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Talking with Walter Dean Myers



Walter Dean Myers is a prolific, award-winning author who was appointed in January 2012 as the third National Ambassador for Young People's Literature. His recent series, the *Cruisers*, features the friendships and conflicts of four eighth-grade students—Zander, LaShonda, Kambui, and Bobbi—who attend Da Vinci Academy for the Gifted and Talented. One of the story components is the controversial alternative newspaper that they write and publish for their school. Called *The Cruiser*, it often becomes the forum for the various disputes addressed within the books. Myers' series for middle-grade readers features smart, urban underachievers who grapple with problems at both home and school. The fast-paced stories comprise realistic (and at times brazen) characters, genuine dialogue, shrewd plots, and thought-provoking issues. I recently spoke with Myers about how he developed the series.

BKL: *What was your intent in writing the Cruisers series?*

MYERS: One of the things that I wanted to do was to write about a group of kids in the inner city and their problems. The kids are young and feisty and think of themselves as being smart. Often, kids feel bad about being smart, especially kids from inner-city backgrounds. I've seen kids get laughed at or bullied because they are bright. As a kid growing up in Harlem, I used to take a brown paper bag to the library and put my books in it; the other kids used to laugh at me because I liked to read. That's still going on today. If you take an intelligent group of kids and isolate them in a special school, then they can be happy. I want readers to pick up the books and see that these are young, bright kids, and they are having fun.

BKL: *The assistant principal, Mr. Culpepper, is constantly telling the Cruisers that they aren't living up to their potential. How do you show that although these kids are smart, their grades don't reflect their intelligence or creativity?*

MYERS: Growing up, I was in a school for seventh- and eighth-graders, 7–8 SP, which stood for special progress. It had kids from all over New York City who were bright and able to complete seventh and eighth grade in one rather than two years. A lot of these kids were younger than the average seventh-grader. They were immature. The teachers yelled and constantly accused us of underachieving. In the *Cruisers* series, the kids at Da Vinci

Academy are very bright, a little immature at times, and not used to having to work hard for grades. So Mr. Culpepper is going to see them as all principals might: they are doing well, but they could be doing better.

BKL: *When you design a series, is there a particular structure that you develop?*

MYERS: When I approached writing the *Cruisers*, I first wanted to establish the characters' personalities. I also needed to give them some kind of problem related to their home lives. Once I had an idea of the personalities, I then searched the Internet and found photographs to represent my characters. I always select photographs of kids who are older and waiting to be adopted, because I was adopted. I'll look at the photograph and say, "I think I know that kid." I put the photographs behind my computer so that when I sit down, I see the characters on my wall. What I am looking for at the beginning are distinct characters who will be consistent throughout the series. You need to have the characters first if the book is going to work.

BKL: *That's an interesting use of photographs. Photographs have had a place in your poetry and nonfiction as well.*

MYERS: I collect photographs and have over 10,000 of them. They tell stories and show you so much.

BKL: *How difficult is it to write genuine dialogue that accurately represents teenagers?*

MYERS: I get asked that a lot. The underside of that question is, "How can an old guy like you know how kids talk?" What you have to do is to make it from the heart. If it comes from the heart, then it works. I make up dialogue and also new words. I was listening to this rapper yesterday and was able to pick up some words and phrases that I could possibly use in a book. Language interests me, so I am constantly listening to it.

BKL: *You have incorporated other writing genres, such as op-ed pieces, poetry, news articles, and a play, into the Cruisers books.*

MYERS: It was a lot of fun to include those other pieces. I like the idea of kids having input by expressing their opinions, which I wasn't able to do as a kid. Writing something like an op-ed piece is enjoyable and allows kids to speak out.

BKL: *Each book has a major issue, such as racism, drugs, autism, and freedom of expression. How do you treat those issues in a way that isn't didactic and doesn't have a happily-ever-after ending?*

MYERS: In *A Star Is Born*, LaShonda's brother is autistic. When I was doing research for the book, I met a special-education teacher who introduced me to a child with autism. It was interesting to observe how she helped this child sit through a school assembly.

As far as racism, young kids who are black today encounter a completely different kind of racism than I experienced in my day. There are so few good black role models presented on television or in the media. Why do so many people feel more nervous when two black kids are walking behind them on the street than they do when it's two white kids? Part of the reason is that you see so many black criminals on television. There are so few good examples. I don't think people are racist; I think their attitudes are being propagated.

BKL: *You have talked about the need for kids to be responsible for themselves. Do you think that by portraying characters who solve many of their own problems, kids will take away that idea of a sense of responsibility?*

MYERS: I'm hoping for that with all my heart. No matter the problem, the answer is within the individual. There are a lot of people that I have talked to who have had struggles in their lifetime, but they decided to solve their own problems. It's hard for me to lecture, especially to the kids that I visit in prison, and say that I know it's difficult, but ultimately you are the one who has to solve your own problems. You have to look at yourself, understand who you are, and search for remedies. You cannot wait for something magical to happen. People aren't going to solve your problems. It's not because they don't like you but rather because they are looking for answers to their own problems.

BKL: *You are the third author to be appointed as National Ambassador for Young People's Literature. What has been your experience during the past two years serving in that role?*

MYERS: I have found that many people believe literacy is only about bringing good books to good readers. Unfortunately, there are a growing number of kids in the U.S. who simply don't or can't read. So when you give them a job application, they cannot fill it out. They cannot pronounce words, so they are unable to visualize them on the page. All the benefits that you and I understand that come from reading are missing for them.

BKL: *You chose as your theme, "Reading Is Not Optional." Who does that apply to?*

MYERS: It applies to everyone. People who read on a regular basis make their lives better. They give themselves more opportunities to advance. They give themselves a wider base to lead a more fulfilling life.

Sampling Myers' Cruisers Series

Checkmate. 2011. 144p. Scholastic, \$16.99 (9780439916271); paper, \$5.99 (9780439916325); e-book, \$5.99 (9780545389297). Gr. 5–8.

Sidney Aronofsky was the school chess champion and one of the best players in the city. When he is suspected of buying drugs, Zander, a member of the Cruisers, is asked to intervene. Diary entries, poetry, and a hidden chessboard message reveal characters' perspectives and anguish as the Cruisers attempt to determine what is prompting their friend to choose drugs.

The Cruisers. 2010. 112p. Scholastic, \$17.99 (9780439916264); paper, \$5.99 (9780439916332); e-book, \$5.99 (9780545347556). Gr. 5–8.

Zander, LaShonda, Kambui, and Bobbi decide to start their own alternative to the school newspaper, which they name the *Cruiser*. This platform enables them to express their thoughts and beliefs about what is happening in school and the world around them. When Da Vinci Academy launches a mock Civil War, the four friends are forced to consider the meaning of democracy and racism. They also become keenly aware of the power of the printed word.

Oh, Snap! 2013. 120p. Scholastic, \$17.99 (9780439916295); e-book, \$17.99 (978054539104). Gr. 5–8.

The *Cruiser* has been named as the third-best school newspaper in the city despite being an underground publication. When a photograph seems to implicate wannabe rapper Phat Tony in a robbery, Zander, LaShonda, Kambui, and Bobbi struggle with having to rat on a classmate or being accessories to a crime.

A Star Is Born. 2012. 160p. Scholastic, \$17.99 (9780439916288); e-book, \$17.99 (9780545512688). Gr. 5–8.

As a result of her costume designs, LaShonda receives a scholarship to the Virginia Woolf Society Program for Young Ladies. Once she completes the program, she will be eligible for further financial assistance at a prestigious college. However, this opportunity means that she will be separated from her brother, who is autistic. Myers deftly addresses many issues, from child slavery to freedom of speech, in this fast-moving—and often funny—third installment of the series.

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Common Core Connections

The following are suggestions for implementing the Common Core State Standards with titles from Walter Dean Myers' Cruisers series, including *The Cruisers* (2010), *Checkmate* (2011), *A Star Is Born* (2012), and *Oh, Snap!* (2013). You can find more information about the standards at www.corestandards.org.

In the Classroom: The following strategy encourages students to assess prior knowledge and to evaluate the acquisition of concepts. Students will also use textual evidence to support or revise their ideas after reading. Generate a graphic organizer to record students' beliefs, experiences, and preexisting ideas about a topic selected from one of the titles in the Cruisers series. For example, *The Cruisers*, the first book in the series, focuses on freedom of speech. Before reading, ask students whether they agree or disagree with the following statements and have them state why.

- The First Amendment of the Constitution guarantees freedom of speech for all people regardless of the message they want to disburse.
- There is a difference between freedom of speech and freedom to say whatever you want.
- Newspapers should be able to print their opinions in editorials regardless of the ability to support their positions.
- Articles and opinions published in a school newspaper should be approved by the principal.

After students have read *The Cruisers*, ask them to react to each statement that they previously made and support or change their statement based on textual evidence.

Common Core Connection

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.1.** Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

In the Classroom: Ask students to read one book in the Cruisers series with the intention of identifying several defining moments in which dialogue or pivotal incidents propel the action forward or reveal deeper characteristics of the characters. As students conduct a close reading of the text, they should annotate, highlight, or place a sticky note by scenes in which the dialogue is particularly rich or the incidents (or incident) presented are symbolic or revealing. Next, through writing, discussion, or the use of a graphic organizer, have students explain how those key scenes relate to other story elements (e.g., plot, conflict, character, setting, or

theme). Students could also present their analyses to the class by using some of the literary forms found in the Cruisers novels, such as an op-ed piece, a poem, a diary entry, or a cryptic message.

Common Core Connection

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.3.** Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6.3.** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

In the Classroom: Multiple perspectives are presented by the characters in the Cruisers series as they grapple with personal conflicts and pivotal events. Have students select one character and record the character's involvement in and reaction to critical events in one of the Cruisers novels, focusing on what they imagine the character's inner thoughts, feelings, and emotional reactions might be. Next, have students form small groups and perform their responses as a short play or a dramatic reading. To demonstrate how a play is structured, have students perform the "Act Six" play in *A Star Is Born*.

Common Core Connection

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.6.** Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text.

In the Classroom: This strategy provides students with an opportunity to explore how specific word choices impact meaning. This is evident throughout the Cruisers novels, particularly in relation to the *Cruiser* newspaper. Have students read and examine newspaper articles and opinion pieces included in one or more of the Cruisers novels. Students can then create a graphic in which they list a word drawn from their reading in one column, the word's meaning in the second column, and then a brief description of the word's context within the book in a third column. In a fourth column, students can write down one or more alternatives for the word that they have selected.

Common Core Connection

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.6.4.** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.