

A CONVERSATION

Walter Dean Myers

Questions & Answers

*Sunrise Over
Fallujah*

Q: *Sunrise Over Fallujah* is your second young adult novel about war. Why did you decide to revisit this subject?

A: One of the lessons learned during the Vietnam War was that the depiction of wounded soldiers, of coffins stacked higher than their living guards, had a negative effect on the viewing public. The military in Iraq specifically banned the photographing of wounded soldiers and coffins, thus sanitizing this terrible and bloody conflict. I wanted to bring the war back into the American consciousness, not in a political sense, but in the very difficult physical sense. I wanted young people who would be fighting this war, and who would, in the future, be making the hard decisions about our country engaging in wars, to be conscious of what war is really about.

Q: Your Vietnam War–era novel *Fallen Angels* celebrates its twentieth anniversary this year. What inspired you to write the novel initially?

A: I joined the army on my seventeenth birthday, full of the romance of war after having read a lot of World War I British poetry and having seen a lot of post–World War II films. I thought the romantic presentations of war influenced my joining and my presentation of war to my younger siblings. My younger brother’s death in Vietnam was both sobering and cause for reflection. In *Fallen Angels* I wanted to dispel the notion of war as either romantic or simplistically heroic.

Q: What was the response to *Fallen Angels* when it was first published, and has reaction changed at all during the last twenty years?

A: The response was, at first, mixed. The rawness of war depicted was looked at aghast, the references to the racial animosity of the sixties was frowned upon, as was the frequent use of casual profanity. Over the years the book was one of the most challenged in schools and frequently banned. It also achieved an enviable record of acceptance among Vietnam veterans and educators as an accurate and much needed account of a particular conflict and of war in general.

Q: The two novels are slightly linked (the protagonist in *Sunrise Over Fallujah* is the nephew of the protagonist from *Fallen Angels*). Why did you want to make that subtle connection between the two books?

A: I worried about my father, who served in World War II. I worried about my brother, who served in Vietnam. I worried about my son, who served in the Iraq War. Each generation seems to invent its own reasons for war, and I wanted to show this.

Q: What kind of research did you do for *Sunrise Over Fallujah*, and how did it differ from the research you did for *Fallen Angels*?

A: The primary research for both books was done through interviews with veterans. The After Action reports, describing particular battles, were invaluable as were the assessments of the field commanders. The war in Iraq was far more politically complex than Vietnam and the political analysis by both sides was useful. The war in Iraq was also delineated by Central Command in terms of more specific objectives than were available in Vietnam. Controlling a specific geographical area or supply route, for example, would be cited as the rationale for a particular operation. This clarity of operation and subsequent success or failure gave me an excellent picture of how the war was succeeding or failing.

Q: *Fallen Angels* was published twenty years after the Vietnam War ended. How is it different to write about a war still in progress?

A: The war in Iraq was somewhat easier to write about because material from American soldiers as well as the Iraqi army and Iraqi people was more available. Internet blogs, news accounts, and international news sources have provided clearer pictures of everyday events than were available even twenty years after Vietnam.

-continued-

A CONVERSATION

Questions & Answers

Q: *How is the Iraq War different from the Vietnam War?*

A: A major difference is the national intent of those described as the “enemy.” In Vietnam the “enemy” were those embracing the communist cause and those who saw the United States and its allies as an invading force. In Iraq the “enemy” are more likely to be combatants fighting for non-nationalistic or religious causes. Tribal loyalties, local power struggles, adventurers, and mercenaries make up a large portion of those willing to take up arms. The resulting difficulty in defining the “enemy” makes it equally difficult in obtaining a clear victory.

Q: *What do you hope readers will take away from reading these books?*

A: Shortly after *Fallen Angels* appeared, a woman wrote to me stating that her son had wanted to join the army to fight in Vietnam. She had begged him to at least finish high school. Imbued with the romanticism of war, he went to every war movie he could. When he read *Fallen Angels*, however, he changed his mind about the glory and heroism of war. He loved his country just as much, but was more reflective in his thinking about the adventure of armed combat.

I want young people to be hesitant to glorify war and to demand of their leaders justification for the sacrifices they ask of our citizens. The young people who read *Fallen Angels* some twenty years ago are the same ones who are the senior officers in today’s military. I hope that reading *Fallen Angels* has made them prudent leaders. And when they progress to becoming decision makers, I hope that the earnest literature they have encountered, including *Fallen Angels* and *Sunrise Over Fallujah* will cause them to deliberate wisely.

Q: *How do you feel your own personal experience having served in the military impacts your ability to write about it?*

A: What I saw in my military experience was that all wars are an attempt to control the chaos of the battlefield. It is neither as precise as our media tries to show it, nor as clear. Basically it is not about arrows on a computer screen or “smart” weaponry. It is about exacting an intolerable cost on someone labeled “enemy” through killing human beings, pure and simple. This is what I have seen, and what I hoped to bring to the writing of *Sunrise Over Fallujah*.

Contact:

Tracy van Straaten

212/389-3782 or tvansson@scholastic.com

This interview has been provided by Scholastic Inc.

© 2008 Scholastic Inc. All rights reserved.