

Reappearing Fathers, Reappearing Pasts: History, Gender, and Identity in Hamilton's *Plain City* and Myers' *Somewhere in the Darkness*

Laura Apol

There are many similarities between authors Virginia Hamilton and Walter Dean Myers. Pick up a text book of children's literature and you will find both of these names prominently displayed. Pick up a list of important readings in multicultural literature, a list of children's literature awards, a list of articulate discussions about the issues that surround the reading and writing of literature for children—you will likely encounter the names and voices of Virginia Hamilton and Walter Dean Myers. Each has published dozens of books—contemporary realistic fiction, historical fiction and non-fiction; each has received numerous top awards for children's and adolescent literature; each is widely acknowledged for important contributions to the field of children's literature in general, and to the area of multicultural literature in particular. Each writes deliberately from her or his position as an African American author, using language (its cadences, rhythms, nuances, dialects) to convey the beauty and complexities of the lives of the characters of the stories. Both are hailed as profoundly influential authors of contemporary realistic fiction for young people. Perry Nodelman writes of Virginia Hamilton that “. . . if any still productive children's writer deserves to have her entire body of work considered as a touchstone it is Virginia Hamilton—our greatest living children's writer, our most surprising and infuriating, our most daring and perhaps our wisest” (10). Of Walter Dean Myers, Rudine Sims Bishop writes, “One of Myers's major contributions has been his authentic and generally positive portrayal of Black life in urban United States” (12).

Similarities in the Authors and Books

There are also numerous similarities between two specific novels by these authors, *Plain City* (1993) by Hamilton and *Somewhere in the Darkness* (1992) by Myers. *Plain City* is the story of a twelve-year-old girl, Buhlaire, who searches for

and eventually finds her father—a father who was not killed in the Viet Nam war, as Buhlaire had been led to believe, but who is instead living in an underpass by the interstate outside Plain City—unemployed, homeless, and mentally unstable. The second novel, Myers' *Somewhere in the Darkness*, contains a male protagonist, Jimmy Little. Like Buhlaire, Jimmy has never had anything to do with his father, Crab, for although Crab is alive, he is serving jail time for having killed someone in an armed robbery. The story begins when Crab appears unexpectedly at the door of the apartment where Jimmy lives with Mama Jean (who is not his real mother), wanting to take Jimmy on a cross-country tour in order to prove his own innocence and “make it right” with his son before a terminal illness ends his life.

Both stories, then, revolve around young protagonists who encounter fathers who are not only marginal in the lives of their children, but who are socially marginal as well—a homeless man with significant mental instabilities, and a terminally ill convicted killer who escapes from jail and steals cars and credit cards to support a cross-

country odyssey intended to absolve his personal sense of parental guilt.

Both stories are coming-of-age stories as well—stories in which children are transformed into young adults, stories in which protagonists move into greater self-understanding and self-awareness through the course of the narrative. In each of the novels, self-identity is connected to disappearing and reappearing fathers. How, these protagonists ask, can you know yourself unless you know where you came from? Know who you might look like? Know who was there when you were a small child? Know why that person disappeared? When the fathers in these stories reappear, the simple fact of their presence is a catalyst for the protagonist's self understanding. Having a sense of past, the novels seem to say, is prerequisite to having a sense of self.

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In both books, photographs represent an important means of coming to terms with the past—photographs of protagonists in intact families: a mother, a father and a baby. Stolen photographs that Buhlaire's father returns to her when at last they meet; photographs from before Jimmy's mother died, before his father went to jail.

As fathers reappear, both books explore the notion of love—parent to child, child to parent. Buhlaire loves her father at once; she loves the thought of him, is surprised by the reality of him, but loves him anyway because he's her dad. And she's quick to say it, to herself, to him, and to others. Jimmy's love develops more slowly, resistantly. Perhaps it can never really be called love. It begins with curiosity. It includes exchanges in which Crab passionately asserts, "I am your father"(49) and Jimmy responds with equal fervor, "You ain't nothing!" (50). It has within it Jimmy's desire, and inability, to like Crab, as well as a moment where Jimmy, "look[ing] for someone he loved" sees only "the darkness of the man, the outstretched hand" (154). It evolves into a tentative liking and culminates in a final moment of reconciliation, where Crab, captured by police and in enormous physical pain—near death—says to Jimmy, "Hey man, I'm sorry" and Jimmy responds for the first and only time with a term of affection, "I know, Daddy. I know" (161).

There are numerous other similarities between the novels as well: there is the role of physical resemblance and identification—the times children looked at fathers to "see" themselves, as if in a mirror. There is the confidence that both Buhlaire and Jimmy have that their fathers will "teach" them something about themselves; there is the fact that both fathers rarely succeed at telling the truth, and that both fathers justify deception and theft as ways to facilitate relationship with their children. In both books, money (given from child to parent), becomes a symbol of the caretaking these fathers require, and both Buhlaire and Jimmy fall into caregiving roles—roles that at first they resent, but that they grow into as they accept the limitations and liabilities of their fathers. Finally, there is the shared notion of "home" in the novels—a place that includes a configuration of people who love you but are not necessarily your biological parents, a place of safety, and a place to return to when you've learned who you are.

Differences in the Authors and Books

There are also many points of difference between the authors and the stories. Although both Hamilton and Myers share a commitment to bringing to readers many forms of African American literature, these two authors each acknowledge or are acknowledged as writing from their unique positions as a woman or man of color. Hamilton has said of her novels, "They come out of the real in my life, I believe. . . . Most of the time I write close to my own original source—my hometown, my Perry/Hamilton family and ancestry. I draw as near as I can to that deep well of fact and memory" ("Acceptance" 438); and she explains the following about her process of discovering a distinctly female voice in the character of Buhlaire in *Plain City*: "While uncovering this remarkable, twelve-year-old Buhlaire, I realized that I see young people, particularly young females, as seeking strength. . . . Young girls, developing toward womanhood, are on a quest for self and maturity, as is my protagonist, Buhlaire" ("Everything" 376).

Myers, on the other hand, is often recognized for his portrayals of father-son experiences. In 1991, he was heralded in the following way: "Although he shares certain aspects of his world view with Black women authors, his voice has been tuned by barbershops and street corners, bongo drums and fatherhood, basketball and military service. His brand of humor, his facile rendering of the rhetoric of Black teenage boys, his strong focus on fathers and sons, are all shaded by his experiences as a Black male" (Bishop 25).

As a result, although *Plain City* and *Somewhere in the Darkness* contain numerous similarities, they also contain fundamental differences. Consider the following: both Buhlaire and Jimmy have been "father-less" for most of their lives. Both begin their stories with dreams about their absent fathers—dreams that are literal and figurative, and that reveal an underlying certainty that knowing their fathers will help them know something about themselves. Both find fathers who are flawed, troubled, troubling, and while both learn that moving into the adult world means you understand that parents let you down, disappear, make mistakes, and you come to terms with it. Still, they react to this knowledge in very different ways. For Jimmy, the flawed father who is Crab is something to resist, to condemn. Jimmy is distressed by Crab's deceptions; he is not afraid to name Crab's faults, to tell him when his reasoning or his actions are "wrong." Buhlaire, on the other hand, seems relatively untroubled by Junior's lies. While Jimmy challenges Crab's behavior, Buhlaire defends Junior, makes excuses for him, maintaining that things are not really his fault. In spite of his imperfections, she still identifies with him, loves him, cares for him.

Thus, for all their likenesses, these two novels exhibit a significant underlying difference: in *Plain City*, Buhlaire's self-understanding comes most strongly through her sense of connection and identification *with* her father, while in *Somewhere in the Darkness* Jimmy seeks his sense of self through independence, autonomy and identification *against* his father. In this way, although both stories could be considered coming-of-age stories, Jimmy's coming of age is shaped according to what has come to be known as the "ordeal motif" (Kelly 39), while Buhlaire's coming of age could be more accurately classified as a "taming of the female spirit" (Apol 68)

Coming of Age: Ordeals and Taming the Spirit

In the ordeal motif, a child or young person is temporarily isolated from the moral influence of adults and undergoes an experience (or series of experiences) that requires a decisive response or action. The young person "succeeds" at meeting these challenges; having proved him or herself in action, the young person returns to the safety of the family or the supervision of adult society, where he or she is rewarded. While on his cross-country odyssey, Jimmy is not technically isolated from the moral influence of adults; however, Crab (though adult in years) cannot really be considered a *moral* influence for Jimmy. (In fact, it could be argued that rather than acting as an adult who provides Jimmy with a moral compass, Crab is himself one of the challenges Jimmy faces.) Jimmy is required to take action and single-handedly meet difficulties as they arise, and, in typical "ordeal" fashion, after Jimmy has "proved" himself in his quest for self-understanding, he returns to the safety of the family—his *true* family,

that is—in the person of Mama Jean.

Unlike the “ordeal” motif, which happens most often in stories with young male protagonists, the story shape exhibited in *Plain City* is one that is frequently provided for female protagonists: the “taming of the spirit,” where a young girl moves from the relative freedom and independence of childhood into a fuller understanding of her role as a woman. In literature of the past, this female rite of passage was overt: while boys’ stories contained accounts of adventure and heroism, girls’ stories presented protagonists who “grew” into roles of selflessness, deferment, and domestic duty (Apol 61-80). The “role as a woman” that waited for adolescent girls frequently involved an other-directedness that stood at odds with female autonomy, personal freedom, or individual growth. *Plain City* exhibits such a “taming of the female spirit,” for although one could argue that Buhlaire never truly gives up her autonomy, part of the lesson she learns in the course of the novel is that the world is full of unsafe individuals (usually men) who appear in the novel in various forms—including the strange man who frightens a free-wandering Buhlaire in the woods, as well as the menacing men who move closer to Buhlaire while she’s talking to her father in the railroad underpass. (It could, in fact, be argued that the entire point of the book is that Buhlaire learns how to interact with men—how to view Uncle Sam as protector, how to see Grady as a friend, how to find a father in Junior and a surrogate father in Mister Brown, how to be wary of strange men in the woods and in the underpasses.) The coming-of-age lesson Buhlaire learns is to curb her independence, her journeying, since it may no longer be safe for her as a young woman to go out wandering alone. At the

same time, the unilateral model of comforting, nurturing, and caring that characterizes her new relationship with her father *does* put Buhlaire in the position of female selflessness and other-directedness. Although Buhlaire wants a father, she becomes in many ways Junior’s *mother*—giving him money, looking out for him, defending him to his family, providing him with unconditional love.

In this way, the two novels can be viewed as following gender-based coming-of-age story patterns—patterns that have their roots in the work on the stages of moral development articulated by Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) and later challenged on the basis of gender bias by Carol Gilligan (1982). While Kohlberg outlined a system of moral development and an ethic of justice based on individuality and separateness, Gilligan maintained that for women, the highest forms of moral development are characterized by an ethic of care and social responsibility. Kohlberg’s system validates concepts such as autonomy, detachment, justice, rights and independence; Gilligan claims that Kohlberg’s are particularly “male” understandings of moral development, and that female identity formation takes place in a context of ongoing relationship since “girls, in identifying themselves as female,

experience themselves as *like* their mothers, thus fusing the experience of attachment with the process of identity formation” (Gilligan 8). This means that “girls emerge. . . with a basis for ‘empathy’ built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not” (Chodorow 167). For this reason, Gilligan maintains that “Masculinity is defined through *separation* while femininity is defined through *attachment*” (Gilligan 8, emphasis mine).

While both Kohlberg’s and Gilligan’s views have been widely criticized for their inherent essentialism, the theories they put forward about male and female development are blueprints for the processes depicted in the lives of Myers’s and Hamilton’s protagonists. Jimmy does, indeed, operate under a system of justice, using the “wrong-ness” of Crab’s actions as a basis for judgement and even outright condemnation, opting for individuality—identification *against* rather than connection *with* his reappearing father. Late in the story, after a final effort on Crab’s part to convince Jimmy that he never did commit the murder for which he is serving time, Jimmy turns and says to his father, “It don’t make a difference if you didn’t kill anybody. . . . Not if you’re going to steal some money or credit cards or something. That’s wrong,

too. It don’t make you good just because you didn’t kill nobody!” (155). When Crab responds by taking Jimmy’s face in his hands and saying “Don’t it make a difference if it’s all I got left? What else do I have?” Jimmy responds by pushing Crab’s hands away—a physical act of separation—and saying, “Just be you and let me be me” (155). And the conclusion of the book contains a lengthy and eloquent soliloquy in which Jimmy spells out the differences between himself and Crab, imagining himself with a son he will someday have and de-

scribing his own vision of fathering, completely the opposite of Crab’s (167). A developing sense of justice, autonomy, independence—according to Kohlberg’s model, Jimmy is indeed coming of age.

Buhlaire, on the other hand, demonstrates perfectly Gilligan’s pattern of female moral development. Her sense of identity is embedded within a sense of social responsibility, connection, and care. When she meets the stranger in the woods—even after he is revealed as a dangerous stranger—she responds by imagining that her rescuer, Uncle Sam, has been too hard on the man. “Care for your fellow man. . . care for your fellow, sister, human beings” (48) she recites to her uncle. When Buhlaire at last finds her father, she discovers that he, too, is a stranger—someone she has never known, and someone who is difficult to love. He says strange things, smells bad, lives with other homeless people near the interstate. Like Jimmy’s father Crab, Buhlaire’s father Junior steals, lies, tells half truths, and represents an unlikely candidate for emulation or even affection. Yet Buhlaire responds with unconditional love and identification. In desiring to take care of a father who seems mostly unable to take care of himself, she embodies her own maxim to “Care for your fellow man.”

Thus, for all their likenesses, these two novels exhibit a significant underlying difference: in Plain City, Buhlaire’s self-understanding comes most strongly through her sense of connection and identification with her father, while in Somewhere in the Darkness Jimmy seeks his sense of self through independence, autonomy and identification against his father.

And when Buhlaire says goodbye to her father at the underpass, she adds, "And when you need anything . . . well, I'll come" (177).

In the final analysis, though, although these protagonists do seem to fit gender-specific coming of age scenarios in the forms of ordeals and taming, and while they do seem to fit gender specific models of moral development, the process of identity formation in both of the novels resists such simple and binary understandings. In *Somewhere in the Darkness*, Jimmy's autonomy is undermined by the sense of intense connectedness that he feels for Mama Jean—connectedness and a sense of community that began in the opening pages of the book and continue through to the end. Often Jimmy is portrayed as saying or thinking about how much he loves Mama Jean. His relationship with her is characterized by mutual caretaking; at one point in Jimmy's journey, Myers writes, "Jimmy thought of Mama Jean again. He wondered if the rain would bother her arthritis. If it did she'd have trouble getting up in the morning and he wouldn't be there to make tea for her. He wondered if she were thinking about him, and if she were sad. He thought a 'hello' to her, and 'I love you'" (39). At the end of the story, Mama Jean is the home Jimmy returns to, his lessons learned, his independence gained.

In a similar way, Buhlaire complicates the neatness of a binary understanding of female coming of age as well. Embedded in her ethic of care for Junior is an in-your-face defiance of her family's rules, an insistence on independence and individuality that will not allow her to conform to the communal expectations of her mother, her uncles, and her aunts. It is through exercising her caretaking that Buhlaire asserts the power of her own decision-making process and proves herself less dependent on the opinions of others, more able to think and act on her own.

Which leads, it seems, to the heart of identity formation in these two novels—that is, the intensely dialogic nature of the process itself. From the outset, both Jimmy and Buhlaire have a sense of this dialogic, discursive construction of identity. They know that one way to know who you are is to study your parents—in this case, your father—in order to see who you look like, whose face mirrors yours. You compare your hair, your eyes, the color of your skin; you see the patterns of their thinking and their lives and see how you fit, where things come together. You touch that person, physically and emotionally, leave your mark on them, discover their mark on you. You talk.

Shortly after Crab appears, Jimmy expresses this understanding of the dialogic interplay in the construction of identity when he says to himself: "He [Jimmy] would have like to stand them both [himself and Crab] up in front of a mirror and see how they looked together" (28); further, Myers writes that "He [Jimmy] wondered how he looked to Crab. Whether Crab thought they looked alike or not" (43). Later, as Jimmy sits beside Crab in the car, he imagines Crab sitting alongside his own father—a double mirroring of sorts—and speculates on the similarities and differences between his life and

Crab's; in one of the final scenes of the book, Jimmy and Crab are running from the police, and their actions are described as identical: "Jimmy found himself running, not toward Crab but in the same direction, his arms moving as Crab's were moving" (160). In the final scene between Jimmy and Crab, while his father lies dying in the hospital bed, Jimmy eats the food they bring in for Crab—physically taking his father's place by eating his father's food. As Jimmy eats, Crab breathes one last hard breath and dies, completing the dialogue between Jimmy and Crab that will help Jimmy determine his place in the world. Buhlaire, too, constructs identity dialogically. She, too, sees the similarities between herself and Junior—their rasta hair, their light skin. In fact, she goes so far as to say, "I am like my dad, can't stand the indoors for long. Have to stride the land. Just an outside child!" (169).

Coming of Age: Past, Present, and Future

For both Jimmy and Buhlaire, there is another sense in which identity is dialogic as well. If identity is constructed in dialogue with another individual, it is also constructed in dialogue between the present, the future, and the past. The quest for a father is, in essence, the quest for a past. The photographs, the stories, the momentoes that include fathers are representative of what Buhlaire terms "back time"—a history made explicit, even visible. After meeting her father, Buhlaire understands something about herself: "All the time, forever, she had these daydreams. . . . A ball. . . . A man. I'm on the grass, I see the ball coming. A see sunlight and the man, smiling. My own show. Just always there, like a wish. Wow! It's my own back time! Me and my dad, playing" (116).

While through their absences, both Junior and Crab have stolen their children's history—their children's "back time"—Junior

has done so in a more deliberate fashion, sneaking into Buhlaire's bedroom at night and stealing her photographs, medals, treasures. When at their first meeting Junior returns to Buhlaire the packet of stolen goods, he is literally returning her back time. She thinks to herself, "Did he 'take' stuff about me? . . . My dad, a thief! . . . He took my things. He took off with my back time. He sure did. Maybe he just wanted to have me with him. That's why he took the stuff! It would be like having me pay attention to him!" (127).

For Buhlaire, making sense of the present means coming to terms with the past. "You can't change back time. Back time stays back, that's all" (170). Jimmy, too, needs to come to terms with the past, to understand Crab's history—Crab as a child and Crab's father—before he can understand Crab as the father he is, is not, and never will be. And for Jimmy the dialogue continues into the future, into the father Jimmy imagines he himself will someday become. Myers writes,

He thought about what he would do with the child if he were a boy. He wouldn't know much about getting money to buy food for him, or what things to tell him to do except to be good and not get into trouble. But he would tell him all the secrets he knew, looking right into his eyes and telling him

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nothing but the truth so that every time they were together they would know things about each other. That way there would be a connection, he thought, something that would be there even when they weren't together. He would know just how he was like his son, and how they were different, and where their souls touched and where they didn't. He knew if he ever had a son he would have to do it right away, and all the time, because sooner or later there wouldn't be enough days left to fit the meaning into. (167)

Coming of Age: Dialogue of the Self

Identity is a dialogue between people; identity is a dialogue between times; but in its deepest sense, identity is a dialogue of the self, a shifting process most visible in the discourses that construct the novels themselves. In this regard, the two books seem to move once more in different directions. Myers's telling of the story in *Somewhere in the Darkness* relies on a fairly linear discourse—a narrative structure that moves forward from the introduction of Crab as Jimmy's father, through the hall of mirrors of the father/son legacy, to the scene where Jimmy imagines himself with a son of his own. Myers' message seems to be a straightforward one; as writer Dennis Vellucci puts it,

If Jimmy is representative, the next generation of fathers will not be fated to repeat the mistakes of past generations, and the cycle of broken families, of distant or anonymous fathers, of sons left too young to their own resources might be broken. Jimmy has learned the importance of the father-son bond through its absence in his own life; his reflections at the end of the book promise that, sensitive and responsible, he will one day be for someone an exemplary guide. (212)

Jimmy's journey, his relationship with Crab, the dialogue between father and son, between past, present and future, transforms Jimmy from a boy to a man—and a responsible and honorable man at that.

The discursive mode in *Plain City*, on the other hand, adds an additional complexity to the dialogic construction of self, for the narrative structures themselves create within the protagonist a dialogue, self to self. Throughout the novel, the text resists a linear telling by being fragmented, indirect, uncertain; within Buhlaire's mind, voices meet and compete—an ongoing interior dialogue as she tries to see herself as she imagines others do, constructing a sense of identity both from the inside out and from the outside in. Periodically the text is interrupted by an italicized "snap!"—an interjection that functions much as the snap of the shutter of a camera, stopping the action at the very moment when Buhlaire is most intent on seeing herself—discussing herself with herself—not from within, but from without.

In *Plain City*, readers can recognize the constitutive power of discourse; by rejecting a limiting and unified authoritative discourse that follows prescribed conventions and fixed rules of language, Hamilton allows father and mother, self and other, past and present to blend and blur. Buhlaire's multiplicity of voice eventually becomes her strength; the discourses that meet and compete within her eventually help her form a sense of identity that is comfortable with a shifting sense of who she has been, is, and will become.

It is the dialogic nature of identity construction, then—between people, between past, present and future, and between aspects of the self—that allows the young people in these stories to actively *become*: to value their struggles, to

celebrate their strengths, to comprehend their pain, to make sense of their lives. In the process of each of these stories, the protagonists not only gain a sense of self, but they gain as well the knowledge of how that self is constructed. Both of these novels—so alike, so different—are about the stories the protagonists are told, the stories they have told themselves, and the ways those stories are revised as time goes on. As Buhlaire and Jimmy journey—physically, psychologically—the idea of a unified self becomes more and more removed. Instead, identity is recognized as a complicated interaction between people (both identification with and independence from), between times (back time, present time, future) and between voices (inner, outer, imagined, real). Through multiple ongoing dialogues, the self is revealed not as an object or thing, but as an interactive, discursive process—the process of discovering who you were, who you are now, and who it is you may one day be.

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