

# A Guide to Teaching Walter Dean Myers's

**The Dream Bearer • Handbook for Boys • It Ain't All for Nothin'**

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**Grades 5–8**

## **THEMES**

Personal responsibility • Father/son relationships • The importance of mentors

## **READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES**

Compare and Contrast • Problems and Solutions  
Make Judgments and Decisions • Understand Cause and Effect

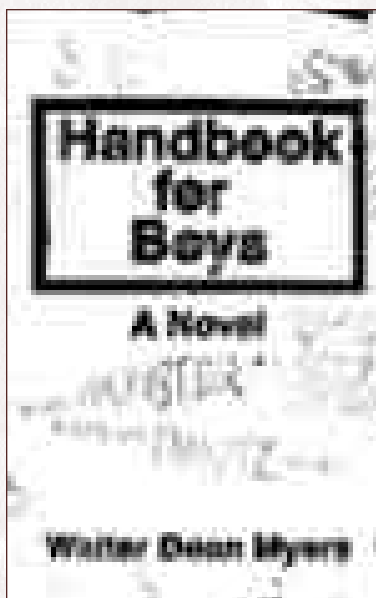
### **About This Guide**

In this guide you'll find discussion questions and activities for three novels by acclaimed writer Walter Dean Myers. Myers's latest, *The Dream Bearer*, introduces twelve-year-old David, who struggles with his father's mental illness and its effect on the family. In *Handbook for Boys* sixteen-year-old Jimmy is on probation for assault but instead of serving time in a juvenile facility, he's sent to Duke Wilson's barbershop, where he learns important lessons about life and how to live it. *It Ain't All for Nothin'* rounds out the trio. Available again after a long absence, it tells the story of Tippy, who's sucked into a life of crime and increasing despair when, on the cusp of adolescence, he's forced to live with his father. Despite their difficulties, David, Jimmy, and Tippy persevere and learn to overcome obstacles, make tough decisions, and face life on their own terms.



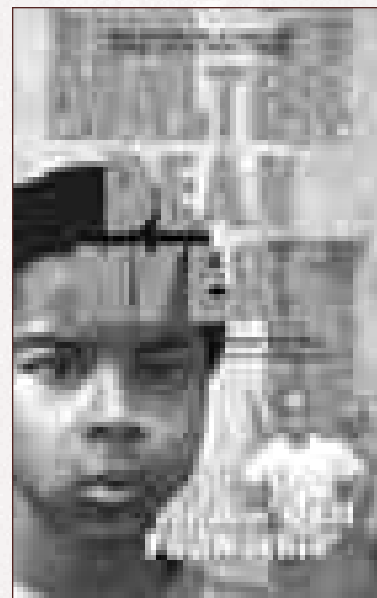
**The Dream Bearer**

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Lb 0-06-029522-8



**Handbook for Boys**

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Lb 0-06-029147-8  
Pb 0-06-440930-9



**It Ain't All for Nothin'**

Pb 0-06-447311-2

## READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES FOR ALL THREE BOOKS

### Compare and Contrast

- David, Jimmy, and Tippy all develop relationships with mentors. Have students examine the similarities and differences of these relationships. Who are the boys' mentors? What impact do these relationships have on the boys?
- Compare and contrast father/son relationships in all three books. In what ways does this relationship, or lack thereof, affect each boy's personal development?

### Make Judgments and Decisions

- In each of the books an adolescent male is involved in criminal activity. For example, Tyrone sells drugs in *The Dream Bearer*; Tippy robs a store in *It Ain't All for Nothin'*; and Jimmy is charged with assault in *Handbook for Boys*. Should they be punished for their behavior? If so, how? If not, why? What is an appropriate consequence for each of their actions?

### Understand Cause and Effect

- Each of the books has a turning point, a moment at which the characters see things in a new light and, as a result, approach life differently than they did before. Identify the turning point in each book. What causes the change? What happens as a result?

## ACTIVITIES ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

### Language Arts

- Have students create their own handbooks for successful living based on *Handbook for Boys*. Guide them in thinking about the advice they'd like to share with younger students and/or siblings and how to present it best. Options include listing five to ten pieces of advice along with a brief explanatory paragraph, or sharing advice in the context of a short story. Encourage students to share their books with younger students and siblings.
- Have students interview successful adults. Begin by brainstorming a list of questions. Open-ended questions (those that require more than a "yes" or "no" response) yield the most information. Include who, what, where, when, and why questions. With permission from the interviewee, students may wish to tape-record the interview. Students may transcribe the interview or use it as the basis for an article. Compile student work in a class book.

### Social Studies

- All three novels feature adolescents in trouble with the law. In *The Dream Bearer*, Tyrone is dealing drugs and is sought by police; *Handbook for Boys* stars two teenagers on probation; and *It Ain't All for Nothin'* probes Tippy's descent into crime. Have students research the juvenile justice system in their home state. What penalties would Walter Dean Myers's characters face? Are these punishments fair? What consequences would students recommend as an alternative? Have students discuss their opinions about the justice system, then lead the class in an ethical debate.

### Health

- Teenage drug and alcohol use is a common thread in the three books. Have students research adolescent substance abuse. What do state and nationwide statistics say about drug and alcohol use by teenagers? How do drugs and alcohol affect the body and mind? What factors contribute to substance abuse? What is being done to keep kids off drugs and alcohol? What programs are available to help teens seeking recovery? Have students research programs in the local community, and work together to prepare an anti-drug campaign project.

### Art/Language Arts

- Family, friends, and mentors play an important role in all three novels. Have students create a photo exhibition that pays tribute to the important people in their lives. Students should brainstorm a list of people who have influenced their lives in positive ways, then choose three to five of them to photograph. Mount photos on construction paper. Each should be accompanied by a label saying who the person is and why he or she is important. Invite guests to view the exhibit.

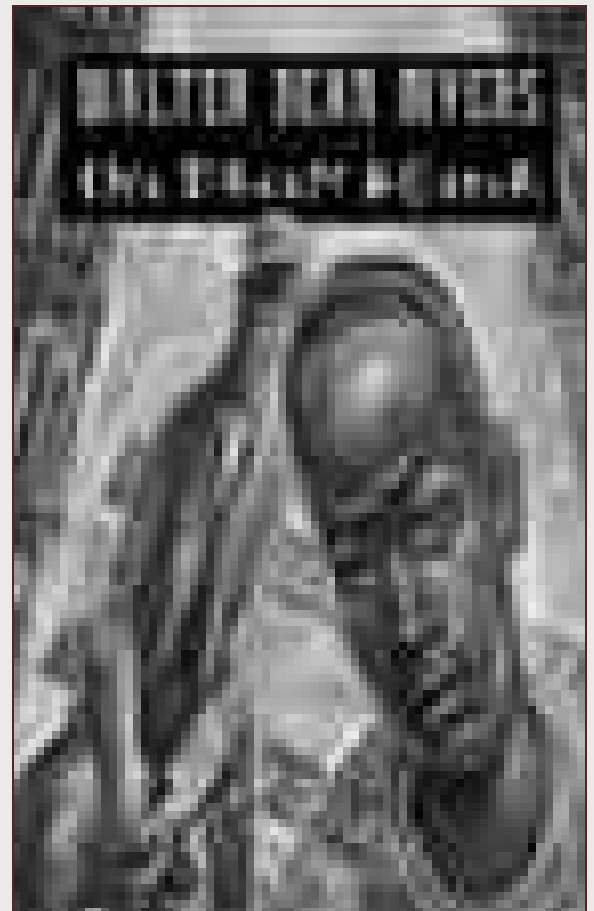
# The Dream Bearer

## ABOUT THE BOOK

With the help of his best friend, his mother, and an elderly man he meets while playing basketball in the park, twelve-year-old David Curry comes to terms with his father's mental illness.

## SHARING THE BOOK: QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- When David first encounters Mr. Moses (p. 27) he tells Loren, "Leave him alone.... He's probably crazy or something." Reread Mr. Moses's response to this statement on page 27 ("I knew a man once who they called crazy...."). How does Mr. Moses describe "crazy"? Does Mr. Moses fit this description? Does Reuben? Explain your thinking using evidence from the text.
- Why does Mr. Moses choose David as the next dream bearer? What are the dream bearer's responsibilities? Is David the right person to take on this responsibility? Why or why not?
- How do David's mother and father differ in their opinion of Mr. Kerlin? What is your opinion of Mr. Kerlin? What are Mr. Kerlin's motives for hiring Reuben as his superintendent and renovating the building? Is he justified in doing so? Why or why not?
- What are the symptoms of Reuben's mental illness? How does Reuben's illness affect the family? What strategies or coping mechanisms does each member of the family develop in response to Reuben's illness?
- Why do David and Ty call their father Reuben? What impact does this have on their relationship with him?
- What are dreams? How do Mr. Moses, Reuben, David, and Loren differ in their understanding of dreams? How does David's understanding of dreams change over time?
- Compare and contrast Mr. Moses and Reuben. How does David's relationship with Mr. Moses help him to better understand Reuben and develop a deeper connection to him?
- In the final chapter David says, "I think that what people dream, what they take into their minds to hold or worry about or, like Daddy, fight against, is what you have to really know to understand them" (p. 178). What does David dream? What does the dream mean? What does it tell you about him?
- Why is the final chapter the only one with a title? What is the significance of this?



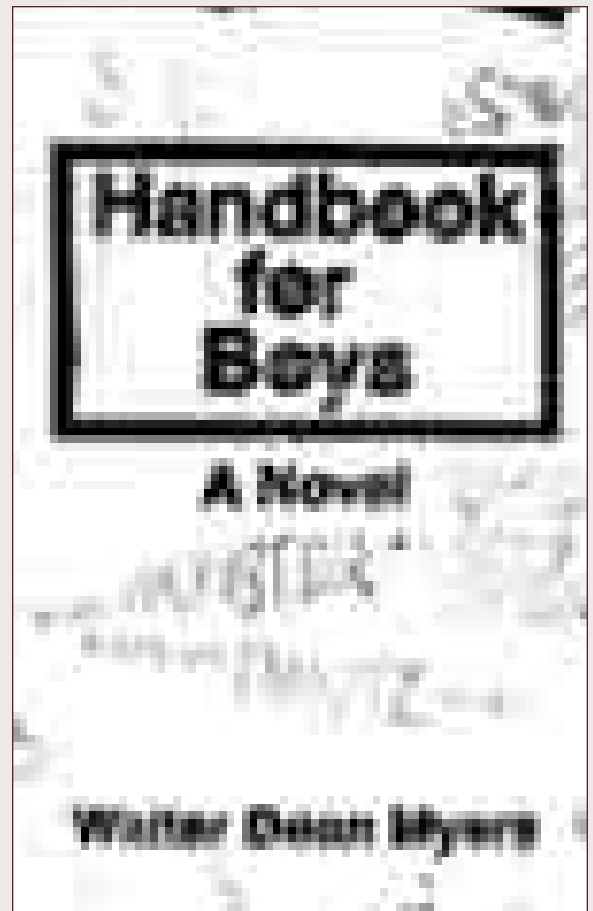
# Handbook for Boys: A Novel

## ABOUT THE BOOK

While on probation, sixteen-year-old Jimmy learns life lessons from three elderly men at Duke Wilson's Harlem barbershop.

## SHARING THE BOOK: QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- In his introduction Walter Dean Myers writes: "Over the years it became clear to me that people who did well were, almost without exception, actively involved in pursuing their dreams." What are your dreams for the future? How are you actively pursuing those dreams? What can you do now that will bring you closer to achieving your goals?
- What life lessons does Jimmy learn in the barbershop? How does Duke go about teaching each lesson? Do you think the lessons would have had the same influence on Jimmy if he read them in a book? Why or why not? What is the difference between book learning and learning from experience?
- Duke says: "Rule number one [is] figure out what you mean by success.... The second rule is finding out what work is needed to get to that success" (p. 66). What does success mean to you? What defines success? How do you achieve it? What work will Jimmy need to do in order to achieve success?
- Instead of participating in Mr. Wilson's "community mentoring program" (p. 3) Jimmy could have been sentenced to six months in a youth facility. Would this have had the same impact on Jimmy as Duke's program? What do you think would have happened to Jimmy if he had been sentenced to the youth facility?
- On page 86 Duke explains to Jimmy, "To me, just being alive in America is like having a box of tools that I can use to build any kind of life I want... But I have to use those tools and build my own life. No one is going to do it for me." What are the tools Duke is referring to? Does everyone have access to those tools? What kind of life do you want to build for yourself? What tools will you use to create the life you want? Why is it so important to Duke to make a difference in these boys' lives?
- "People... adapt their minds," Duke says. "You see a person in a bad position and think he should be struggling to raise himself out of it, and instead of that he simply adapts to it. And when they adapt like that there's not a lot you can do about it" (p. 162). Jimmy disagrees with Duke on this point. Reread this exchange. What is your opinion? Debate both sides of the issue using examples from the text to support your argument.
- Jimmy and Kevin both take part in Mr. Wilson's mentoring program but only Jimmy succeeds. What happens to Kevin? What factors contribute to these different outcomes? Given a second chance, do you think Kevin will succeed? Why or why not? What will Kevin need to do to change his life?



# It Ain't All for Nothin'

## ABOUT THE BOOK

When his grandmother becomes ill, young Tippy returns to his father's care and, under his influence, is drawn into a world of crime and substance abuse.

## SHARING THE BOOK: QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

- Why does Tippy live with Grandma Carrie? Should he have been made to live with Lonnie when Grandma Carrie goes into the care facility? Why or why not? What were the alternatives, if any? Would this have been better or worse for Tippy? Why?
- Why does Lonnie tell Tippy to call him "Daddy" when they go to the welfare office? How does Tippy feel about this?
- At first, Tippy tells others about Lonnie's crimes. Who does he tell and how do they respond? As Lonnie's infractions get worse, Tippy keeps quiet. Why? Describe how Lonnie's behavior affects Tippy's self-esteem. Who would you turn to if you or someone close to you were in trouble?
- When Tippy tells Grandma Carrie that Lonnie has stolen she says, "When the devil offers you his crutch you just turn your eyes up to heaven and say, 'Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand.' Tell the Lord you're tired. Tell Him you're weak. And don't be afraid to tell Him you're worn, too. It ain't all for nothin', you know. You just don't walk this side of the vale for nothin'" (p. 59). What does Grandma Carrie mean? Why do you think Walter Dean Myers chose *It Ain't All for Nothin'* as the book's title?
- Why does Tippy go along with Lonnie's crimes? Use a time line to chart the crimes. Note how Tippy is involved and what happens as a result. Should Tippy be punished for these crimes? Why or why not?
- When and why does Tippy start drinking alcohol? How does alcohol make him feel? Do you think his drinking will lead Tippy to use other drugs? Why or why not?
- How does Lonnie change as a result of having Tippy back in his life? Does Lonnie have the ability to change the direction of his life? What will he need to do in order to make change happen?
- Explore the difference between nature and nurture. If Tippy had been raised by Lonnie since infancy would he have been a different person? Explain your thinking. How does Grandma Carrie influence Tippy's development?







## About the Author

Walter Dean Myers is the author of approximately seventy books for younger people. He is the author of five Coretta Scott King awardwinners; *Monster*, the first Michael L. Printz awardwinner; and *Scorpions*, a Newbery Honor Book. Born in West Virginia and raised by foster parents in Harlem, New York, where many of his books are set, Mr. Myers now lives with his family in Jersey City, New Jersey. Walter Dean Myers says of himself, "Writing for me has been about many things. It was a way of establishing my humanity in a world that often ignores the humanity of those in less favored positions.... At any rate, what I think I'm doing now is rediscovering the innocence of children that I once took for granted. I cannot relive it or reclaim it, but I can expose it and celebrate it in the books I write. I really like people—I mean, I *really* like people—and children are some of the best people I know." In 2002, the Walter Dean Myers Publishing Institute was established. The goals of the institute are to develop and cultivate a pool of young African-American undergraduates for careers in all aspects of book publishing, to expose participants to industry professionals, and to tap into the strengths of African-American writers and illustrators.

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