

## The real world

### Teens say they're reading urban fiction because it reflects life in the city. Should parents be concerned?

By Vanessa E. Jones, Globe Staff | November 3, 2008

Kymaunii Godfrey, Breanna Blocker, and Chanel Cowan-Cummings talk spiritedly about the types of books they like to read. Cowan-Cummings, a freshman at Melrose High School, says she finds most of the literature she peruses for class "boring." Blocker is suspicious of books created specifically for young adults.

"The books for young kids, they be, like, hiding stuff," says Blocker, 15, of Roxbury.

So the three teenagers have turned to the very adult genre of urban fiction. One of Godfrey's favorites is "The Coldest Winter Ever," by activist and hip-hop star Sister Souljah, which tells the story of the privileged daughter of a Brooklyn drug dealer. Blocker has read "A Gangsta's Girl" and "A Hood Chick's Story," tales of girls who get caught up in street life.

Urban fiction - also known as street lit or street fiction - is a style of literature that depicts drugs, violence, and sexual promiscuity in black and Latino neighborhoods. Some of the books detail the extravagant lifestyles of drug dealers. Others describe the bloody violence associated with the drug trade. The sex scenes in some of the novels are extremely explicit, and sex is often used as a form of power rather than an expression of love.

The genre is not new: Authors such as Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim began writing about the world of pimps, gangsters, and drug dealers in the 1970s. But recently a younger generation of writers such as Teri Woods, Carl Weber, and Nikki Turner have begun delving into urban fiction. Some started as self-published authors who sold their books from the trunks of their cars. The books quickly won great acclaim among readers, allowing the new authors to establish independent book companies and ultimately sign deals with major publishers. In the past few years, the genre has exploded in popularity. According to Nielsen BookScan, only 4,000 urban fiction novels were sold in 2005, representing 0.2 percent of adult fiction book sales. In 2007, urban fiction accounted for 4 percent of the adult fiction market, with 82,000 copies sold.

From the genre's rebirth, it has experienced scrutiny and controversy. The books initially were criticized for their racy sexual content as well as their spelling and grammatical errors. As more teenagers fall under the spell of street-lit novels, some adults worry about how the content is influencing teenagers. But teens and some adults insist that the content of the books doesn't change mind-sets.

As a result of the controversy, major publishing houses have released young-adult series such as Kimani TRU, Bluford, and Hotlanta for teens yearning for books with an inner-city vibe. These new series have avoided criticism because the violence or drug use tends to be mentioned in passing rather than described explicitly.

The tension between adults and teens mirrors the dialogues in mainstream pop culture about the appropriateness of R.L. Stine's young-adult horror stories or the sexual promiscuity in the book and television series "Gossip Girl," says Amy Pattee, an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Sciences at Simmons College. In the past, debates have developed around whether young people should read Jackie Collins or Stephen King.

"For a long time, librarians have struggled with the issue of kids reading grown-up books," Pattee says. "There are certain adult books that we consider to be more adult than others."

Pattee says she doesn't have a problem with teens reading urban fiction. In fact, she wrote a positive review of "Ride Wit' Me," a street-lit novel for young adults, for the School Library Journal. Pattee says she appreciates the social commentary in books such as Nikki Turner's "A Project Chick." "A lot of these books point out the ways in which the larger world is failing people who have incredible internal resources," Pattee says.

Denene Millner and Mitzi Miller launched the "Hotlanta" urban series for teens. The first book, released in April, tells the story of two rich teens whose estranged father is released from prison.

"I've been pretty passionate about speaking out about how much our teenage girls love to read, but how inappropriate the material is that's at their fingertips," Millner says.

Millner's 14-year-old niece had read the "Gossip Girl" and "A-List" series but yearned for books with characters with whom she could identify. Millner's niece soon turned to street fiction. "She's been reading Teri Woods, Zane," Millner says. (Zane writes best-selling erotic novels.) "I'm not saying there's anything wrong with Zane, but it's not right for a 14-year-old child to read that work."

Felicia Cowan, the mother of Chanel Cowan-Cummings, agrees with Millner to an extent. Cowan won't let her daughter read Zane's sexually explicit novels, which Cowan personally peruses. By being a hands-on parent, Cowan says she limits the detrimental effects of the books she does allow Chanel to read, such as Eric Jerome Dickey's romantic novel "Milk in My Coffee." Cowan is open about the harsh realities of life. She's answered Chanel's question about why some men cheat - infidelity is a perennial theme in urban fiction - but Cowan also makes sure that she knows where her daughter is at all times.

"I try to keep it on the level that I don't hide everything from her," says Cowan, 43, who lives in Roxbury. "I let her know what's real. I try to keep it on an even keel. If it's too grown-up for her, 'No, you can't read that.' Even if she understands what's going on, 'No, you can't read that yet.' "

Kymaunii Godfrey, Breanna Blocker, and Chanel Cowan-Cummings say the content of urban fiction books doesn't affect them. "It's not taking away my innocence," says Cowan-Cummings, 14. "It's making me more knowledgeable about what's going on."

Blocker describes an encounter she and Cowan-Cummings had that day. Blocker was wearing a yellow bandana around her neck, and some people asked her if she was a member of the Latin Kings, a gang known for wearing yellow bandanas. For Blocker, the incident showed how relevant the content of urban fiction is for teens living in certain neighborhoods. "The same things that are happening in the books," she says, "is happening in Boston today: the gang violence, the guns, the drugs."

Ricketta Pryce, 17, visited Frugal Book Store in the Washington Park Mall in Roxbury recently to buy "A Gangster's Girl" and "Me and My Boyfriend." Both deal with young girls who fall in love with drug dealers.

The bookstore owner, Leonard Egerton, doesn't think teens should read those books. "I have some integrity," he says. "I don't think it's appropriate to sell adult literature to an underage person."

But Egerton says he also realizes that there's no law preventing teenagers from buying urban fiction and that he can't turn his personal stance into store policy - even though some parents have berated him for selling the books to their teens without their permission.

Pryce ultimately took home the books she wanted. "People want to read it," Pryce says, "so you have to give it to them." "A Gangster's Girl" was so good, she says, that she finished it in one sitting. ■