optional-walter-dean-myers> (Literacy Leader: Reading Is Not Optional, an interview with Walter Dean Myers)

<http://www.walterdeanmyers.net/> (The official Walter Dean Myers site)