



“Finding Your Voice”
(Biography of Walter Dean Myers)

COVER STORY

FINDING YOUR VOICE

APRIL IS POETRY MONTH. A FAMED AUTHOR USES THIS VIBRANT FORM OF WRITING TO GIVE ‘VOICE’ TO HIS HOMETOWN *by Dara N. Sharif*

When Walter Dean Myers was in fifth grade, having to speak in front of the class terrified him.

Myers had a speech **impediment**, and he was afraid that the other kids would laugh at him.

Then, his teacher said the students could read aloud something that they had written. That's when Myers discovered a talent for writing poetry. He wrote poems using words that he could pronounce easily.

“[Before discovering poetry], I couldn't read in front of the classroom,” says Myers, now a **renowned** author and poet. “The rhythm of poetry carried me through.”

Poetry helped give Myers a voice, a way of expressing himself with others.

“I could rhyme things,” Myers says. “I knew if I had a rhyme, rhyme and rhythm, it would officially be considered a poem.”

Giving Voice to Many

In his book *Here in Harlem* (poems



YOUNG TALENT Walter Dean Myers (right) and his brother, George Myers, in 1947.

in many voices), Myers uses poetry to give a whole community—including kids—a voice.

Myers grew up in the famed neighborhood of Harlem in New York City. He uses his hometown and the people he remembers growing up with as the basis for the voices he takes on in the book.

Myers has happy memories of his childhood in a big city.

He uses poetry to showcase the diversity and beauty of the city.

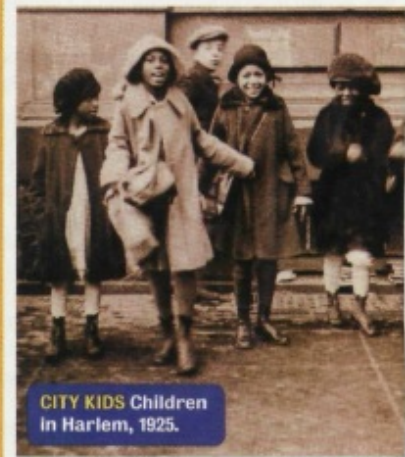
“Most people, when they describe beauty, it's a pastoral scene, a countryside,” Myers says. “There are very few descriptions of cities that describe the city as beautiful. [Growing up in the city], the geometry of the buildings were very comforting to me. Old bricks. New bricks. Buildings sometimes tied together with clothesline. . . . The city is wonderful, too.”

In *Here in Harlem*, Myers allows the city to speak (see *In Character*) through

In Cha

Mali Evans, 12
Student

I'd like to be old one day
Like Mrs. Purvis with her gray
Hair like a halo around her black face
She says it's her crown, her tiara
She walks slowly, grandly
Down the avenue, as if the streets
Were her queendom and even
The winos smile and bow
Or raise their hands in greeting
I would like to be an ancient lady
Tree-tough and deep-rooted
In the rich soil of my dark
Foreverness
And the only thing white I would wear
Is the crown about my
Sweet black face



CITY KIDS Children in Harlem, 1925.

everyone from a 12-year-old schoolgirl named Lois Smith to an 87-year-old former dancer named Clara Brown to a 19-year-old basketball player named Lawrence Hamm.

“I imagined a mythical street corner in Harlem,” Myers says. “Who would pass this street corner? Anyone that I

What's that word?

impediment: (im-peh-dih-ment) *noun.* A condition that interferes with a process, especially speech.



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Character

Walter Dean Myers writes as many different people in his book of poetry, *Here in Harlem* (poems in many voices). Myers says he changed the style of poetry depending on the age and background of the character that he created. The following are three poems from the book. What is similar about the characters' voices? What is different?



Walter
Dean Myers



LIFE IN HARLEM “The Children Go to School,” this 1943 painting by Jacob Lawrence, is part of a series called The Harlem Paintings.

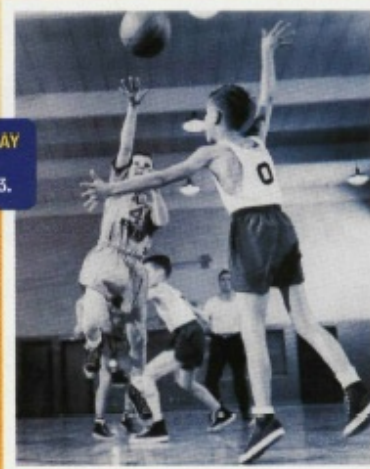
Lawrence Hamm, 19 Student Athlete

It's more than the ball—
Blur dribbled down the hardwood floor—
More than the step past you,
Greater than the lift, the awesome soar
Through space, rim high, higher,
And the monster jam that crumbles
Egos, all this and moves
So sweet that make shadows stumble.
I own this sacred space
This holy court, these painted lanes
This kiss of palm on glass
These kicks, the smell of sweat and pain.
Call me muscle, and flight.
“Gone!” is my name, and “Slam!”
In this sweet universe
Of Ball, I am! I am!

Lois Smith, 12 Student

One day I'd like a school named after me
And all the kids would wonder, “Who was she?”
They'd probably think I was some rich white lady
And not someone cute and a little shady
Then one day they'd find me in a book
Check out my name and take a second look
Then I'd be famous as old Booker T.
And young kids would want to grow up to be just
like me

KIDS AT PLAY Shooting hoops, 1953.



could remember from my life in Harlem became voices in the book.”

Poetry Today

Kids today are even more in tune with poetry with the popularity of hip-hop. “They are aware of rhyme in hip-hop,” Myers says. “Kids appreciate this now

because of rap.”

Poetry gives kids an appreciation of language, he says, because poets can more freely manipulate language.

“Take the urban language,” Myers says. “Can I make it sing? Can I make it beautiful? . . . Young people can say look what I can do with language.”

Back to YOU

- **Put yourself in someone else's shoes.** Write a poem as a person or thing other than yourself. How do they speak? What do they see in their world?

what's that word?

renowned: (ri-noun) adjective. Famous.

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