



# Christopher Myers

## Author Program In-depth Interview Insights Beyond the Slide Shows

Christopher Myers, interviewed in his studio in Brooklyn, New York on October 16, 2003.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You and your father, author Walter Dean Myers, have collaborated on a number of children's books. What's it like working with him?

**CHRISTOPHER MYERS:** I love working with my pop. I love it because I think he's a great storyteller, and he inspires me. When he does his work, I don't feel that my job is simply to support his text. I feel that my job is to tell a different story that intertwines with his. Our stories overlap, compare, and contrast in very interesting ways.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Can you give an example your collaborations?

**CHRISTOPHER MYERS:** In *Blues Journey*, there's a line that my pop wrote that goes, "Blues, won't you free me, let all this suffering cease? Said blues, won't you free me, let all this suffering cease? Give me a feather pillow, and let me rest in peace." I illustrated that line with the image of women hanging clothes on the clothesline because I wanted to take the everyday workaday worlds of these women and to juxtapose them to this text. When Pop uses the words "free me, let all this suffering cease," it has a resonance that is mythological, legendary, large. I wanted to take that large resonance and apply it to the workaday worlds of these women hanging laundry on the line.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your books are often multi-layered and appear to have a kind of purpose in mind.

**CHRISTOPHER MYERS:** To me, a storyteller has a sense of purpose. A storyteller has a story to tell that means something to themselves and to those that they're telling the story to. I hope the work that I do contains that sense of purpose.

That purpose is often the transmission of values or righting some of the wrongs that are done by the other stories in our society. I want to create images that will make today's children feel worthwhile, feel like they are valuable people.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You often illustrate with multiple art media within one book. Can you explain why?

**CHRISTOPHER MYERS:** I feel that there are many ways to tell any one story. I think that the only way that we come to a fuller understanding of what a story can be is through telling it in a lot of different ways. In *A Time to Love*, for example, I used six different styles because I wanted to say that there's no one way of telling Bible stories — that these stories have been told and will be

retold from generation to generation for years to come. Specifically, I used photography, painted on papyrus, imitated hieroglyphics, painted over photographs, did traditional watercolors, created wood cuts and made collages.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What inspired *A Time to Love*?

**CHRISTOPHER MYERS:** I was raised Catholic, going to church every Sunday for many, many years. And I wanted to do a book like the books I was raised on — Bible stories — but I wanted to do them in my own way. I wanted to do them with my pop because a lot of my religious experience growing up also came from my father. And so *A Time to Love* was kind of an ode to all the Bible stories books I grew up with, as well as a refiguring of those Bible storybooks.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your book *Blues Journey* was illustrated with very deliberate media.

**CHRISTOPHER MYERS:** *Blues Journey* for me was first and foremost an exploration of an art form. I want people to understand The Blues as an art form. I want people to understand The Blues as a formal structure into which so many emotions and stories can be placed. And I want The Blues to be understood as almost a gift by African-American culture to the world.

I was especially interested in depicting The Blues as a very limited art form. Not that it's limited in what it can express, but that it's got a very spare and rigid structure that allows you to express so much. I try to reflect this sparseness in the images that I made for *Blues Journey*, with a very limited palette — blue ink, white paint and brown paper bags.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** That must have been a challenge to work within that limitation of blue ink, white paint and brown paper bags.

**CHRISTOPHER MYERS:** Working in this very spare palette was a challenge I was excited about. It mirrored the challenge of so many artists in this world who don't have access to mega-art stores and who don't have the kind of money that other artists may have. *Blues Journey* was a project that also dealt with a history of poverty — that dealt with what it means to be poor and how much joy there is in finding ways to improvise within limited economic means. Doing these illustrations, it was appropriate to only use blue ink, white paint and brown paper bags.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Describe the technical process of creating the images in *Blues Journey*.

**CHRISTOPHER MYERS:** Artistically, one of the things I was interested in was the range of tones you can pull from blue ink on the brown paper bag. There was such a richness to it.

I also used a lot of rubber stamps in *Blues Journey* because I wanted to make the book using my hands with low-tech means that reflected The Blues. *Blues Journey* is a single piece. It's one of the first times that I thought and planned a book from beginning to end to be a unified whole. I think of the book not as a collection of pages, but as an artwork in and of itself.

I also made *Blues Journey* a non-linear book. You can open it and start it at any spot and from there, tell the story in a new way each time. It is a unified story that spans generations and different ways of talking about the same experience.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How else does *Blues Journey* reflect The Blues?

**CHRISTOPHER MYERS:** The Blues was made during in-between moments by hardworking people. The Blues was made with very spare instruments, strong wit, hand-me-downs and whatever could be found. I wanted to do a book that was made in the same way —made with and focused on labor and with a kind of hand-me-down, put-together structure of whatever beauty you can squeeze out of brown paper bags, white paint and blue ink.

I'm fascinated that The Blues has functioned as popular history for so many years. It functioned literally as the news, the weather, a history book and gossip. For example, when Charley Patton sang "Mississippi Bo Weevil Blues," he was talking about a boll weevil epidemic, that deeply affected his life.

My pop and I wanted to echo that the function of The Blues is essentially our function as artists — to elevate the lives of those we see around us to the level of myth, so that people can see that their lives have something to tell other people, and that the stories of their lives have something to give to the world.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *Blues Journey* seems to be layered with multiple stories.

**CHRISTOPHER MYERS:** The Blues is always about telling two stories. There's the first story, which may be about pain, sadness or your woman having left you. Then there is the second story, which is the story of the artist who takes that pain and makes a song, and makes a beautiful thing that flies from his guitar and his voice, or her guitar and her voice. And that double story is central to the book of *Blues Journey*.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What kind of research did you do before creating the art for *Blues Journey*?

**CHRISTOPHER MYERS:** For the image of a chain gang, I rented the movie *Cool Hand Luke* and watched that several times. I also bought a pickaxe. Swing it 20 times and you'll know that you don't know how much pain was going on for these men.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What are you communicating on the page showing someone looking through a hole in their shoe?

**CHRISTOPHER MYERS:** I was trying with that image to get at the vaguely whimsical nature of the way that people can deal with poverty. No matter how desperate it may seem, one can still have a playful moment, and I wanted to demonstrate that playful moment.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Can you talk about your depiction of a lynching in *Blues Journey*?

**CHRISTOPHER MYERS:** One of the hardest images in the book to illustrate was the image that dealt with lynching. The line says, "Strange fruit hanging, high in the big oak tree / Strange fruit hanging, high in the big oak tree / You can see what it did to Willie, / can you see what it does to me?" To make this horrific moment in history palatable to kids, and to allow for the image not to simply be an image about victimization, I thought that the image of a child protesting was really important. I wanted to show a community of protesters, of active participants in deciding their own fate. And I wanted to show that this child is not alone — that this child is part of a larger

community of people who are concerned. Following the lynching image that was so tough and so hard, I wanted to remind people that there is a joy in The Blues. The next image is of a singer bent back in ecstasy — it's about that joy and that openness.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *Harlem*, *Black Cat*, *Fly*... these books of yours appear to celebrate urban life and energy.

**CHRISTOPHER MYERS:** I'm a city boy at heart. I grew up in Jersey City, Queens and Harlem, running all around the streets. These streets are warm to me. These streets are home to me. If you go to a classroom in Harlem, or in any urban neighborhood, oftentimes you'll hear that their neighborhoods are dangerous. If you ask those same kids if they have fun in their neighborhoods or do they think that their own neighborhoods are dangerous, those same children will tell you that they enjoy their neighborhoods, that they love their neighborhoods.

*Black Cat* is an urban book and I wanted to praise urban spaces. I wanted to say that urban spaces are beautiful and exciting and full. It is a visual tour of my current neighborhood. Most of the photos are taken within five or six blocks of my house. I traveled every spot where that cat travels.

*Harlem* is a celebration of this premier and emblematic black urban neighborhood, and I wanted to say about every black neighborhood that they are home to many beautiful and wonderful people.

*Fly* was about several things for me. It's an urban book, but it's also about an intergenerational friendship. I was interested in the idea that so many of the kids in my neighborhood have "grandparents" that are not related to them per se, but are the old people on the block who look out for them. I think that's a really beautiful thing. I wanted to celebrate that kind of intergenerational friendship. Also, I feel that kids' books today take place in the world of children without adults. And if there are adults, those adults are portrayed as the rules, the law, the authority. I wanted *Fly* to show an intergenerational friendship that was based on some sort of understanding and mutual respect.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Describe the message behind *Wings*.

**CHRISTOPHER MYERS:** *Wings* is essentially an anti-ugly duckling story. It's a story about a kid who is different. He learns that his solution to being different is not to find a community that's just exactly like him, but to find a space where it is fine to be different. In the original ugly duckling story, the essential message is, "stick with your own kind, find sameness at all costs." I wanted to do a book that told kids it was okay to be different, even if you never found your own kind.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** *Monster* has a powerful message; what was your contribution to that message?

**CHRISTOPHER MYERS:** My contribution to *Monster* was small, but I made one small point that I think is important: images of crime and criminality dog us in this society. Every TV show, every newscast, every newspaper is filled with these same images — the surveillance camera, the courtroom sketch, the mother grieving her son being in jail.... I wanted to cross Pop's brilliant narrative with images that resonated for a society that is already inundated with these images of crime and criminality.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What message do you have for children when you visit schools?

**CHRISTOPHER MYERS:** I want kids to see who writers and artists are. They believe that writers and artists are these special sainted people who they could never hope to be. And what I'm interested in making clear to these kids is that their own minds, their own ideas, their own stories are worth being told — that their lives are the stuff of legend and myth.

I was in a school once and a little girl raised her hand and her question was, "How do you write so neatly in every copy of the book?" Kids often don't understand how books are made. They don't see how close they are to the process. They are taught that their own stories are not worth much, and I like to tell these kids that their stories are great stories.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What direction do you see your work taking in the future?

**CHRISTOPHER MYERS:** When I was a kid, my dad hired me out as a researcher for himself and other authors. And in pouring through archives, and census records, and photo resources, I think I got one of the best educations I could in the importance of images. I saw how images last and how written and visual images affect the society that we live in. I hope to continue the work of being a researcher and being someone who contributes images and sees how those images change the world we live in.

#### **Books by Christopher Myers**

- AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY DEAD BROTHER (written by Walter Dean Myers), Amistad / HarperCollins Children's Books, 2005
- LIES AND OTHER TALL TALES (collected by Zora Neale Hurston, adapted and illustrated by Christopher Myers), HarperCollins Children's Books, 2005
- LOVE: SELECTED POEMS (written by e. e. cummings), Jump at the Sun / Hyperion Books for Children, 2005
- BLUES JOURNEY (written by Walter Dean Myers), Holiday House, 2003
- TIME TO LOVE, A: STORIES FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT (written by Walter Dean Myers), Scholastic Press, 2003
- FLY!, Jump at the Sun / Hyperion Books for Children, 2001
- WINGS, Scholastic Press, 2000
- BLACK CAT, Scholastic Press, 1999
- MONSTER (written by Walter Dean Myers), HarperCollins Children's Books, 1999
- HARLEM: A POEM (written by Walter Dean Myers), Scholastic Press, 1996
- SHADOW OF THE RED MOON (written by Walter Dean Myers), Scholastic Press, 1995

This In-depth Interview transcript is created by TeachingBooks.net for educational purposes and may be copied and distributed solely for these purposes for no charge as long as the copyright information remains on all copies. Questions regarding this program should be directed to [info@teachingbooks.net](mailto:info@teachingbooks.net). Copyright ©2006 TeachingBooks.net LLC. All rights reserved.