

An excerpt from *Bad Boy* by Walter Dean Myers

Being good in class was not easy for me. I had a need to fill up all the spaces in my life, with activity, with talking, sometimes with purely imagined scenarios that would dance through my mind, occupying me while some other student was at the blackboard. I did want to get good marks in school, but they were never of major importance to me, except in the sense of “winning” the best grade in a subject. My filling up the spaces, however, kept me in trouble. I would blurt out answers to Mrs. Conway’s questions even when I was told to keep quiet, or I might roll a marble across my desk if she was on the other side of the room.

...when the class was given the assignment to write a poem, she did read mine. She said that she liked it very much.

“I don’t think he wrote that poem,” Sidney Aronofsky volunteered.

I gave Sidney Aronofsky the biggest punch he ever had in the back of his big head and was set to the closet. After the incident with Sidney, Mrs. Conway said that she had had quite enough of me and that I would not be allowed to participate in any class activity until I brought my mother to school. I knew that meant a beating. That evening I thought about telling Mama that the teacher wanted to see her, but I didn’t get up the nerve. I didn’t get it up the next day, either. In the meantime I had to sit in the back of the room, and no kid was allowed to sit near me. I brought some comic books to school and read them under my desk.

Mrs. Conway... snatched the comic from me and tore it up. She dropped all the pieces on my desk... Then she went to her closet, snatched out a book, and put it in front of me.

“You are,” she sputtered, “a bad boy. A very bad boy. You cannot join the rest of the class until your mother comes in.” She was furious, and I was embarrassed.

“And if you’re going to sit back here and read, you might as well read something worthwhile,” she snapped.

I didn’t touch the book in front of me until she had made her way back to the front of the class and was going on about something in long division. The title of the book was *East o’ the Sun and West o’ the Moon*. It was a collection of Norwegian fairy tales, and I read the first one. At the end of the day, I asked Mrs. Conway if I could take the book home.

She looked at me a long time and then said no, I couldn’t. But I could read it every day in class if I behaved myself. I promised I would. For the rest of the week I read that book. It was the best book I had ever read. When I told Mrs. Conway I had finished, she asked me what I liked about the book, and I told her. The stories were full of magic events and interesting people and witches and strange places. It differed from *Mystery Rides the Rails*, the *Bobbsey Twins*, and a few *Honeybunch* books I had come across.

I realized I liked books, and I liked reading. Reading a book was not so much like entering a different world—it was like discovering a different language. It was a language clearer than the one I spoke, and clearer than the one I heard around me. What the books said was, as in the case of *East o’ the Sun*, interesting, but the idea that I could enter this world at any time I chose was even more attractive. The “me” who read the books, who followed the adventures, seemed more the real me than the “me” who played ball in the streets.

Mrs. Conway gave me another book to read in class and, because it was the weekend, allowed me to take it home to read. From that day on I liked Mrs. Conway.

I still didn’t get to read aloud in class, but when we had a class assignment to write a poem, she would read mine. At the end of the year I got my best report card ever, including a glorious Needs Improvement in conduct.