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**Book Review**

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 **Children's Books**

# Boys to Men

BY LEONARD S. MARCUS

A COLLEGE friend who was struggling in one of his classes went to talk things over with his professor. If he was counting on sympathy, he was in for a surprise: "Get interested in Latin," the professor advised him. "Latin won't get interested in you."

Learning to reach beyond oneself, the very self that young people spend so much of their time fashioning, may well be childhood's hardest lesson. In Wal-

**GAME**

By Walter Dean Myers.  
218 pp. HarperTeen/HarperCollins Publishers. \$16.99. (Ages 12 and up)

**SUNRISE OVER FALLUJAH**

By Walter Dean Myers.  
290 pp. Scholastic Press. \$17.99. (Ages 12 and up)

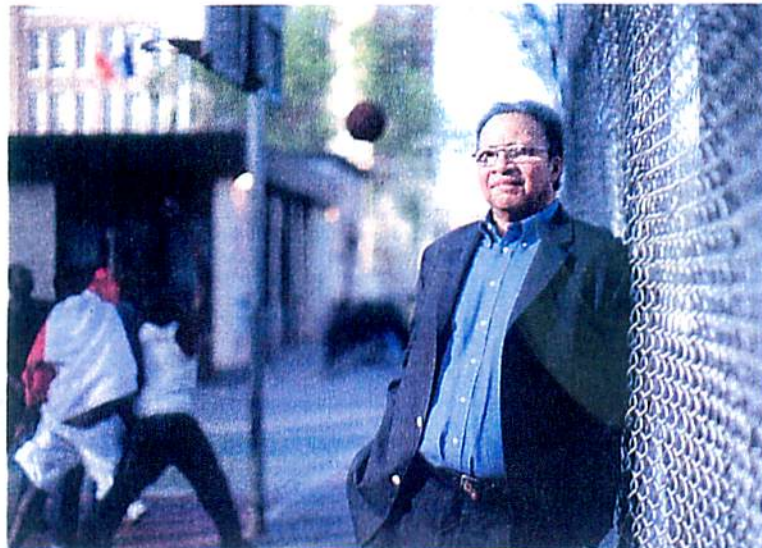
ter Dean Myers's "Game," members of a Harlem high school varsity basketball team play out this classic struggle for perspective both on and off the court.

At the center of this lean first-person narrative is Drew, an athletically gifted African-American teenager with plummy visions of a college scholarship and N.B.A. superstardom. As he begins his monologue, Drew makes it clear he thinks the world of his game. Soon, however, cracks show in the young man's confidence, prompting the reader to wonder who else, besides the ball players he and his James Baldwin Academy teammates compete against, Drew sees as the enemy.

For starters, there's Baldwin's own coach, House, who comes down hard on Drew for showboating. Then there's the pair of new team members, both white, whom Drew suspects (not altogether unfairly) of receiving preferential treatment. His father, a benign but shadowy figure who plays the lottery and seems to have given up on life, makes him wonder: might it be that his own dream has no more traction than the fantasy of scoring a monster payoff from a magic string of numbers?

Meanwhile, living embodiments of other possible futures present themselves, as in a fever dream: old Mr. Cephus, who couldn't cut it as a baseball player but did all right for himself anyway; Tony, the once-promising older brother of Drew's best friend, who "messed up"

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Walter Dean Myers in Harlem, the setting for many of his books.

on the street and dead-ended in jail.

The tautly choreographed game sequences that punctuate Drew's story bristle with the electricity of the sport while serving to track the hero's transformation from dicey wild card to on-point team player. Off court, the action is equally telling. In a more conventionally "uplifting" story, Drew and Tomas, the ambitious Czech émigré teammate who is easily Drew's athletic peer, might cross the racial divide to become best friends. The author opts for a more ragged conclusion, leaving the two teenagers respectful but wary of each other. Looking back, Drew decides: "I didn't need to be close to everybody." Fair enough, Myers suggests. It's the distance from which Drew, or anyone, stands back from himself for the sake of achieving a larger perspective that really matters. As a slightly older, less angry Drew says about one of his team's last and finest efforts: "We were on the court living out our lives. I was playing my heart out."

By his own account, in the memoir "Bad Boy" (2001), the author of "Game" started out life as something of a hard case. Raised in a foster home in Harlem during the 1940s, the young Walter Dean Myers was prone, in uncomfortable social situations, to lead with his fists. He drifted in and out of school and latched on to reading and writing as a sort of life preserver long before the possibility of writing for a living had much reality for him.

As he once said in an interview, even in his 30s, after he'd published his first book, he doubted his chances for a full-dress literary career. But eight years and a half-dozen books later, he did turn to writing full time, primarily for young audiences.

IN the intervening 30-plus years, Myers has produced an extraordinary body of work, including picture books, blues-inflected lyric poetry, fantasy, biography and steely-edged realistic fiction. He is a two-time Newbery Honor recipient, for "Scorpions" (1988) and "Somewhere in the Darkness" (1992), and his 1999 novel "Monster" won the first Michael L. Printz Award, a prize established by the American Library Association to recognize excellence in young adult literature. Drugs, drive-by shootings, gang warfare, wasted lives — Myers has written about all these subjects with nuanced understanding and a hard-won, qualified sense of hope.

This spring he has two new novels, set worlds apart — "Game" and "Sunrise Over Fallujah," which takes place largely in Iraq. "Sunrise" is a kind of sequel to Myers's groundbreaking 1988 novel, "Fallen Angels," about the Vietnam War. (The author, who served for three years in the military in the 1950s, dedicated the novel to his younger brother, who died in Vietnam.) In "Fallen Angels," Myers examined not just the rhythms and rituals of wartime Army life — "hours of boredom, seconds of ter-

ror," says the narrator, Pvt. Richie Perry — but also the psychological and spiritual toll war takes on the ordinary young people who do so much of the killing.

In "Sunrise Over Fallujah," the narrator is another Private Perry, Richie's nephew, Robin — or Birdy to his comrades in arms. He has signed on for the Iraq war over the objections of his father, who would rather he had gone to college, and he has done so with the noblest of intentions: to help rid the world of a tyrant, spread democracy and end terrorism. Birdy belongs to a Civil Affairs unit whose assignment is to make friends for America among the liberated Iraqi people and to ease the transition to the post-Saddam happier days. He and his buddies go in expecting a cakewalk. As the story begins, there is still plenty of time for joking around, an opportunity Myers takes full advantage of. "My personal mission in life," Captain Coles, a career Army man, declares as he winds up a briefing, "is to grow old and grumpy and watch my kids flunk out of school.

I need to get back home to get that done and I would appreciate your help."

Soon enough, however, Birdy and his fellow soldiers find themselves in a perplexing hall of mirrors, and we as readers are embedded with them. A tub of flour conceals a cache of detonators. A Humvee erupts in a fireball. A humanitarian mission involving the return of kidnapped children turns into a deadly ambush. In a narrative in which dramatic tension remains a constant and scenes of graphic violence are only occasional, the author makes a point of describing in some detail what it might feel like to kill another person in wartime, and what it might be like to witness the killing of both a friend and an enemy. Amid the chaos, Birdy recalls a high school basketball game he played in and realizes he desperately misses having a scoreboard, or some way of knowing whether his team is winning.

This is an astonishing book. Like the war it chronicles, its main characters' stories have not yet come to a close; Birdy and the others are all up for reassignment after a harrowing mission that one of their crew does not survive. We leave them not knowing who will make it home. Birdy takes a moment to write his Uncle Richie in Harlem: "I used to be mad with you when you wouldn't talk about Vietnam. I thought you were being selfish, in a way. Now I understand how light the words seem." □