

>> From the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.

>> This Guy Lamolinara at the Library of Congress. Late September will mark the 12th year that booklovers of all ages have gathered in Washington, DC, to celebrate the written word at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. The festival, which is free and open to the public, will be two days this year, Saturday, September 22nd and Sunday, September 23rd, 2012. The festival will take place between 9th and 14th Streets on the National Mall, rain or shine. Hours are 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Saturday, the 22nd, and noon to 5:30 p.m. on Sunday, the 23rd. For more details, visit [www.loc.gov/bookfest](http://www.loc.gov/bookfest). And now is it my pleasure to introduce Walter Dean Myers whose latest book is titled "We Are America; A Tribute from the Heart." Walter Dean Myers is an award winning author of books for young people and he is also the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature. The National Ambassador Program is co-sponsored by the Library of Congress and the Children's Book Council. Water, thank you for joining us.

>> Oh, thanks for having me here.

>> You have written more than 100 books. So where do you get your inspiration for so many different topics?

>> From everywhere. Anything that interests me, people that interest me, and very often from kids who write to me. I very often get long letters from kids with suggestions of what book I should do next, and it's very amusing and sometimes very inspirational.

>> Okay. Can you give us one example of a letter you might have gotten from somebody that inspired you to write a book?

>> Yes. I was talking to some kids about one idea that I had and they asked me for my address and one girl wrote and asked me to write a book about a teenage model. I knew nothing about models, so I did some research, found out that was not a terribly nice business, and I did a book called "Crystal," about a teenage model. And when I told the-- I wrote back to the kids and said I was going to do this book, a boy asked me to [inaudible] writing books about girls and do another basketball book, so I did "Slam," so it was, you know, I got two books from the same class.

>> Okay.

>> Yeah.

>> You told me once that write probably about five pages a day. Do you ever have a day where you have writer's block and you just simply can't write?

>> No, I don't because I plan, you know, when I finish my five pages, I will go over my next project and just look at each of the chapter breakdowns and I make sure that something physical is going on in each chapter and by doing that, I can always write. I can always write. I don't get writer's block.

>> Oh, great. I'm sure a lot of writers will be very envious of you. You've chosen as your platform for your term as national ambassador, reading is not optional. When you talk to young people about that topic, what do you tell them?

>> I try to give them a sense of how reading will affect their lives. Young kids don't know this, you know. As a parent, I sort of enforced reading upon my kids. You had to read and you read with the family and I read to them, giving reading a value within the family, but with kids, you try to convince them that reading is going to make their lives better. It's difficult. You know, one of the things that I tell them is that it's good to read with your parents and it is. Actually, that's the key for young kids.

>> When did you know that you wanted to spend your life as a writer?

>> You know, to be honest with you, I didn't know until I was in my 30s.

>> Okay.

>> In my late 30s because I was, I thought I enjoyed writing but I never imagined I could make a living at this. I never imagined because you're not taught that in school.

>> Right.

>> You're taught that writers are geniuses and just running around being geniuses and but I never thought about making a living at it. It was just something that I enjoyed doing. I enjoy every single day of my life. I enjoy it.

>> That's great because a lot of people can't say that. You grew up in Harlem. Can you tell us a little bit about what your life was like there?

>> It was good for my early years. Harlem was like a village, a more mixed village than it came to be later because of segregation and you had, so doctors and lawyers and sports figures lived right there in the community and I got to see wonderful cross-section of people and, of course, my family was there, my church. So it was a good experience for me as a very young person. Later on it became less good as my family began to not do well, but generally speaking, plus I loved the public libraries there and those hugely tall desks and those old, old librarians, who must have been in their 20s at least. But, you know, it's funny because when I go back to the library now, which I do once or twice a year, those desks don't look nearly as tall. Those librarians are children.

>> That's funny. Can you tell us were there any famous literary figures that you grew up with there?

>> Well, you know, I didn't appreciate him very much but Langston Hughes came to my church and he would come and do readings at the church. He was not a regular member of the, but this is a Presbyterian church and was

sort of a middle class black church and he would come and he would read from his books. And afterwards, he would sell his books right out of his suitcase, which was really neat, and then, of course, James Baldwin lived about nine blocks from me. And I didn't know him as a kid but I met him later.

>> Okay. Your novels tackle some very tough subjects, childhood imprisonment, neighborhood violence, absentee fathers. How much of what you write about comes from your own life?

>> Well, you know, my uncle was in jail up until the time I was 12. And he got out of jail and was out of jail for six months and then he was killed. He was murdered. So I sort of had that background, that experience. I write a lot about children from foster homes. My mom died; as a child, my dad gave me to the Dean family, so I was not raised with my family. So I sort of know that background and I met my biological father at around 13 and I wrote a book about that called "Somewhere in the Darkness."

>> Okay. One thing that people may not know about you is that you are a great collector of vintage photos. Do you focus on a particular subject and do these photos have any influence on your writing?

>> I do. I collect lots of children's photos from around the world, but I also have black history, black historical photos from 1854 until 1940, so I have about 9,000 photos in that category.

>> And do these photos in any way, have you ever written a book or a story based on just looking at a photo?

>> I have. Yes, I was telling some teachers yesterday, as a matter of a fact, that I was buying some photos in a shop in Harlem and a man said, oh, I have some old photographs and he had some old photographs from the Italian Ethiopian War to 1935 in which his uncle was a reconnaissance pilot for [inaudible] and so I'm doing a book on his uncle.

>> Oh, okay.

>> Yeah, yeah, which is really kind of fun. And it's really interesting to see the photographs and, you know-- I was in London about a decade ago and I found some photographs of an African girl who had been taken from Africa in the 1840s and I did a book about her. I did more research, found more pictures, and more documents, and it was just-- I love what I do. I mean, and the funny thing about it, they actually pay me to do this.

>> That's very nice. I have one last question for you. Can you tell us a little bit about your new book, "We Are America?"

>> Yeah. You know, after the 9-11, what happened was everyone was hurt and I felt hurt, and everyone had been through a period of grief, which I also did. Then there was this period of patriotism and I found myself not as much included in that and realized that as a cool liberal, I had sort of moved away from the ideas that made America great and what I wanted to

do very much was to reconnect and I began looking at the documents and the Constitution and the Articles of Confederation and all of these documents that made America great. And "We Are America" is my tribute to this country.

>> Okay. We have been hearing from Walter Dean Myers, National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, who will appear on Saturday, September 22nd in the Teens and Children Pavilion at the National Book Festival on the National Mall. Water, thank you very much.

>> Thank you very much.

>> This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at [loc.gov](http://loc.gov).