

Bad Boy: A Memoir

Walter Dean Myers

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Bad Boy: A Memoir is a 2001 autobiography penned by Walter Dean Myers. The novel follows the early years of award-winning author Walter Dean Myers, an African American man who spent his young life traversing the streets of Harlem. Myers lived with the mother of his half-siblings and her husband. As a youth, he loved to fight and show aggressiveness towards others, earning him the degrading title of a bad boy. However, behind the athletic, tough persona that those around him knew him by, was an avid reader and writer who felt most at home while flipping the pages of his books. Life was not easy for Myers. He struggled with his speech, got into many physical conflicts, and spent most of his youth trying to figure out how to balance his life as African American, male, and literature lover. Although considered a gifted student in his middle school years, Myers' attendance dropped to tragic rates in high school. It would be more of a surprise to see him in class than to see him absent. Throughout the novel, readers are introduced to characters that played key roles in the author's life, such as his mother, Frank, and Dr. Holiday.

Bad Boy: A Memoir is an incredible text. The author's ability to pull readers into such specific instances of his life is extraordinary. Even at the ripe age of 64, Myers can share the thoughts, feelings, and motives he had as an elementary school student. One of my favorite aspects of *Bad Boy: A Memoir* is how the main character's setting interweaves with his lifestyle. Harlem is truly a unique place. As opposed to simply stating where he lives, Myers frequently returns to the idea of Harlem truly being his home, although he was not born there. To a New York native or anyone who feels that their city makes them who they are, it is easy to relate to Myers' love for his locale.

Furthermore, I love the author's use of the phrase 'bad boy'. Adults constantly tell children that they are bad girls and bad boys, but seldom realize the effect this label can have on a child. One of the recurring themes in *Bad Boy: A Memoir* is that there is more than meets the eye. Myers' peers did not know the depth of his character. They simply saw him as a troublesome African American boy, and instantly labeled him. Behind this was an intelligent young man with layers and passion.

In addition, I appreciate and admire the author's ability to reflect. Even when he did wrongful things, he pondered upon his actions. Taking this a step further, the present Myers reflects on the actions of his younger self. For instance, later in the novel, Myers implies that he wishes his relationship with his mother could have continued on the strong path it once followed.

As unique as this memoir is, there are a few minor shortcomings. I found it difficult to keep track of what grade or age Myers was when he was discussing certain events. Also, I believe that the ending is rushed. Yes, the term *boy* is in the title, and this novel is supposed to

explain Myers' youth, but I would have liked to hear more about his transition from being this "bad boy" to becoming an author. Myers explains a few key events in his life after high school such as joining the army and reading James Baldwin's inspiring short story, but I would have loved to get the same depth and explanation as to how he became an author as I did for other events in his life, even if it meant a longer novel.

I would recommend this book to those between the ages of 13-17. Although an easy read that may be found in the children's section of the library, I believe people in this age group may need to hear the message of this novel the most. The latter years of middle and high school can be a transformative period in a student's life. Hearing the story of a successful minority who went through hardships may be more impactful on someone in this age range as opposed to an elementary school student. I would say that this novel can be borrowed from the local library.

Recommended Titles:

Somewhere in the Darkness by Walter Dean Myers

Slam by Walt Dean Myers

Scorpions by Walter Dean Myers