

**Conflict in Literature:** a struggle or fight. Conflict makes a story interesting because readers want to find out the outcome. Myers has severe external conflicts, as shown by his continual fights in school. He also experiences major internal conflicts, culminating in his near nervous breakdown and treatment at Shalme Hospital. "I hadn't yet sorted out the shame I felt for having squandered my life, which, at seventeen, I thought was nearly over anyway." (page 196).

**Memoir:** a first-person prose selection about an event. *Bad Boy* is a memoir about Walter Dean Myers' coming of age as a writer. The bulk of the memoir focuses on his childhood in the 1940s and 1950s in Harlem, New York. Myers telescopes his young adulthood and writing career in a few pages, to keep the focus on his childhood.

### The Importance of Setting

The memoir could not have taken place anywhere but Harlem, New York, the historic cultural nexus of African-American life in America. Harlem shaped Myers' childhood and his outlook on life. In part, it helped make him into the writer he is today, which is why he devotes so much of the book to describing its atmosphere.

Today, Harlem has a reputation for urban decay and racial tension, but that is far from the truth: Harlem is once again an up-and-coming trendy neighborhood. The second Harlem Renaissance has been taking place for some time now as homesteaders refurbish elegant brownstones to their old glory. The area has become even more elegant since former-President Bill Clinton set up his office there.

Harlem is located north of 110 Street, south of 151 Street, and west of Fifth Avenue. Its many attractions include Grants Tomb, the Apollo Theatre, Columbia University, and the Studio Museum in Harlem. In part because of Columbia University, the area is also home to many trendy restaurants of astonishingly wide variety.

### Cross-Curricular Sources

#### Fiction

William Armstrong, *Souder*  
 Sharon Draper, *Tears of a Tiger and Forged by Fire*  
 Christopher Paul Curtis, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham and Bad, Not Buddy*  
 Sharon G. Flake, *The Skin I'm In*  
 Jack Ezra Keats, *The Snowy Day*  
 Robert Lipsyte, *The Contender*  
 Jeanette Winter, *Follow the Drinking Gourd*  
 Jacqueline Woodson, *Coming on Home Soon*

#### Nonfiction

Chrisanne Beckner, *100 African Americans Who Shaped History*  
 Louis Haber, *Black Pioneers of Science and Invention*  
 Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*  
 Cal Massey, *Famous African American Women*  
 Diane Patrick, *The New York Public Library Amazing African American History: A Book of Answers for Kids*  
 Nancy I. Sanders, *A Kid's Guide to African American History*  
 Jeffrey Stewart, *1001 Things Kids Should Know About African American History*  
 Otha Richard Sullivan, *African American Inventors*



#### Audio Books

*The Dream Bearer*  
*Fallen Angels*  
*Bad Boy*  
*Shooter*  
*Suave!*

#### DVDs, Videos

*African Americans* (1993)  
*Harlem Renaissance: Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Nat King Cole* (DVD)  
*A Legacy of Patriotism and Valor: African Americans in WW II* (1998)  
*Lullaby of Harlem* (DVD)  
*Story of a People: Black Youth* (1998)

#### Internet

Biographical Information on Walter Dean Myers page  
[www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kwander/myers.htm](http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kwander/myers.htm)  
 Scholastic Web site  
<http://teacher.scholastic.com/>  
 Walter Dean Myers Teacher Resource File  
[falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/myers.htm](http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/myers.htm)

### Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in Walter Dean Myers' *Bad Boy* should include these aspects:

#### Themes

- courage
- despair
- family love
- fighting
- literary role models
- poverty
- racism
- reading
- speech impediments
- writing

#### Motifs

- being adopted by members of your extended family
- dealing with a severe speech impediment
- coping with increasing poverty and family disruption
- being recognized for your extraordinary intelligence
- wanting to become a writer
- remembering the influence of skilled and supportive teachers
- having a nervous breakdown

- dropping out of high school
- enlisting in the Army
- finding your voice and audience as a writer

### Meaning Study

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in *Bad Boy*. Explain the meaning of each. Page numbers indicate the context from which the item is taken.

1. It was during this visit that he met George Myers, Florence's first husband, her two daughters, and George's children by Mary Myers. (p. 6)  
*(As a result of this visit, young Walter comes to live with his foster family. He is never formally adopted, but his new parents raise him to the best of their ability. His foster mother, in particular, is very loving and close to him.)*
2. Reading a book was not so much like entering a different world—it was like discovering a different language. (p. 46)  
*(Because of his severe speech impediment, Myers has trouble expressing himself. Perhaps because of this, language becomes one of his central concerns. He often feels more authentic when reading than when playing with his friends and pursuing other daily activities.)*
3. As much as I enjoyed reading, in the world in which I was living it had to be a secret vice. (p. 52)  
*(When he brings books home from the library, older kids on the street tease him about his reading. They make it clear that "normal" boys do not read. Since he does not want to get into fights about his reading, Myers starts bringing his books to and from the library in a brown paper bag.)*
4. The idea that race played a large part in the life process was becoming clear to me. (p. 85)  
*(Since Harlem was largely black in the 1940s and 1950s, Myers did not often have to deal with issues of race. As he matures, however, Myers becomes aware that the movers and shakers in the city are white—not black.)*
5. By this time there were two very distinct voices going on in my head, and I moved easily between them. (p. 92)  
*(One part of his personality has to do with sports and street life, the components of the black male personality. The other part of his personality has to do with literature. This part he carefully keeps secret from his friends and family.)*