REVIEWS

Books for adolescents ■ Professional materials ■ Classroom materials

Books for adolescents

James Blasingame

doi:10.1598/JAAL.50.8.7

Blasingame teaches at Arizona State University. Books for review in this column should be sent to James Blasingame, English Education, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Arizona State University, PO Box 870302, Tempe, AZ 85287-0302, USA. Comments about the column may be sent by e-mail to james.blasingame@asu.edu.

This month Walter Dean Myers discusses his latest work, *Harlem Summer*, the story of a teenage boy, Mark Purvis, growing up at the height of the Harlem Renaissance. Keith Miller, Arizona State University professor of English and scholar of African American literature, and Allison Parker, a doctoral candidate in literature at the same University, interviewed Myers by e-mail after reviewing *Harlem Summer* and comparing it to several of the author's previous works. Myers's historical fiction work is peopled with famous figures whose roles in history contribute to the plot in ingenuous ways. We also take a look at a unique book created by Myers and his son, Christopher: *Autobiography of My Dead Brother.*The book a hybrid of sorts, interweaves traditional elements of the novel with illustrations and graphic novel elements. April Brannon reviews this National Book Award Finalist.

Judith Hayn reviews Kate Thompson's *The New Policeman*, a story of missing time, past mysteries, fairies, and bridges between two worlds. Thompson's book won the Whitbread Award for best books written in Ireland or the United Kingdom, and it is a delightful fantasy. Hayn also reviews Tracy Porter's *Billy Creekmore: A Novel*, the story of an orphaned boy whose odyssey includes an orphanage, a coal mine, and a circus.

Jessica Wong takes a look at James Owen's *Here There Be Dragons*, a fantasy adventure about three boys who travel to a world brimful of characters and problems from classical literature, ancient mythology, and fantasy fiction. Wong also shares her take on Frank Beddor's *The Looking Glass Wars*, a delightfully alternative telling of Lewis Carroll's classic. In Beddor's version, Alyss escapes from Wonderland to Victorian England, where she meets Lewis Carroll, who disappoints her deeply by writing an inaccurate reverse narrative of her life, even misspelling her name.

Jangmi West reviews two books from Orca Currents, a series of high-interest, low-reading-level books. In *Chat Room*, Linda, the protagonist, makes some wrong assumptions about the flowers, gifts, and poems that have been coming her way since she started an online romance. *Dog Walker* follows the business and romantic journey of a young man who hires his friends under somewhat false pretenses.

We hope you enjoy our reviews.

Harlem Summer

Walter Dean Myers. 2007. New York: Scholastic. 158 pp. US$16.99.

Set in 1925, Walter Dean Myers's coming-of-age novella uses the fresh perspective of a youthful

protagonist for the purpose of evoking many wonders of the Harlem Renaissance. During the pivotal decade of the 1920s, all the tensions in Harlem seem to converge on Mark Purvis, an adolescent male who seems only half aware of everyone around him.

An aspiring saxophonist, the somewhat directionless Mark lives in the shadow of his older brother Matt, who has delighted his parents by deciding to attend college. Conscientious to a fault, Mark's churchgoing and sometimes overwrought mother pushes him to imitate Matt. Mark, however, lacks academic motivation. Needing summer work, he more or less accidentally lands a job at *The Crisis*, a magazine edited by Jessie Fauset and W.E.B. DuBois. Fauset impresses upon Mark the importance of the emerging "New Negro"—a conception that he mainly fails to grasp, as he explains in a chapter impishly titled "How the Ruination of My Whole Summer Started and I Began to Be a New Negro When I Wasn't Really Through Being the Old Negro I Used to Be." Although Mark doesn't understand Fauset's enthusiasm for this movement, she does present him with the opportunity to meet several remarkable characters, including Langston Hughes.

Another type of opportunity appears when Fats Waller, the rollicking pianist and entertainer, dazzles Mark and enlists him and his best friend Henry to load bottles onto a truck. Unhappy when his truckload of bootleg liquor disappears, Dutch Schultz, the biggest mobster in Harlem, blames Mark and Henry. Encounters with gangsters and police convince readers that Mark faces much larger battles than the need to convince his parents about the virtues of playing jazz on the saxophone. The weight of these dangerous situations helps push Mark into the adult world. No longer able to hide in the shadow of his older brother or under the protection of his parents, he realizes that he has to begin to take responsibility for his actions.

A great virtue of this book is Myers's ability to evoke Mark's just-rolled-out-of-bed, semipassive personality. Myers draws in readers through this character, then holds their interest through vivid description of an exciting era. Myers also convincingly reconstructs Fauset, Hughes, Waller (whose antics scandalize Fauset), and many other luminaries. So many historical notables appear in this book that the publisher appends a helpful guide that identifies "Real People and Places of the Harlem Renaissance." Unfortunately, the large number of characters occasionally weakens the drama of the plotline.

Jacket illustration © 2007 by Shane W. Evans and jacket design by Elizabeth B. Parisi from Harlem Summer by Walter Dean Myers. Used with permission of the publisher, Scholastic.

This book would be an excellent choice for teachers to recommend or assign for the purpose of introducing students to the Harlem Renaissance. Teachers could use the novella to help introduce a unit that would prompt students to hear Waller's Harlem Stride piano, gaze at Carl Van Vechten's photography, read Hughes's blues-influenced poetry, and weigh polemical editorials from *The Crisis*. Through an examination of the language, the incidents, and the characters in this text, teachers can help students to consider the time period through the lens of a credible adolescent sensibility.

Harlem Summer provides an unusual opportunity for young adults to gain a better understanding of the Harlem Renaissance through the eyes of a wavering and believable young protagonist.

Reviewed by Keith Miller and Allison Parker, Department of English, Arizona State University, Tempe, USA.

Autobiography of My Dead Brother

Walter Dean Myers and Christopher Myers. 2005. New York: Amistad/HarperTempest. 224. pp. US$15.99.

While attending the funeral of the 14-year-old victim of a drive-by shooting, three close friends,

INTERVIEW WITH WALTER DEAN MYERS

Keith/Allison: *The Beast* and *Harlem Summer* both feature first person, adolescent narrators. *Monster*, though, does not. The readers see the protagonist in part from the outside, somewhat like the other characters do, especially the judge and jury. *Monster* also consists of a mixture of literary genres—diary, courtroom transcript—that are unusual in young adult literature. Could you comment on your use and non-use of somewhat traditional first person narration and of mixed genres? Do you plan to do more work with mixed genres?

Walter: When I was interviewing prisoners I noticed that they often used first person when talking about their own lives, but third person when talking about their crimes. Clearly these were attempts to separate themselves from their own negative behavior. So I have Mark talk about his own life in the first person, but when he refers to the crime he switches to the film version. I enjoyed using mixed forms and will undoubtedly do it again.

Jesse, C.J., and Rise, think about what it means to grow up in Harlem. As a result, Rise decides he wants Jesse, a talented artist, to create his biography in graphic form. Flattered by the request and motivated by his admiration for Rise, he begins work on the project and, in so doing, provides a first-person account of growing up in the inner city. Jesse traces Rise's development from an ordinary kid into a drug dealer and gang member. At the same time, he provides an account of his own artistic process and his own struggles with growing up. Ultimately, Jesse realizes that no matter how hard he tries to convince Rise to do what is right, it is Rise who will have to determine how both his biography and his life will turn out. Unfortunately, Rise's choices have left him vulnerable to the harsh realities of neighborhood violence, and he is killed in a drive-by shooting.

Autobiography is a synthesis of several genres. It is a novel that combines comic strip art and black-and-white illustrations with prosaic text. The comic strip that runs through the pages is an autobiographical depiction of Jesse told through the voice of the bird-like figure of Spodi, who gives voice to Jesse's internal struggles. Additionally, graphic novel-like illustrations decorate the pages and add a layer of meaning to the text. In one section, Jesse is questioning who Rise is and who he is becoming. The illustration that accompanies this text is a picture of Rise surrounded by masks—physical representations of Rise's changing character. In another chapter, the characters are talking about the violence that plagues their neighborhood, and the text is framed in pictures of guns.

Autobiography is a gritty and candid portrayal of life in Harlem, appropriate for readers ages 12 through adult. It is a book about growing up that will capture readers' attention through its words and its pictures. At times poetic, the narrator's voice is honest and real as he poses serious questions about what it means to be part of an environment saturated with violence and despair. Christopher Myers's illustrations—both the graphic novel pictures and the comic strip excerpts—move beyond being merely illustrative to take on thematic and symbolic significance, thus adding a layer of interest to an already nuanced and engaging text created by Walter Dean Myers.

The product of this father/son effort is remarkable.

Reviewed by April Brannon, California State University-Fullerton, USA.