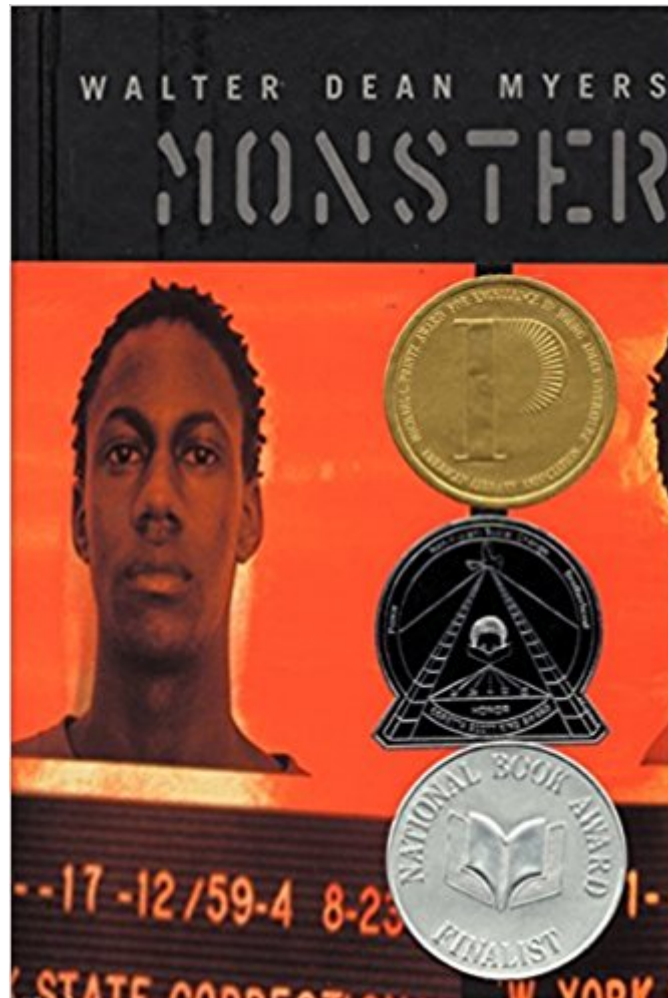




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Monster (Coretta Scott King Honor Book)



Synopsis

This New York Times bestselling novel from acclaimed author Walter Dean Myers tells the story of Steve Harmon, a teenage boy in juvenile detention and on trial. Presented as a screenplay of Steve's own imagination, and peppered with journal entries, the book shows how one single decision can change our whole lives. *Monster* is a multi-award-winning, provocative coming-of-age story that was the first-ever Michael L. Printz Award recipient, an ALA Best Book, a Coretta Scott King Honor selection, and a National Book Award finalist. In 2016, *Monster* was turned into a film starring Jennifer Hudson, Kelvin Harrison, Jr., A\$AP Rocky. The late Walter Dean Myers was a National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, who was known for his commitment to realistically depicting kids from his hometown of Harlem.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Monster" is what the prosecutor called 16-year-old Steve Harmon for his supposed role in the fatal shooting of a convenience-store owner. But was Steve really the lookout who gave the "all clear" to the murderer, or was he just in the wrong place at the wrong time? In this innovative novel by Walter Dean Myers, the reader becomes both juror and witness during the trial of Steve's life. To calm his nerves as he sits in the courtroom, aspiring filmmaker Steve chronicles the proceedings in movie script format. Interspersed throughout his screenplay are journal writings that provide insight into Steve's life before the murder and his feelings about being held in prison during the trial. "They take away your shoelaces and your belt so you can't kill yourself no matter how bad it is. I guess making you live is part of the punishment." Myers, known for the inner-city classic *Motown* and *Didi* (first

published in 1984), proves with *Monster* that he has kept up with both the struggles and the lingo of today's teens. Steve is an adolescent caught up in the violent circumstances of an adult world--a situation most teens can relate to on some level. Readers will no doubt be attracted to the novel's handwriting-style typeface, emphasis on dialogue, and fast-paced courtroom action. By weaving together Steve's journal entries and his script, Myers has given the first-person voice a new twist and added yet another worthy volume to his already admirable body of work. (Ages 12 and older)

--Jennifer Hubert

Grade 7 Up--Steve Harmon, 16, is accused of serving as a lookout for a robbery of a Harlem drugstore. The owner was shot and killed, and now Steve is in prison awaiting trial for murder. From there, he tells about his case and his incarceration. Many elements of this story are familiar, but Myers keeps it fresh and alive by telling it from an unusual perspective. Steve, an amateur filmmaker, recounts his experiences in the form of a movie screenplay. His striking scene-by-scene narrative of how his life has dramatically changed is riveting. Interspersed within the script are diary entries in which the teen vividly describes the nightmarish conditions of his confinement. Myers expertly presents the many facets of his protagonist's character and readers will find themselves feeling both sympathy and repugnance for him. Steve searches deep within his soul to prove to himself that he is not the "monster" the prosecutor presented him as to the jury. Ultimately, he reconnects with his humanity and regains a moral awareness that he had lost. Christopher Myers's superfluous black-and-white drawings are less successful. Their grainy, unfocused look complements the cinematic quality of the text, but they do little to enhance the story. *Monster* will challenge readers with difficult questions, to which there are no definitive answers. In some respects, the novel is reminiscent of Virginia Walter's *Making Up Megaboy* (DK Ink, 1998), another book enriched by its ambiguity. Like it, *Monster* lends itself well to classroom or group discussion. It's an emotionally charged story that readers will find compelling and disturbing.

Edward Sullivan,
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Monster is the story of 16 year old Steve Harmon. A Harlem teen who finds himself on trial for felony murder due to his alleged participation in a botched robbery of a local pharmacy. *Monster* is so titled because during his trial, that is what the prosecutor refers to him as while addressing the jury in her opening arguments. This label haunts him and makes him question his identity and his place in society. *Monster* deals with some very profound issues regarding racism and the structure of our justice system. It also tackles the line between the legal definition of

innocence and the moral/true definition of it. For me, the appeal of this book lies with how the question of Steve's innocence or guilt is intentionally ambiguous. Like the jurors, the reader has to weigh the evidence and decide whether Steve is innocent or guilty and if he is guilty, of what exactly? (The book does not go into as much detail about this, but it is set in NYC in the 90s when Rudy Giuliani was the mayor known for being tough on crime. "Acting in Concert" clauses in the penal code meant that you didn't necessarily have to be the one who pulled the trigger to be charged with murder.) The book has a very unique and interesting writing style. The story is told from Steve's point of view but the narration switches back and forth between a screenplay format and diary entries. It also switches between the courtroom, jail and flashbacks to Steve's childhood. The screenplay format can be distracting at first and takes some getting used to, but it actually is quite effective in conveying imagery and as his trial ensues, it adds to the drama. Some parts of his trial are riveting and read like an episode of Law and Order and his diary entries from jail are very sobering. The awards and accolades that this book has received are well-deserved. This is not your typical "overrated/overhyped" urban fiction novel.

Using the format of a movie script, the author transports the reader into an all too familiar scene, a court room where a young African American male is on trial for murder. Even though the book was written over ten years ago, this episode is being played over and over again every day in America. The committees that have given this book several awards seems to have recognized this point. Sadly, this story has been in the movie theaters of American society for so long that we expect to see it in the movie listings. When will there be a sequel with a different ending?

This book is read in 8th grade as a required text in my district, most likely for several reasons including how it is told in mixed genres (playwriting and journal writing), and for its underlying themes regarding bias in the American justice system, peer pressure and the argument of what makes a person guilty. Although this author is great at creating "real" characters in real situations, it's a tough book for many of my kids to stay focused in. Many kids get frustrated about the switches between narrative/screenplay writing, there are a lot of characters to keep track of, and for someone unfamiliar with courtroom terminology (and screenplay terminology) it can be a bit of a tedious read. It is an interesting story though, I think it just needs to be approached in the right mindset that it's not a Walter Dean Myers story you can just breeze through. Physically, the books are not very strongly bound; unless you have only 1 or 2 people reading it, it's liable to fall apart in large sections

as soon as the binding comes even a little loose (like if you open the pages flat on a hard surface when you read).

At first I thought the decision to present the story as a self-made film would oversimplify the narrative, but actually I think it illuminates the character of the protagonist. Nevertheless I was left with a sense that no matter the legal outcome, justice would not be served. Until we all can begin to let go of culturally bound expectations and preconceptions, we will have too many criminals and too little justice.

"The best time to cry is at night, when the lights are out and someone is being beaten up and screaming for help." This is what 16-year old Steven Harmon is thinking as he lies on the cot in his jail cell, awaiting trial for murder. He may or may not have been involved in a drugstore robbery that ended with the murder of the owner. He is terrified of being in jail and of the possibility he may have to spend the next 25 years in prison. To help himself cope, he is writing down everything in his notebook in screenplay format. The novel covers the trial and ends with the verdict. Without spoiling the story, I can tell you that I walked away at the end not knowing for sure if Steve was guilty or not. I can say that I felt a strong connection to Steve and that I wanted him to not be guilty. I felt sorry for his innocence and for the fact that he grew up around criminals. Just being acquainted with these people put him in a bad position. The author clearly portrays the fear and anxiety that Steve is feeling. Being trapped and being out of control, relying on his attorney, the jury and the judge to decide the rest of his life... As Steve says, many times, he is not a bad person, he is not a monster. Can I say WOW! This story drove home the point that one small event or one small error in judgment or even being in the wrong place at the wrong time or being "friends" with the wrong people can change your life forever. Reading this book could be life changing for young people. This is my daughter's summer reading assignment. She is going into 8th grade. I really hope she gets as much out of this book as I did.

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