

A Poem as Big as New York City

WALTER DEAN MYERS

In his introduction to A Poem as Big as New York City—a new book length poem written by NYC kids in Teachers & Writers Collaborative workshops, and published by Universe Publishing, an Imprint of Rizzoli New York—writer, New York City native, and current ambassador for young people’s literature Walter Dean Myers recounts his own early brush with the transformative power of writing, and offers up a hymn of praise to the creative efforts of the young poets whose work is featured in the book.

THE HARLEM TENEMENT I lived in offered no relief from the scorching summer heat. I was fifteen, struggling with family problems, and wondering what I would be doing with my life, when I heard about a contest for young poets. The assignment was to write, in poetic form, a portrait of New York. I took my black-and-white composition book and started writing.

At first the writing was all from my head, an exercise in putting words on paper. Then I started looking around me and, more important, I began to see and hear and smell and feel the city I had grown up in. Suddenly, the familiar became gloriously new. The fire escape I had slept on to escape my airless apartment

grew into a dark, symbolic geometry that changed my point of view. As I wandered the streets, seeing people interact, hearing how the rumble of the Broadway train perfectly backed the staccato voices of children playing in the shadows beneath them, I was seeing a new city. I was also becoming a new person. I was becoming a person who saw with a constantly fresh vision, who listened more intently, whose imagination was permanently stretched.

So it is with the young poets whose work, whose images, whose cultural reweaving of the familiar is represented in *A Poem as Big as New York City*. Sometimes the poets show up with startling representations of the world they live in painted in a language as fresh as the city itself. At other times the poets dance between the words as they accept their roles as integral parts of the city they depict.

If anyone wants to know the reasons for bringing young people to art, they will find those reasons here. These are young people learning to celebrate the ordinary and to transform that ordinary into the rich stuff of life. They boldly discard the stale as they bring their own rich and unique inner visions to the page. I am sometimes surprised at the talent represented here, but not the creativity. It is what young people are capable of when given the chance.

I didn’t win the contest as a teenager, but I did become another person, one who would spend a lifetime doing what I did, wandering the streets of New York. I was thankful for the chance to be a poet that summer and to learn from the experience of enjoying my city. I still am. ☺

Walter Dean Myers henem fugitem quossi derferiam is cuptias dit quae vellabo ritibus antota cus est lantur apid que mossunt abore voluptiam, es sed estet perisincit at. Ibus quae nis aut moluptatum ex et volendel eum voluptat as nectias sum nusapit laut voluptaecto ipis eatat am volor sam facculparit que pa pla.

A Poem as Big as New York City

When I look at the New York sky,
I see little pencils fly,
flying, flying through the sky
writing words way up high,
writing a poem of many hues
reds, oranges, greens, blues.
How did it get up there so high—
was it written by a butterfly?

Or was it a giant skipping across the New York sky,
bending over the clouds to write,
thinking a million things that you can think,
in shining sunset purple ink...

Most see only a concrete paradise
rough blocks, the scent of gasoline and sugared nuts
buildings building up
lives flying by
planes overhead
people below
sirens wailing
car horns blaring

but there is a poem growing
from the core of this Big Apple

A POEM AS BIG AS...

the millions of people tuning in to watch the ball drop
when all time stops at Times Square on New Year's Eve,

A poem as big as the MAⁿHAT^tAN skyli^{Ne} viewed from the farthest ends of Brooklyn,

A POEM AS BIG AS THE CITY!

