

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Walter Dean Myers

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Myers, Walter Dean, 1937-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Walter Dean Myers,
Dates:	August 5, 2005
Bulk Dates:	2005
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:27:30).
Abstract:	Fiction writer Walter Dean Myers (1937 - 2014) has written over seventy children's and young adult books. Myers was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 5, 2005, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2005_190
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Author of over seventy children's and young adult books, Walter Dean Myers was born Walter Milton Myers on August 12, 1937, in Martinsburg, West Virginia. At age two, Myers's mother, Mary Green, died, and Florence Brown Dean, his father's ex-wife and her husband, Herbert Dean, raised him. Growing up on 121st and Morningside in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, Myers, a troubled youth, struggled with a speech impediment but loved to read. Myers attended P.S. 125 and JHS 143, but dropped out of Stuyvesant High School twice; once in 1952, and again in 1954. After serving in the United States Army from 1957 to 1960, Myers worked at the Harlem Post Office and the New York State Department of Labor; he also attended classes at City College of New York,

Columbia University, and at SUNY Empire State College, where he graduated in 1984.

Encouraged by John Oliver Killens, Myers published his first poem in the *Delta Review* in 1962. Myers wrote for men's adventure magazines, then won a *Writers Digest* contest sponsored by the Council for Interracial Books for Children with his story *Where Does The Day Go?*, in 1969. Writing first for small children, and then for young adults, Myers's themes ranged from sports, to science fiction, to biography, to African and African American history, to fantasy, to adventure and even to mystery. Highlights of Myers's prolific and award winning career include: *The Young Landlords* (1979), *Hoops* (1981), *The Legend of Tarik* (ALA Best Books for Children, 1981), *Motown and Didi: A Love Story* (Coretta Scott King Award, 1984), *The Outside Shot* (1984), *Fallen Angels* (Coretta Scott King Award, 1988), *Now Is Your Time! The African American Struggle for Freedom* (Coretta Scott King Award, ALA Best Books, Notable Books for Children, 1992), *Malcolm X: By Any Means Necessary* (Best Books for Young Adults Award, ALA, 1993), *Somewhere In Darkness* (Newberry Honor Book, 1993), *Monster* (Michael L. Printz Award, 2000), *Bad Boy: A Memoir* (2001), *Shooter* (2004) and *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* (2005) about his brother's death in Vietnam. Myers also wrote a biography of John Robinson entitled *The Brown Condor*; Robinson was an African American pilot and a hero of the Italo Ethiopian War.

Myers religiously wrote ten pages a day, after his morning walk. Myers lived with his wife, Constance, and son Christopher, the youngest of three children, in Jersey City, New Jersey.

Myers passed away on July 1, 2014.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Walter Dean Myers was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 5, 2005, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Fiction writer Walter Dean Myers (1937 - 2014) has written over seventy children's and young adult books.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Myers, Walter Dean, 1937-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Myers, Walter Dean, 1937---Interviews

African American authors--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Fiction Writer

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Walter Dean Myers, August 5, 2005. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Dean Myers, Section
A2005_190_001_001, TRT: 0:30:10 2005/08/05

Walter Dean Myers was born on August 12, 1937 in Martinsburg, West Virginia to George Myers and Mary Green. Although he had limited knowledge of his father and paternal family history, Myers traced his maternal family history to the Bower plantation, a breeding plantation. Myers describes his mother's childhood and how his parents met. After his mother's death when he was two years old, Myers was fostered by his father's first wife, Florence Brown Dean, and her second husband, Herbert Dean in Harlem, New York. His foster mother did factory and day work; his foster father was a janitor. Myers describes his foster parents' personalities, his half-sisters, and the sights, sounds, and smells of his childhood in Harlem where he saw people like Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson, Langston Hughes, and Willie Mays. As a boy, Myers had a speech impediment as well as a penchant for writing. He did not see many positive representations of African Americans in his school books and decided to focus his efforts on being smart.

African American authors--Interviews.

Children's authors--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Dean Myers, Section
A2005_190_001_002, TRT: 0:28:50 2005/08/05

While Walter Dean Myers loved to read and play

basketball, he also had a penchant for fighting and behavioral problems in school. His family life was difficult due to his foster mother's alcoholism. Myers attended P.S. 125, J.H.S. 43, and then Stuyvesant High School in New York City, New York. Trouble at home distracted Myers' focus in school and he dropped out of high school twice before enlisting in the U.S. Army. In the Army, Myers played basketball and encountered racial discrimination on and off the court. After leaving the Army in 1957, Myers worked several jobs and began to write. Writing for two or three hours a day, Myers maintained a prolific pace and regularly submitted his work for publication. In 1962, a few of Myers' poems were published in a Canadian magazine. As a young writer, Myers was influenced by James Baldwin's writings on life in Harlem, New York. However, Myers changed his focus to sports writing because it was accepted for publication more often than his writings on black life.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Dean Myers, Section
A2005_190_001_003, TRT: 0:29:40 2005/08/05

Walter Dean Myers won a Writer's Digest competition for black children's book writers. His entry, "Where Does a Day Go?" was selected for publication and illustrated by Leo Carty. Myers did not graduate from high school, but he managed to enroll at City College of New York in the mid-1960s. He dropped out and later attended SUNY Empire State College in New York City, New York. Around 1968, Myers met John Oliver Killens and took one of Killen's courses at Columbia University in New York City. Killens encouraged Myers to interview for the position of acquisitions editor at Bobbs-Merrill Company. At the company, Myers was able to learn about publishing and he also looked for black authors to publish. Myers recalls his foster father's attempt to discourage him from a writing career. Myers talks about his success as a writer and author Frank Yerby. He also describes the impact of the black arts movement on his writing and his efforts to humanize his characters and make them relatable to young audiences.

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Dean Myers, Section
A2005_190_001_004, TRT: 0:29:20 2005/08/05

Walter Dean Myers talks about his research on John Robinson, an African American aviator also known as the Brown Condor, who fought for Ethiopia during the Second Italo-Ethiopian War. Myers perpetual search for inspiring stories of African Americans led him to discoveries like Tuskegee Airman and HistoryMaker Roscoe Brown. Myers remembers the challenges he faced in convincing his editor and publisher that his book proposal for “The Legend of Tarik,” was worthy of publication. As a writer, he expressed interest in deep and thoughtful storytelling supported by history. One of Myers books, “The Young Landlord,” was adapted for film by Topper Carew. Myers talks about his book “Fallen Angels,” which tackled the glorification of war and was inspired by his half-brother’s death in the Vietnam War. His books about youth violence in the black community include “Monster,” and “Autobiography of My Dead Brother.”

Video Oral History Interview with Walter Dean Myers, Section A2005_190_001_005, TRT: 0:29:30 2005/08/05

Walter Dean Myers talks about the importance of self-worth to young people and his writing process. While conducting his book research, Myers relied on John Henrik Clarke and HistoryMaker Yosef Ben-Jochannan for advice and counsel. His own research challenged his preconceptions about education and about teenage girls. A disciplined writer, Myers adhered to a strict writing schedule. Myers talks about the potential contributions of hip hop writers. He reflects upon his hopes and concerns for the African American community, what he would do differently, and his legacy. Although some of his books have been turned into film, Myers was not interested in writing screenplays. Myers also describes his advice for aspiring writers. Other African Americans in his children’s books include Jerry Pinkney and John Steptoe. He talks about his children and how he would like to be remembered.