

Autobiography of My Dead Brother Study Guide

Autobiography of My Dead Brother by Walter Dean Myers

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Introduction

Autobiography of My Dead Brother (2005) is a vivid, wrenching, and hopeful look into the confusing and scary lives teen boys face in poor, violent, urban worlds. Through innovative illustrations and honest characterizations, Walter Dean Myers captures the conflicts—internal and external, hopeless and hopeful—that less-privileged Americans face pursuing the American dream. A finalist for the 2005 National Book Award in the young people's division, *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* explores life in a Harlem neighborhood through the eyes of fifteen-year-old Jesse Givens.

Jesse is a gifted artist whose drawings (illustrated in the book by Myers's son Christopher) are an integral part of the text. Jesse uses his art to make sense of events around him, including the deaths of several friends, drive-by shootings, the threats of gang life, and the changes in his long-time "blood brother," Rise. Jesse tries to understand what Rise has become as Rise chooses to become involved in drugs and gangs. Jesse and his friends must also walk the fine line of seeking peer acceptance while remaining true to their own ideals.

Like Jesse and his friends, Myers grew up on the streets of Harlem and got in trouble while a high school student. Though he was always interested in reading and later in writing, Myers did not have hope for his own future by the time he was in his teens. He worked as a drug courier and became involved in gangs. Myers never completed high school, though he later earned a college degree. He drew on this background when writing books such as *Autobiography of My Dead Brother*.

In the novel, Myers uses authentic-sounding dialogue and plot developments to expound his themes. He emphasizes the importance of loyalty and friendship as well as the support of family and other trusted adults, while realistically depicting the tensions and traumas faced by teens in contemporary Harlem. Though Myers shows that the lure of drugs and violence is hard to escape and affects everyone, he also underscores the importance of trying to rise above one's circumstances using one's talents. With characters like Jesse and C. J., finding their identities and being true to themselves are critical steps toward a successful life.

Myers also highlights the power of self-expression—that is, defining one's self through one's abilities—in the novel. Characters like Rise, Little Man, and Mason have no such outlets and become victims of the streets. Emphasizing personal abilities also gives teens a means of escaping from their environment and hoping for a better future as they reach adulthood.

One of Myers's goals as an author of books such as *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* is to realistically depict this world he knows so well to affect the lives of his readers. He told Toni Brandeis of the *Wisconsin State Journal*,

If they can read about a problem, for example, with drugs, sex, or gangs, they can think about them before they meet these problems in the street, when it's much more difficult

to make a good decision. What I want them to do with my books is to engage these problems.



Author Biography

Walter Dean Myers

Walter Dean Myers, a prolific author of books for children and young adults, was born Walter Milton Myers on August 12, 1937, in Martinsburg, West Virginia. After his mother died when he was two years old, he went to live with family friends, the Deans, in New York City's Harlem neighborhood. Myers was an avid reader with a speech impediment who got into fights with those who teased him. Despite becoming involved in street life and essentially dropping out of high school by his senior year in 1954, Myers was inspired by a teacher who encouraged his writing. He graduated from Empire State College in 1984.

After serving in the army and working as a book editor, Myers focused on writing full time beginning in 1977. Drawing on his own childhood experiences in Harlem, Myers began publishing picture books in the late 1960s and early 1970s before focusing on fiction for children and young adults in the mid-1970s. Often putting young black males at the center of his fiction, Myers has been praised for consistently producing quality books and helping change how African Americans were portrayed in young people's literature. The prolific Myers—who sometimes produces several books in a single year—writes in other genres, including nonfiction and poetry, and the bulk of his work depicts the difficulties of life in Harlem while emphasizing its residents' humanity and dignity. He published *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* in 2005. As of 2006, Myers lives with his family in Jersey City, New Jersey.

Rise informs them that Calvin has called a meeting of the Counts, a social club the boys belong to. He also tells them, "Bobby G. was good people and everything, but that's why you have to make your life special every day. You never know when your time is up." When Rise leaves, C. J. and Jesse agree that they do not want to get shot. Jesse admits to himself that he has been nervous and jumpy all the time since the shooting, even at home, and that "It was a drag, and I didn't want to talk to anybody about it."

At home the next day, Jesse's mother tries to get Jesse and his father to spend time together. Jesse reveals that his mother is upset about the violence in the neighborhood and thinks about moving to the suburbs. He tells about when they first moved to the area. Rise's mother babysat one-year-old Jesse while Jesse's parents worked. Jesse and Rise grew up together. "He was more than a best friend—he was really like a brother. So when we saw an old movie on television about these two guys cutting themselves and mixing their blood to become blood brothers, we thought it was a good idea," he explains. When they were seven and nine years old, they became blood brothers

Rise's and Jesse's lives have been intertwined for years. Both boys collected comic books, until Rise's grandmother, Aunt Celia, threw Rise's collection away and he decided it "was a stupid thing to do, anyway." By this time, Jesse had discovered his own artistic skills and was drawing his own comics. Jesse also notes that Rise changed



about the time he was a junior in high school. Though Rise had plans to go to college, he soon started getting in trouble and ditching school. About the time Rise changed, Jesse and C. J. became friends.

Chapter 2

At the meeting of the Counts, the members vote on collecting dues and inviting women to join the group. They also discuss taking in a new member, a tough kid they believe to be an elementary school student, "Little Man." He gets angry when they refuse to decide right away on admitting him.

A seventeen-year-old named Mason Grier, a member of the Counts, has been arrested for robbing a bodega owned by Mr. Alvarez. Calvin, a leader of the Counts, relays a message from Mason, who says that he is innocent of the crime. "He wants the Counts to rough up the bodega store owner. Send him a message," Calvin says. Rise is in favor of backing up Mason, while the rest do not want to be involved. Rise leaves, then the others ask Jesse about his friend. Jesse admits that he and Rise may not be as "tight" friends anymore.

When Rise and Jesse hang out later at Rise's apartment, Sidney Rock stops by. He is a local police detective who was raised in the neighborhood. Sidney has heard about the call for the assault on Alvarez and implicitly warns them about the consequences of their actions, saying that in jail, "We got too many snitches, too many nonsnitches, and way too many young brothers trying to figure out how they got there." After Sidney leaves, Rise makes fun of him, but tells Jesse that he is not going to do anything on Mason's behalf. Rise suggests that Jesse write his biography, starting with a portrait of him that shows his strength. He explains, "when these street dudes do their muscle hustle, they got to lose, because sooner or later they're going to run into something stronger than they are." He wants "to be bigger than life."

Chapter 3

Jesse and C. J. are hanging out at church, where "C. J. was doodling over the keys" of the organ. Jesse tells C. J. that Rise has changed and he does not know him as well as he did before. Walking home, Jesse thinks that C. J. is easy to spend time with, like Rise used to be. He thinks, "Now I was getting the feeling that when Rise was saying one thing, there was something else going on behind the words." At home, Jesse draws Rise from memory. His mother compliments the drawing before asking who it is. "Mom was right," Jesse thinks, "it didn't look like Rise."

Chapter 4

Benny, a member of the Counts, organizes C. J., Jesse, and others into a Cuban music band to play for money at an adolescent's birthday party. Benny looks at the party as a break for them. Though C. J. agrees, both Jesse and C. J. doubt that C. J.'s mother will approve. Later, C. J. tells Jesse that he loves all music, but his mother wants him to play



only in church. C. J. wants Jesse to get Jesse's mom to talk to C.J.'s mom about playing with the band.

Jesse tells C. J. that Rise wants a biography, to which C. J. responds, "He wants a biography, he should write it. He knows what he did." Jesse replies, "I know what he did too." While he and C. J. talk and walk, Jesse notices a beat-up doll that they had seen a skinny, disheveled little girl play-abusing earlier. He would have drawn it, but he stopped carrying his sketchbook around with him because some older men destroyed it when they thought he was sketching them.

Chapter 5

Benny calls Jesse on Saturday morning and tells him that the bodega was firebombed and he heard that two white cops are looking for Jesse as a suspect. His parents overhear the conversation and are concerned, though Jesse assures them he had nothing to do with it. Jesse's father asks if he should call a lawyer and says, "I don't like messing around with the police." Jesse then calls C. J.'s mom and tries to convince her to let him play in the band. C. J.'s mom and Jesse's mom talk about the band. Later, Jesse and C. J. walk to the bodega, which is destroyed. They see Sidney there, and Jesse agrees to go with him to tell the still-incarcerated Mason about the bombing. Sidney has also convinced Rise to come.

Chapter 6

On Monday night, Sidney takes Jesse and Rise to visit Mason. Jesse is annoyed by Rise's precautions and attitude; "Can't have people seeing me dealing with the Man," Rise says. Sidney asks them to emphasize to Mason the difference between armed robbery and homicide, and to leave the bodega owner alone. Sidney also tells the boys how easily armed robbery can turn into murder. Inside, Rise tells Jesse, "You can put in my book that when the Man was dealing lies, I was real-a-lizing what he was trying to put down." Jesse thinks, "maybe what Rise was doing was putting marks in the air, the way I did on paper, trying to do a self-portrait that I would believe and copy ... [but] I was looking for what was the truth behind the real thought he was keeping."

Chapter 7

When Mason comes into the room, he is limping. He does not say anything to Jesse and Rise for a while, and finally accuses his friends of "pimping for the Man." Jesse does as Sidney asked, telling Mason that he "ought to cool it, because if somebody died [he] would get homicide." Mason replies, "They can give you anything they want to give you," because evidence can be planted. Mason is angry that the Counts did not do as he asked. Rise tells him, "You don't send out no messages, you send out *requests*" because he is powerless in jail. Mason and Rise nearly come to blows, and Mason tells Rise he has "nothing to lose." The encounter leaves Jesse afraid and befuddled.



Chapter 8

After drawing some scenes from Rise's life as cartoons, Jesse brings his creations to Rise's apartment. Rise likes the work and is amazed that Jesse can remember so many events from their childhood. "You got the art thing going on good," Rise says. He also says he will be moving into his own place soon, and that he will pay for it dealing drugs. Shocked, Jesse tells his friend, "That doesn't even sound like you. All the time you talking about not doing drugs and how that stuff is sucking the life out of the hood." Rise reminds him that they are blood brothers, then goes on to explain how his perspective changed:

One day I seen me standing in the cold by the side of the track waiting for my train to come. All I was getting was colder and colder and my train never did come. What I'm thinking now is that I need to get out of the cold.

Walking home, Jesse thinks, "I told myself that if I did his autobiography right, if I did a really good job, maybe I could change him back to what I knew."

Chapter 9

Jesse introduces his comic strip "Spodi Roti and Wise," through which he sometimes processes and expresses the things that are hard to deal with in his life. Jesse reflects on how he is close to his parents, but less so as he gets older because it was "like their brains were in a different place than [his] sometimes." He wishes he could talk to them about Rise, but he cannot imagine how. Jesse plays the congas at the Cuban band gig. The band does well, primarily because of C. J.'s talent. Going home, Jesse learns that C. J.'s mom let him play because the party was being given by a Wall Street executive, and that she hopes her son will turn away from music and go to college and have a good career.

Chapter 10

Jesse sits on the stoop with Benny, White Clara, and Gun, talking about guns. A school bus drives down the street, which is odd because it is summer. Some men on the bus start shooting as they drive past Jesse and his friends. Benny gets shot in the hand, and a cab driver who had gotten in the bus's way is also shot. The incident upsets Jesse very much. He later learns that the Diablos, an uptown gang, were probably responsible. There is another drive-by later in the week that is payback against the Diablos. Sidney later informs him that the drive-bys were probably over drugs. Jesse talks to C. J. about Rise, and C. J. expresses his concern. Rise calls Jesse and invites him to meet some new people.

Chapter 11

Jesse is uncomfortable when he meets Rise at the Ras Uhuru Social Haven. Jesse shows Rise more pictures for his autobiography and Rise explains it to the woman



doing his nails: "My man here is writing my autobiography. I'm living the life and he writing it down like I tell him." Rise also lets Jesse know that his having "dropped the word" led to the retaliation drive-by against the Diablos. Though Rise and Jesse talk about memories of their shared past, Jesse is annoyed by Rise's gangster act. Jesse grows even more perturbed when Rise tells him where his drug-dealing territory is:

My mind was going blank. The whole thing was too heavy for me. I couldn't even think straight, but Rise wanted to keep going over the pictures as if him "dropping the word" for a drive-by wasn't any big thing. If it wasn't big to him, it was sure big to me.

Before Rise leaves, he gives Jesse a fourteen-year-old girl named Tania as his "old lady." Jesse is attracted to her. Tania takes him to a Chinese restaurant for food, then they go to Tania's apartment so Jesse can draw her. Though Tania offers to be naked for him, Jesse declines. Tania also tells Jesse to tell Rise that they had sex. Tania loves her picture, and they kiss. At home, Jesse is confused by Rise and what he has become.

Chapter 12

C. J. informs Jesse that Rise is now a drug dealer, Rise's employers did the second drive-by shooting, and that Little Man carries a gun. Both Jesse and C. J. are puzzled by what is going on. While eating dinner with his parents, Jesse thinks about Rise telling him not to tell anyone about his new life though Rise told Calvin the same information. Jesse still hates drugs and what they do to people.

Jesse remembers a time a few years earlier in which Rise mouthed off to an adult in the neighborhood, Drew, and seemed ready to fight him. Drew pulled a straight razor and the boys ran away. Jesse recalls wondering "why Rise was so upset that he had to step to a hard dude like Drew," and thinks, "When I thought back to that, I wondered if maybe I didn't know Rise the way I thought I did."

Chapter 13

Jesse is hanging out on the stoop with Gun, C. J., and White Clara. Talking about the funeral for the member of the Diablos who was killed in the second drive-by, Gun tells them that the gang might take revenge in their neighborhood. Calvin joins them, and agrees that everyone should lie low. When a car drives up, Jesse and the others believe it might be another shooting, so they run and hide. It turns out to be white police officers, who pat them down because they ran. The policemen ask about the drive-by, but the boys say nothing. "It was a big thing because I was sitting on the stoop, copping an attitude that was chill to the world while inside I was, like, shaking," he says. He goes home and falls asleep.



Chapter 14

Jesse's mother wakes him up to talk to Sidney on the telephone, who offers him baseball tickets. Sidney asks how the book about Rise is coming, revealing it in a way that lets Jesse know Sidney knows about Rise's recent activities. Jesse is suddenly inspired to draw Rise in a pose he had once seen in a photograph of Black Panthers leader Huey Newton looking regal. Jesse becomes frustrated because he cannot get the picture right, but he finally comes up with an interesting, exaggerated, stylized version that pleases him. When he asks his mother who she thinks it is, she replies, "Well, it could be Bizarro, the mad villain of Gotham City, Stinky Scourge of the Underworld."

Chapter 15

Though it is morning, Jesse feels that he must show Rise the picture right away. Waiting for Rise to get out of the shower, Jesse feels doubts about the picture and how Rise will react. Rise loves the picture, telling him, "This is me, man! Truth rules, little brother. Truth rules!"

Chapter 16

Tania calls Jesse and says that she is his girlfriend, but he does not have to do much. Jesse likes having her as a girlfriend. Then C. J. calls, upset. When Jesse meets him at the church, C. J. is sitting with Little Man at the piano. Little Man implicitly mocks the piano, the church, and C. J. and Jesse, and then leaves. C. J. is distressed, and Jesse waits as he plays "Amazing Grace" and cries. When C. J. and Jesse walk home, Jesse learns that Little Man called him "a faggot." C. J. is upset by Little Man's actions and his own reaction. Jesse is supportive, telling his friend,

We can't let fools drag us down to their level. If that's all they got, then that's all they got. We got something else.... You got the music thing going on, and that's important to me, because what you're doing makes me surer about what I'm doing.

Chapter 17

Jesse's dad reads an article about Mason in which the Counts are described as a gang, not a social club. Jesse's dad tells him that he cannot be a member of the group anymore. Jesse's father is clearly worried about the bad influences around his son, but when Jesse talks back, his father hits him in the face. "He was yelling, something about how he hadn't raised a child to be going to prison." Before he can hit his son again, Jesse's mother comes home and stops him. Later, Jesse cannot open one of his eyes, so she insists on taking him to a doctor.

When they arrive home, Jesse wants to stay on the stoop with Calvin and Benny, but his mother wants him to go inside. Because he stays outside, his mother sits down and joins them. Calvin and Benny soon leave. His mother tells him that a policeman at the



hospital asked if a report should be filed, but she asked that nothing be done. They are both upset, hurt, and angry because of the situation at home, as well as in the rough neighborhood in general. After she leaves, Jesse thinks, "My eye was hurting; I was mad at Dad for being afraid for me, even though in my heart I knew I was afraid, too."

Chapter 18

On Sunday, Jesse is still angry with his parents and declines to go to church with them, though the decision leaves him feeling bad. While trying to decide what he wanted to do for the day, Sidney calls. Sidney tells him that he has heard of an upcoming showdown between the Counts and Diablos. Jesse tries to maintain his anger at his father, and he tries to find ways to pass his day, without much luck. Rise calls Jesse later and tells him that there is a meeting with the Counts and some the Diablos to discuss territory, and that he expects Jesse to come to help the Counts show their numbers.

Chapter 19

Jesse is painting in his room, deciding what to do about the meeting. He did not commit to going, but he feels like he is being drawn in in spite of himself. Jesse calls C. J. to talk about it. He is surprised to learn that C. J. plans to go to the meeting, saying, "I can't be hiding in church all my life." Calvin and Gun also plan to attend. Still unsure about what to do, Jesse asks C. J. if they can watch out for each other, but C. J. will not commit. Jesse was hoping that C. J. would not go so he could back out, but now he is even more torn. After remembering an incident from childhood when Rise desperately wished he had a father, Jesse decides to call Rise, who tells him that everything will be okay. Jesse lets him think he will come to the meeting.

Chapter 20

Jesse walks toward the meeting, still unsure about going. When he gets there, C. J., Gun, Rise, and Rise's girlfriend, Junice, are there. Rise tells them the situation with the Diablos and acts like he is in charge. He says all he wants to do is get the Diablos and their drug dealing out of their neighborhood and not bring attention to themselves. Jesse wonders why Rise seems so wise and philosophical, while just a year earlier he was only a kid. C. J. and Gun seemed soothed by Rise. When Gun asks where the Diablos are, Rise tells him that they are not really organized. The meeting breaks up shortly thereafter.

Rise, Junice, and Gun take a cab, while C. J. and Jesse walk home. They talk about the changing Rise. While C. J. is ordering street food, police cars and emergency vehicles pass by. They guess about what has happened, then go to check it out. A young girl tells them about the shooting that killed at least one man and injured a pregnant woman.



Chapter 21

In the middle of the night, Jesse's mom wakes him up. She tells him, "Some boys were shot on 144th Street. Two died and one is in bad condition." Sidney is in the apartment to question Jesse about the shooting. Jesse tells them that he and C. J. walked by it, but did not see anything. Sidney still has to take him downtown. Though the family lawyer tells Jesse not to say anything while riding with Sidney, Jesse tells him about the meeting. Sidney informs him that there was another meeting, and the meeting Jesse went to was part of a setup: The Counts and Diablos were apparently both sent to different locations for the meeting. Jesse and everyone else who was at the meeting is being questioned.

At the station, the family's lawyer believes the police understand that those at the meeting were just there to provide a cover for the real meeting and shooting. The lawyer also tells them that Jesse and C. J. should stay away from Rise. Sidney soon tells them they can leave. As they go home, dawn is breaking.

Chapter 22

In his room, Jesse looks at his drawings of Rise, realizing that the Rise he knew is gone. He tries to draw this Rise again, but cannot. About a week later, Jesse hears from Rise, after he was released from police custody. Rise tells him that he is moving to Miami, wants the drawings for his book, and will stop by before he leaves. Jesse says,

I took out the book I was doing and thumbed through it, looking at the photographs and pictures I had drawn, thinking how hard it was going to be to say good-bye.... Then, suddenly, it came to me—the book was coming out wrong, and I knew why it was wrong.

Jesse decides that Rise can have his book of drawings but Rise has to finish his autobiography himself. When Jesse goes outside to say goodbye to Rise, C. J. and Benny are there, too. Arriving in a white limo, Rise is dressed in a suit and shows off. Little Man shows up and shoots Rise with a gun hidden in a brown paper bag. After running and hiding during the gunfire, Jesse holds Rise, who says, "Yo, Jesse, I'm scared, man, I'm so scared!" and dies in Jesse's arms.

Chapter 23

The funeral is a week later. Jesse is upset and apologizes to Rise's body. Jesse does not go to the cemetery but stays at the church as C. J. plays jazz. Jesse thinks, "It wasn't just the tiredness, the deep-in-the-bone weariness that kept me sitting. It was the feeling of not knowing how to go on anymore."

Jesse thinks about how Little Man was crying when he was arrested, just like Rise was crying when he died. When C. J. finishes playing, he and Jesse walk home. C. J. tells Jesse that while he is sad that Rise is gone, he is happy not to have to deal with gangs

anymore. Jesse agrees and listens to C. J. talk about a music project and not about Rise. In his mind, Jesse promises Rise to finish his autobiography.

Plot Summary

Autobiography of My Dead Brother opens at the church funeral for fourteen-year-old Bobby Green, who was killed in a random drive-by shooting. The attendees include Jesse Givens, a fifteen-year-old friend of Bobby and the novel's first-person narrator; Jesse's mother; Jesse's fifteen-year-old friend C. J., who plays the organ at the service; and Rise, Jesse's seventeen-year-old friend. After the church service ends, Jesse, C. J., and Rise go to a nearby park.



Themes

Self-expression

One of the primary ideas explored in *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* is the importance and power of constructive self-expression. Freedom of thought and expression are cornerstones of the American dream, are promised and protected in the First Amendment, and are one of the aspects of life in the United States that draws dreamers from around the world. For Americans in hard situations, such as Jesse and several of his friends and acquaintances, their talents help them define who they are and who to be above the sometimes-harsh realities of life in Harlem. Such gifts also provide a potential means of escape from this urban life. Some of those who do not have such a means of self-expression, such as Rise and Little Man, end up as victims of violence.

This outlet buoys Jesse, an artist whose talent is recognized by his peers, parents, and others. He draws to process what is happening around him, but also as a source of comfort when facing difficulties. Much of his art revolves around Rise, as Jesse tries to understand how his blood brother could change from someone who once aspired to go to college and hated drugs to a posturing drug dealer who uses his friends. Rise has Jesse create Rise's autobiography through Jesse's drawings, which allows Jesse to work through the transformation of Rise's character.

Others in Jesse's circle are defined by their means of self-expression. Gun is a gifted basketball player who is working toward playing the sport in college. Myers explores C. J.'s talent as a musician more deeply. C. J. plays organ and piano in the church for services and funerals. He also takes musical charge of the Cuban band Benny organizes to play at a girl's birthday party. C. J.'s mother encourages his music as a way of staying off the streets but worries that any form other than church music, such as jazz and blues, can be dangerous. Like art for Jesse, music is C. J.'s refuge. C. J. is deeply wounded when Little Man calls him names and makes fun of his musical interests. Yet like Rise, Little Man can only express himself through swagger and violent action, and he ends up murdering because of it.

The Man Versus the Street

The concept of "The Man," primarily policemen, versus the lure of renegade street life is a source of tension between characters in the novel. The Man is not trusted. The jailed Mason tells Rise and Jesse, "They got everything on their side.... They got the power in here, and they jacking up people on the street."

The Man is not a monolithic entity in *Autobiography of My Dead Brother*. Sidney Rock is a police detective who grew up in the neighborhood and now works cases there. He tries to help the kids who live there as much as possible, though some have doubts



about him because he represents a distrusted outside authority. White police, on the other hand, are not as respected in the neighborhood. During a discussion about guns, White Clara declares, "If a white cop sees you with a cap gun, he's going to use it as an excuse to shoot you."

While Jesse and his friends are definitely leery of unknown white police officers, most of them are much less suspicious of Sidney. Jesse in particular listens to Sidney about the situation with Mason, the drive-bys, and other happenings in the neighborhood. Jesse can joke about not sitting with a cop at a baseball game, and he trusts Sidney enough to tell him what happened at the meeting at Earl's Antiques though his lawyer advises otherwise.

Older kids like Mason and Rise do not share Jesse's sentiments. Rise's opinion of Sidney has changed dramatically, especially after he gets drawn into drug dealing. While Rise once shared Jesse's opinion that Sidney was acceptable, if not a friend, he now mimics the detective's voice and dismisses nearly everything Sidney says. Rise will not even let Sidney pick him and Jesse up in the neighborhood to talk to Mason. Like Mason, Rise wants to establish his own authority on the streets.

Escaping and Improving Circumstances

Two related themes underscored in *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* are escaping and improving the circumstances of life. While none of the characters moves out of the neighborhood, many are trying to improve their lots in life. C. J.'s mom looks to music and the church as a way to keep her son safe and enable a better life later on. Benny puts together the band to play at the birthday party and looks at it as the start of something bigger. C. J.'s mom only lets him play at the party because of this potential for something good to happen for her son. Even Rise starts working as a drug dealer in another part of the city as his own means of escaping his environment and making his life better. However, his attempt to leave New York for Miami after the arrest never comes to fruition; Little Man guns him down before Rise has a chance to become the only character who leaves the neighborhood by choice. Though no character actually leaves the neighborhood, many still have plans to escape or improve their circumstances at the novel's end.

Historical Context

Gang Violence in New York City

In 2002, the National Youth Gang Center estimated that there were approximately 731,000 members of gangs in the United States. Gangs and gang-related violence was a problem on the increase in specifically New York City in the early 2000s. In the city in 2003, there were approximately 15,000 people in gangs, though only 3,600 were believed to be active, non-incarcerated gang members. There were a number of active gangs in New York City including the Bloods, the Crips, the Latin Kings, the Mexican Boys, and Los Pitufos (the Smurfs), among many others.

Murder rates, as well as that of other crimes in New York City, had generally fallen in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In central Harlem by 2005, the overall rate for crimes such as murder, rape, robbery, and burglary had dropped significantly over several years. The crime rate in this neighborhood was similar to the best neighborhoods in cities like Santa Monica, California.

However, in the whole of New York City, killings caused by or related to gang violence remained high. In 2003, for example, murders involving gangs were up 80 percent over the previous year; in 2002, there were twenty-nine gang-related murders, while in 2003, the number increased to fifty-two. Of all the murders in New York City in 2003, one in six were gang-related.

Life in Harlem

Harlem is a neighborhood in the Manhattan borough of New York City, and it has been a center of African American culture as well as high rates of poverty and crime since at least the 1920s. The unemployment rate was often twice as high as the rest of New York City, and many teens lived in single-parent homes. By 1990, a fifteen-year-old black male in Harlem had only a 37 percent chance of surviving to the age of sixty-five, while a fifteen-year-old black female had a 65 percent chance of making it to the same age. These figures are comparable to Angola and India, respectively.

In Central and East Harlem, the two parts of Harlem with the highest concentration of African Americans, there were approximately 20,500 adolescents between the ages of twelve and nineteen, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. Compared to their counterparts in other areas of New York City, these teens had much higher rates of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. In addition to non-life-threatening diseases, a much higher percentage of teenagers living with HIV/AIDS reside in Harlem than the rest of Manhattan. The top causes of deaths for adolescents living in Harlem in the early 2000s were asthma, complications related to pregnancy, depression-related disorders, and homicide. Harlem had one of the highest rates of asthma in the United States.

Critical Overview

Like many of Myers's novels, *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* was generally praised by critics for its engaging depiction of Jesse's struggles, conflicts between friends, and violent reality of life in Harlem. Francisca Goldsmith of *School Library Journal* comments, "This novel is like photorealism; it paints a vivid and genuine portrait of life that will have a palpable effect on its readers."

Critics noted a number of the book's strengths, including Myers's use of language and his characterizations. Writing in *Booklist*, Gillian Enberg notes, "What will affect readers most is Jesse's sharp, sometimes poetic first-person voice and the spirited, rhythmic dialogue of other vivid characters."

Other reviewers gave the author critical kudos for his deft handling of the novel's themes. In a review of *Autobiography*, as well as several other novels by Myers, Herbert Kohl of *Rethinking Schools Online* writes, "I realized how skillfully Myers places the human heart at the center of troubling stories and turns what could be stories about violence into tales of hope and redemption."

Another aspect of the book on which many reviewers focused praise were the timely illustrations created by Myers's son, Christopher. Noting the power of the drawings, the critic in *Kirkus Reviews* comments, "The innovative illustrated novel format is effective, essential to Rise's autobiography and to Jesse's own quest for understanding."

Summarizing the book's appeal for many critics, Alexis Burling of teenreads.com called the novel "a true-to-life story that is profoundly moving and one that boldly addresses many of the prevailing conflicts confronting urban youth today."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1



Critical Essay #1

*Petruso is a freelance writer with degrees in history and screenwriting. In this essay, Petruso examines Myers's depiction of authority figures in the novel *Autobiography of My Dead Brother*.*

In an interview with Black Issues Book Review, Walter Dean Myers tells interviewer Grace L. Williams,

I write about urban settings because you see that there is a negative public image. People use code words like "inner city" or say things like "ghetto," but you can't feel good about your home and if you never see urban areas depicted as anything but negative, it tells you that where you come from is crap.

While Myers was referring to the settings of his books such as *Autobiography of My Dead Brother*, this statement could also apply to his depiction of parents and authority figures who live in this urban locale and who help to raise teens like Jesse, C. J., and Rise. While the media often downplay the role of adults in poor, urban settings, Myers quietly celebrates it in this novel.

The critic in the *Publishers Weekly* review of *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* wrongly dismisses Myers's presentation of certain authority figures, claiming "Jesse's parents seem vague." Though the book is written from Jesse's point of view, Myers offers a complex depiction of urban parental figures and other authority figures as a subtext to the novel. Because Jesse's parents are still married and both work to support their family financially and emotionally, Myers underscores the importance of having two active parents in a young person's life. C. J. has a similar situation, though his mother is the dominant partner and the one depicted as having the most influence in her son's life.

Caring police detectives and adults in the church also play significant roles in supporting the teens at the novel's core. Though it is ultimately Jesse, C. J., Rise, and the other teens who make their own decisions, Myers repeatedly emphasizes the importance of adult authority figures on their lives and choices. When this direction is lacking, the situation can turn ugly. Rise was raised by a single mom with the help of her parents; he decides to drop out of school and deal drugs, and ends up dead. Myers clearly is implying that guidance of parents and other authorities is important to positively affecting younger people.

This fact can most clearly be seen in the relationship between the novel's first-person narrator, Jesse Givens, and his parents. His parents are married, live with their son in an apartment, and have a very close and interested relationship with him. Jesse explains, "I was tight with my folks in a way. I could say things to them, and they would try not to get too crazy about it even if they were nervous." But he understood why their relationship was sometimes tense. He continues, "It wasn't as if they were stupid or anything—it was like their brains were in a different place than mine sometimes."



Throughout *Autobiography of My Dead Brother*, Jesse's mother in particular is depicted as a caring, loving woman who stays involved in her teenage son's life and activities from the first chapter of the book. She attends the funeral of both Bobby Green and Rise with her son. She helps him to say goodbye at the casket of the latter's funeral, something Jesse could not do at Bobby G.'s church service. Mrs. Givens also plays a big role in Jesse's day-to-day life, supporting his artwork by getting him a desk for his art supplies and allowing him to look into summer art classes at the Cooper Union. She also pushes her husband and Jesse to be close and communicate more openly with each other.

Jesse's father does care, but this relationship is more complicated. As Myers states in an interview published in the *Wisconsin State Journal*,

What happens is that parents feels that [they] have to have a certain moral stance and they lose the ability to talk to the children because when I'm talking to the child, I have to be the parent.... In the book, I think Jesse's father wants to say to his son, "Look, I don't know who you are and I'm at a loss," but he needs to sit down and say exactly that to him.

Instead, Jesse's father is somewhat distant. He reluctantly gives into his wife's entreaties to be open with Jesse and spend time bonding with him after Bobby G.'s funeral, though Jesse's meeting with the Counts stymies their plans to go bowling that night.

Yet when Mr. Givens realizes that Jesse has not told him about Mason being arrested and Jesse potentially being identified as the person who firebombed the bodega, he shows his true feelings. Jesse's dad tells him, "It involves my son, it's important.... You got that?" Jesse also describes his father's physical reaction while speaking these words: "There was a catch in his voice, and I could see he was getting real emotional." Jesse's father wants to be involved, but he does not always know how to express this desire well, which eventually leads to a physical altercation with his son.

Jesse's father acts out in violence when he is confronted with information that terrifies him about influences on his son. In an article in the *Amsterdam News* about Mason's sentencing for his armed robbery of the bodega, Mr. Givens reads that the Counts are described as a street gang. Jesse tries to explain to his father that Mason is making himself sound bigger than he really is, but his father demands that Jesse remove himself from the Counts. This statement leads to a tense showdown between them, with Jesse asking, "Why don't you hit me? Maybe you're as tough as Mason," and his father hitting him in the face.

While it is clear that Jesse's father is acting out of worry for his son, he has let anger and fear drive his actions. Jesse's mother gets between them and ensures her son receives medical care for his injured eye. She also makes sure that the police do not become involved in the matter because she knows it will make the situation worse. Myers includes this key scenario in the novel to show that even involved parents are not perfect, but make mistakes, sometimes big ones, too. Even Jesse realizes this, as



Myers writes, "I was mad at Dad for being afraid for me, even though in my heart I knew I was afraid, too." Though Jesse and his father do not get along well for a while, Jesse continues to act in accordance with his parents' moral upbringing and tries to make sense out of the changes he sees in Rise and other situations around him.

Another character who expresses herself physically is C. J. Europe's mom, though not to the same degree as Mr. Givens. With her more playful whacks, Mrs. Europe plays a role in her son's life similar to Jesse's mom. While there is a Mr. Europe who apparently lives with his family, Myers emphasizes that it is Mrs. Europe who is primarily concerned with actively protecting her son from the violence of the streets. C. J. finds solace in music and is a talented musician. His mother tries to guide every choice he makes, including the kind of music he plays. She wants him to stick to classical music and gospel for his own good, though he wants to play jazz. Mrs. Europe was once a blues singer herself, but she could not make a living at it.

Mrs. Europe tries to direct C. J.'s life to ensure his future will be positive and include his attending college. C. J. tells Jesse that she even considers moving away from the neighborhood but she thinks that his playing piano for the church keeps him interested in music and off the streets. Mrs. Europe also allows him to play in Benny's Cuban band not because he gets paid, but because the band is playing at a children's birthday party for the daughter of an important businessman. She hopes this opportunity could get her son somewhere later on. Mrs. Europe's guidance seems to work, for C. J. is very focused on his music and where he could go in life. He easily sees through Rise's posturing before even Jesse does. C. J. is also careful in the choices he makes on the street, and he does not deliberately put himself in jeopardy.

Rise Davis's family situation is more complicated. Myers makes it clear that Rise's father has not been a particularly active part of the family for many years. Rise was raised by his mother, Mrs. Davis, and his maternal grandparents, the Johnsons. Rise's mother and grandmother did not have jobs when Rise was young, but they stayed home and covered expenses by babysitting other children. Jesse and Rise have been close since they were toddlers, because Rise's mother and grandmother cared for Jesse while his parents were working. Jesse even says he was envious of Rise's family situation for a time when he was younger, but he came to see how advantageous it was to have a father in the home.

Yet even though the information comes through Jesse, Myers does not depict Rise's family as particularly influential or involved in Rise's life. Rise still lives at home and has his own room, but he does not have the same kind of guidance that Jesse and C. J. receive. One factor in this situation may be the illness of his grandmother, who has suffered from Alzheimer's disease for some years. Such an illness can distract and drain a family, another reality of life Myers touches on. Though his grandmother is incapable of actively caring about Rise's choices in life, his mother and grandfather can fill that role, but they are not depicted as doing so.

One man who tries to guide Rise is Sidney Rock. A police detective who grew up on the block where Jesse lives, Sidney is a guiding, helpful force to all the teens in the novel.



He has built this relationship with them up over a number of years. Jesse explains, "He kind of looked out for all the brothers he knew and that were straight with him. He'd also bust you if he had to, but at least he did it with respect." Sidney worked to avoid having to bust as many of the young men he knew as possible.

While Rise once listened to Sidney, he now dismisses the detective's words and importance. Rise has already decided to cross the line into illegal activities, and allowing a policeman to have any kind of positive relationship goes against what Rise has come to stand for. As Rise tells Jesse when they visit Mason in jail, "He looks like a brother and sounds like one, but he's still the Man." Though Rise does not care much about Sidney and what he says, Jesse and C. J., in particular, allow Sidney to play a positive role in their lives, reinforcing the good choices they make. Jesse and C. J. respect him and what he says. Jesse even tells him exactly what happened when he went to the meeting Rise called at Earl's Antiques between the Counts and the Diablos, though his father tells Jesse to say nothing. Sidney helps the two out when they are unfairly accused of being involved in the setup of the shooting of several gang members because of their attendance at that meeting.

Another place where adults guide the young people in *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* is in the church. While the church plays an even smaller role than Sidney, Myers begins and ends his novel there. The author subtly shows its importance in the community and to Jesse and C. J., who both attend regularly. Myers even names the church's minister Pastor Loving. The church is depicted as something of a sanctuary, especially for C. J., as it is where he can practice piano and organ. He also plays during services.

When Little Man violates this haven by coming in and insulting C. J. there, both Jesse and Elder Smitty, an active member of the church, comfort him. Elder Smitty demonstrates the power of positive action and words by complimenting Jesse's handling of C. J.'s distress over Little Man's harassment. Elder Smitty tells him, "Old as I am, I've never learned to deal with people like [Little Man] without bloodshed. You did real good, Jesse." Such small moments of positive reinforcement show how important the understated weight of even the barely significant authority figure can be to sometimes-unappreciative adolescents.

Source: A. Petruso, Critical Essay on *Autobiography of My Dead Brother*, in *Literary Themes for Students: American Dream*, Thomson Gale, 2007.



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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of *Novels for Students (NfS)* is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's "For Students" Literature line, *NfS* is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently



studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

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“Night.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

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Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

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