The Readers’ Advisory Guide to Street Literature

Vanessa Irvin Morris

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I was asked to write this foreword and my first thought was, “What will I say to the readers?” I think I would say to those of you already familiar with the street-lit genre, those of you who are big fans, those of you who have supported this movement, and those of you who understand the stories and know the characters and know what you’re reading like the back of your hand, thank you. You need to know that you are the reason I am, and you are the reason I will continue to be. I’m such a small part of this movement as a writer, but you as a reader are ardent; thus, you are the reason street lit, or urban fiction as some call it, exists. If it were not for you, it would not be.

These street-lit books are representing a voice of what was never to be spoken or told. And it is a voice that you hear very well. Not everyone can hear the cries of the inner-city streets. Not everyone cares to understand the tears on a Black face and what they represent or how to make them go away. This new-wave genre of street lit will always remind the human race of a people who were supposed to be forgotten, swept under a rug, put in a box—better yet a cell—never to have a voice, never to cry out, and never able to speak out against the injustice we live in, see, experience in our everyday life just because of our demographics. Well, that’s just not going to happen now, is it? No, it won’t, because of all of you. I could write these books all day; it wouldn’t make a difference if you didn’t buy them. But you do, and I thank you.

I need you to know that from the first time I stepped outside with True to the Game, I was rejected. I had more people turn on me and talk with such dismay that it hindered my thinking, but it didn’t stop my determination. I can count the number of people who said things to me like,
“Black people don’t read. You’re wasting your time.” Then there were those who had worked very hard, I’m sure, and received a formal education who had their personal opinions. Many of them also said, “You can’t write. That’s not English. You don’t even use proper grammar; you can’t write these slang words in a book.” And of course the backlash for having the “N word” on every page didn’t help either.

There is a concept, a notion, that is pushed on us to believe that we are to speak and act a certain way to show respect and to be respected, and the N word is the token for that concept. My use of it in my writings of everyday street life shatters that notion, and to me personally, that notion is merely mythological or, better yet, an opinion, to say the least. Is there not freedom of speech, or is that freedom only provided as far as what an individual deems appropriate?

When it was all said and done, I don’t think there was one person who believed in me or my writing, not one, in the beginning. No matter how big I am or how small I am, how rich I am or how poor I am, how high or how low I may be at times in my life, I will always be grateful to those who have supported me and to those who have supported that which I write.

I am positive that this journey of independent publishing and the books that I write, and the readership that supports them, speaks volumes to all those who said I would never sell a book and that I was wasting my time. If it doesn’t, then the fact that I was able to slip through the cracks and sell a million books independently does, I’m sure. Either way, it doesn’t have to speak to them, to those who are appalled and ashamed, I offer you silence—you’ll get no apologies here. But moreover, I think my books and street lit in and of itself don’t have to speak to everyone, don’t have to appeal to everyone, don’t have to be accepted by everyone. And that’s OK, because I know that my books and street lit speak to us—between you, dear reader, and me, that’s all that matters to me anyway. You are my readers, and the connection that I share with you through my mind and through our reading together is something that no one will ever be able to take from me or from you. That’s the beauty of reading—the journey, the story, the plot, and the world in which it takes you—and that, for me, is what writing is all about. It’s my job to take you somewhere far, far away, to another place and time, with characters who feel, and live, and breathe, and of course remind you of someone you may already know, even if that someone is yourself.

That’s what I do, that’s my job, and although my work focuses on the journey into inner-city life, turmoil, and street drama, I don’t think it should matter much if the story is about inner-city streets or farmland, but
rather the journey you take when reading a story. That’s what writing and reading is about for me, the journey.

I have been told by so many librarians that the kids come into the library looking for my books, that for some I am the first book, the first journey on paper, that they have ever read in their lives. I am the first author to take them outside their own existence and into another world. And after exploring my world and reading my book, all the young readers want to take another journey, if not with me, then with another writer. They say the pen is mightier than the sword, and so, from reading street lit, the children become readers when before they didn’t read anything.

Some people would say that the genre of street lit has no substance, that street lit is merely a fad and that the books and the authors won’t be around after tomorrow. If that is the case, then I ask, Who will tell the stories tomorrow? Who will give voice to all the injustices of Black people so that we are not uncounted for? I truly, humbly, beg to differ with those nonbelievers. I’m still here twelve years later and counting, still writing and publishing street lit.

I don’t think anyone can undo that which I have done as a pioneer in this genre because the voice of the people is now too loud. History has already been set in motion, the groundwork has already been laid, the blueprint has successfully been implemented, and Black and Latino folks are writing and telling their stories and selling them, transforming the lives of readers. I don’t think I need to say much more to substantiate that which I do and that which I have done. It’s too late to sweep street lit under the rug, and it’s much too late to question its worth in the publishing industry.

To date, major publishers have recognized the income that self-published street-lit authors have generated. They are aware of the street hustle taking place with urban books and the millions of dollars we are independently generating. The hustle is good on the one hand and it’s bad on the other, because we are talking about the people writing and self-publishing these street-lit stories making hundreds, thousands, and even millions of dollars. The publishers have also recognized the ongoing sales potential of street lit.

In the beginning, no one was paying attention to me and what started out as an independent publishing movement, my small Harriet Tubman, Underground Railroad way of selling books. Now major publishing houses are offering deals and signing street-lit authors in an attempt to control the millions of dollars that can be potentially earned from publishing street-lit novels. This takeover of street-lit publishing is the way it has
been done for centuries, that is, simply business. And the street-lit business is huge.

Street lit encompasses hip-hop rappers like Snoop Dogg, 50 Cent, and Cash Money Millionaires. I believe that using big celebrity names is a way that the publishing industry tries to control the street-lit genre. The upside is that all those who frowned upon street lit will stop opinionating because they all want a piece of the street-lit pie, and I don’t think anyone can possibly question me regarding street lit’s worth from a financial standpoint. Filmmakers are already seeking street-lit books to be the next cash earners at the box office, and everyone is trying to get in on the action. Even daytime television is looking for stories containing street-lit material. It’s a very exciting time, and it has been an exciting journey for me from the very beginning.

I have learned much from writing and self-publishing street lit. I have learned a lot from you, my readers, and from working with a major publishing house. I know that which I started has made me successful, but more important, that which I started hasn’t made me forget who I am, a working-class girl from Philly and a former wifey who was living very dangerously. I was the wayward runaway teen who wanted to forget how I was raised and the strong family of women and men who raised me. I was that teen girl, but I did not forget.

So, I write for my father, my uncle, and my family who weren’t allowed to go to school because they were made to pick cotton as small children. I write for my mother, born in 1930, during the Great Depression, and the struggles of her life. Her imprint, passed on to me from my ancestors, lives within me. I write for my brothers, who gave their lives to the streets for their families to have a better life and who are now resting behind bars. Their sacrifice has gone unnoticed for far too long.

I also write for mothers in the ‘hood who lost it all when they lost their baby boys to the streets from being gunned down and murdered—tragically violent lives, gone forever. I write for all that I’ve seen, for all that I’ve done, for every place I’ve been, for every face I know, for eyes staring into mine, for hearts broken, for loves lost, for loves found, for birth, for pain, for death, for vain; I write for all that I believe, for all that I don’t, for all I wish for, for all I want to know, for all the places I wish to go. I write for income, but I’ll be poor before I write for those who misunderstand—and I write simply because I can.

In this book, *The Readers’ Advisory Guide to Street Literature*, you, the reader, will learn more about what street lit is from a historical perspective, and you’ll learn that reading is one of the most powerful things you
could ever do for your own education and personal growth. Vanessa Irvin Morris has put together an important text that fully explains what street lit is and how you can enjoy the genre in many ways in the library by checking out the books (and returning them!), attending book clubs to discuss the books, meeting authors (like me) at library events, and talking with librarians and teachers to let them know what and who you want to read. Be a bold reader and tell them what you want. There is no shame in reading street lit; there is only shame in educators not being open to understanding it.

I realize that this book is mainly targeted to teachers and librarians so that you can learn how to best deal with this genre called street lit, or urban fiction, in the libraries and even in the classrooms. Because I write foremost for the readers of street lit, please understand that my voice in this foreword is for the readers you don’t necessarily want to see reading street lit: the teen girl popping her gum while reading a street-lit novel at the Laundromat or hair salon, the young adult male sitting on the stoop in the ‘hood while quietly reading a novel, the working-class woman reading a street-lit novel while on her way to work or home on the city train or bus, or the library patron who comes into your library wanting to know, “Where the Black books at?”

I’m here to say this: give them the book that lets them read. Trust that the power of reading is what is affecting readers the most, regardless of what you, as an educator, might deem appropriate. This readers’ guide is an invaluable resource to help all of us to trust readers’ own wisdom about what stories move them, inspire them, and entertain them. The Readers’ Advisory Guide to Street Literature will educate you on what “the Black books” are in terms of the genre of street lit. I am honored to be able to support this endeavor, because I write “the Black books” to entertain the reader, and in turn, the reader is transformed. It’s all good, and it is what it is. It’s street lit.

—February 2010
INTRODUCTION

Two critical incidents happened to me that led me to write this book. One event occurred during my childhood and the other during my career as an adult and teen librarian.

The first incident occurred by virtue of my father having always been a prolific reader. Growing up as a bi-city (really, bi-’hood) kid in both 1970s Camden, New Jersey, and the northern part of Philadelphia (known as North Philly), I sat with my dad every Sunday as he read the Sunday newspaper. He’d be in his La-Z-Boy chair reading the news and sports sections of the Philadelphia Inquirer, and I’d be on the floor right beneath him reading the comics and playing word games. Every evening during the week, he brought home the Philadelphia Daily News, and I always saw him reading a book of some kind. It was he who introduced me to titles like Manchild of the Promised Land (1965), The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965), and The Honey Badger (1965). My mother was an avid reader of the Bible and The Upper Room pamphlet. My paternal grandmother introduced me to my very first library collection: her three-shelf bookcase in the main hallway of her apartment, where she had books like Robinson Crusoe and Ian Fleming novels. Her library contained a lot of “guy books,” which made sense for her because she had four sons. My grandmother also subscribed to Reader’s Digest and kept the Bible by her bedside. My grandmother was also the first poet I ever met.

When I was about nine years old, my father knowing that I, too, liked to read, gave me a book of his, titled Pimp (1969), by Iceberg Slim. OK. So it wasn’t exactly the kind of book you give to a nine-year-old. But my father knew that I was a smart kid with good grades who liked to read. So he trusted that I was also cognitively mature for my age. Perhaps he was right, perhaps he was not. Nevertheless, I began reading the book and was enthralled, fascinated, and openmouthed at what I was reading. This reading journey lasted about twenty-five pages, because my mother walked by and saw me reading it and promptly confiscated it from my hands, turned on her heels, and marched down the hallway, yelling, “Raj!” (short for Roger, my father’s name).
So, that was event number one. Me—as a reader of street lit, my first exposure to the genre, circa 1974.

Fast-forward to my adulthood, when my love of reading evolved into a wonderful career as a librarian. I was very happy to be able to serve as a librarian in the same Philly neighborhood where I grew up: the Strawberry Mansion section of North Philadelphia.

The second event was my reintroduction to the street-lit genre during the summer of 2000. I was the adult and teen librarian at the Widener Branch Library of the Free Library of Philadelphia, which serves a forty-thousand-resident, working-class community within a one-mile radius. (Widener had a thirty-five-thousand-item collection.)

One summer’s day a teen girl walked into the library, passed my desk, and veered toward the newly designated young adult area. She looked at the shelves; it was apparent she was shelf reading. She then put her hand on her hips, exhaled in exasperation, looked up and down the stack again, and then turned around as if she were looking for someone. I caught her eye, and she walked over to my desk and said:

“Do you have _The Coldest Winter Ever_ by Sister Souljah?”

“No, I haven’t heard of that one, but we do have her book _No Disrespect_."

“Nah, I saw that. She’s got another one now. It’s really good. You should get it. For in here.”

“Thanks, I will. What’s it about?”

“Oooh! It’s about this girl who in the ’hood and she a ghetto princess, but then she lose everything, and it’s like a rags-to-riches kinda story.”

“I’ll look into getting it. We have some Bluford books—you wanna try out one of those?”

“Naw, those are corny.”

“I’m a see if I can get the new Sister Souljah for you. What’s your library card number so I can let you know when it comes in?”

The readers’ advisory interaction was completed in usual fashion.

That was the beginning of my decadelong journey into street lit, as we know it today. I do not remember the teen patron’s name, but I can attest that the same thing that fascinated me those many years ago when I read
a bit of Iceberg Slim was a similar chord to what fascinated this young girl and was calling for her to be a reader of text and story. I could immediately relate to her excitement, her enthusiasm, and her demand.

Thus, I ordered four copies of The Coldest Winter Ever and notified the teen patron, whereupon she came back to the library and checked out a copy. The other copies were off the shelf within two days of arrival. As time moved on, teens were coming in asking for Teri Woods’s True to the Game (1999) and Omar Tyree’s Flyy Girl ([1996] 1999). I ordered multiple copies of those books also. Again, the books swiftly left the shelves, often returning within days only to be checked out again or eventually lost or stolen. From there, requests came in for B-More Careful (2001) by Shannon Holmes and then Let That Be the Reason (2002) by Vickie Stringer. I was getting new teen patrons whom I’d never seen before, informing me—no, educating me—on how to make their neighborhood library collection appealing to them.

A phenomenon was brewing as I saw teens I’d never seen before (aside from my core teen patrons) coming off the streets into the library, on their own, during the summer months, asking for books by name and title, and requesting that I order them. The streets had brought street lit into the public library.

During my time at the Widener Branch Library, my young adult collection grew too restrictive and perhaps inappropriate for the street-lit novels because of two developments that occurred simultaneously. First, the genre’s publication picked up, with authors like T. N. Baker, Relentless Aaron, Nikki Turner, and Chunichi coming to the fore. Second, the Free Library of Philadelphia acquisitions department was automatically selecting and ordering titles and sending them to branch libraries. With that kind of volume of materials coming in, I created one of the first urban fiction cluster collections in the Free Library (after the incredible librarian Bruce Siebers—who really spearheaded street lit in Philadelphia libraries with no apologies), where I combined the old with the new. Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim, the Black pulp-fiction authors of the 1970s, now had some company on the shelf: authors like Teri Woods, Darren Coleman, Nikki Turner, and K’wan Foye. I created original genre labels in PowerPoint that depicted a city landscape with the words “Urban Fiction.” The collection went from its debut on a small rolling book cart to taking up multiple shelves in the fiction stacks.

When I left the Free Library in 2005 to teach library science at Clarion University of Pennsylvania, I subsequently learned that the Widener urban fiction collection was gutted within two weeks of my departure from
unbridled circulation, and instead of replacing titles and continuing to
develop the cluster, the next librarian consequently dismantled the urban
fiction collection. This taught me that perhaps I was one of very few librar-
ians who was advocating for the genre. Given that librarians are taught
to be purveyors of the First Amendment and the freedom to read, this
experience raised a fascination in me to learn what librarians were thinking and doing about street lit. Seemingly, we were not all regarding this
genre with a professional lens reflective of our professional and ethical
values as espoused in our profession’s Code of Ethics, the “Freedom to
Read” statement, the “Libraries: An American Value” statement, and the
Library Bill of Rights.

While at Widener, I worked directly with teen readers of the street-
lit genre to learn why they read the genre and to facilitate heightening
their own understanding of why they read what they read. After I left
the Free Library, I came back to Widener as a volunteer (2006–2008) to
continue working with the same group of teens. I’ve also worked with
public school teachers and colleague public service librarians to gain a
further understanding about educators’ resistance to this genre. I’ve also
researched the circulation patterns of major street-lit titles throughout U.S.
public libraries, across geographic regions.

By and large, street lit, as we currently understand it, is a prolific genre
with a significant readership. Both the genre and its readers will not be
denied their voice. It continues to be avidly published, debated, and most
important, avidly read. There are now book review websites and blogs
focusing on the genre, and scholarly articles are beginning to appear in
journals, exploring various aspects of the literature.

As librarians, it is vital that we listen to what this genre has to say.
As librarians, it behooves us to care about what our fellow patrons read.
What is imperative, as professional librarians, is for us to learn and under-
stand the various characteristics and features of street lit as it demands
its presence in the stacks. This requires us, too, to be readers of the genre
(i.e., to expand how we read novels, memoirs, poetry, picture books, and
graphic novels as street-lit stories), readers of our patrons (i.e., readers’
advisory and outreach), and readers of our libraries (i.e., collection devel-
opment, open and equal access). We must locate ourselves as readers
along with the patrons. Thus, as the title of this book denotes, this readers’
advisory guide to street literature is addressing librarians to help librar-
ians as readers to read the genre. This book is also an overall readers’
guide to street lit, because all of us, patrons and librarians, are readers of
genre, the library, and the social interactions that we participate in, within,
and beyond library walls. This social literacy is what makes us, as professional librarians and educators, readers and patrons of the very libraries in which we serve. Thus, we are not the only experts in the stacks. The patrons have much to teach us, too.

In this vein, this readers’ guide will discuss street lit’s appeal to readers (chapter 1), chronicle a history of street literature to situate it along a historical literary continuum (chapter 2), identify the street as a motif for the genre (chapter 3), explore the diversity within the genre itself (chapter 4), and offer up readers’ advisory and collection development strategies (chapters 5 and 7). The book also details adult–young adult (A/YA) and teen-friendly street literature and articulates the value of the genre for teen readers (chapter 6). Because a large part of my own theoretical framework for my research focuses on literacy practices as forms of inquiry and reflection, I also discuss how educators, authors, and readers symbiotically participate in the reading of this genre (chapter 8) and the various ways we interact with the genre via library programming and outreach initiatives (chapter 9). The text concludes with an amazing email dialogue between myself, a librarian, and the young adult author Zetta Elliott, with her permission to reproduce the conversation. The dialogue offers a no-holds-barred window into the very conversations that many of us have been hesitant to engage. The epilogue presents the pros and cons of street lit and situates the genre (and its readers) as an ethical and theoretical “given” for librarianship.

Last, at the end of the book you’ll find the latest edition of my booklists for public (A/YA) and school (teen-friendly) libraries. The lists reference the titles mentioned throughout the book. I also include a list of salient publishers of street lit, as well as a bibliography of all references cited in this work.

The purpose of this work is to assist the public and/or school librarian, as well as teachers, in gaining an understanding for the genre as professionals and as readers. Street-literature authors and genre readers may find this book useful also. Resources are provided to expand collection and research possibilities.

This is the quest of this humble book. I hope it proves useful to you as a reader, as a lifelong learner, as an educator, as a librarian (which to me is all one and the same). Thanks for listening, and if I could share one thing that I’ve learned in writing this book, it’s this: no book is ever a final draft. I look forward to continued conversations about street literature (feel free to visit my blog, Street Literature, at www.streetliterature.com) and continued learning about librarianship—the best profession in the world.
Today’s renaissance of the street-literature genre appeals to readers for a variety of reasons. One of the main themes of street lit, specifically young adult and adult-oriented novels, is survival: how to survive the streets by circumventing different pitfalls. Readers of the genre, especially teen readers who live in similar settings to those of the stories, say that reading the books teaches them “what not to do,” confirms the fact that “these streets is real,” and validates that “this is how it is out here in the hood” (Morris et al. 2006, 22). Readers from outside of inner-city culture say that they learn things about inner-city living they never realized. Many readers are unashamedly, simplistically clear about why street lit appeals to them: because it does; they enjoy reading it.

Street lit is about interpretation and representation. It is a genre that provides an interpretive lens through which readers witness the daily survival struggles and dramas of city residents living certain lifestyles. These lifestyles are varied, from the pimp and prostitute to the working single mom and stories about the detective and the news anchor. This genre is called many things and is classified haphazardly at times. However, to appropriately situate street lit, with all its diversity in stories, characters, and settings, we must look at the genre from the widened lens of urbanity.

**URBAN, CITY, ’HOOD: LOCATING STREET LIT**

There’s been some debate about what to call this genre. Is it urban fiction? What does it mean to be urban fiction as compared to, say, rural fiction? Is it hip-hop lit? Ghetto lit? What do we call this thing commonly called street lit?
“Urban fiction” denotes stories set in urban settings. When we say “urban,” we are talking about major cities, like New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New Orleans, to name a few. We are talking about major cities where the population density is dense. There are urban cities all over the world—Paris, Rome, London, and the most urban city on the planet, Tokyo. So when we say “urban fiction” we’re talking about a huge range of characters and experiences that span cultural, social, political, geographical, and economic boundaries. Thus, urban fiction can encompass genres such as chick lit, lad lit, urban fantasy, speculative fiction, urban erotica (e.g., Zane), and street lit, because many stories in these genres are situated in established urban settings.

Urban areas often feature enclaves of neighborhoods that ascribe to particular cultural representations. For example, many urban areas have a Chinatown or a Little Italy to denote enclaves where specific cultural groups live and thrive. In kind, neighborhoods can be named with specific designations to denote socioeconomic status, such as saying that an enclave where poverty is prevalent is “the ghetto.” Without going into the historicity of the origin and use of the word *ghetto*, we all understand that in common, current use, the term denotes a low-income, albeit impoverished, city neighborhood. With the advent of hip-hop culture, the term *the 'hood* has appropriated *the ghetto*. Additionally, the term *the 'hood* can denote where you live, regardless of your socioeconomic status.

**WHAT MAKES STREET LIT, STREET LIT**

In thinking about how street literature can be defined, or if it is even definable, one thing is consistent and clear: street literature is location and setting specific. It is a genre in which the stories, be they fiction or nonfiction, are consistently set in urban, inner-city enclaves. Settings may shift as characters travel in the stories, but basically, what makes a street-fiction story a street-fiction story is that it is set in inner-city streets.

Thus, the overall qualifying characteristic of street lit is that it is location specific. Street lit of yesteryear and today, by and large, depicts tales about the daily lives of people living in lower-income city neighborhoods. This characteristic spans historical timelines, as well as various cultural identifications, linguistic associations, and formats. For example, this means that a street-lit story can be from the 1800s (historical timeline) about an Irish immigrant family living in the ghetto (cultural identifications), speaking an Americanized Irish dialect (linguistic associations), and rendered
as a novella (format). Indeed, Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, published in 1893, is just such a tome. Street literature was also published as early as the sixteenth century and into the mid-nineteenth century in the form of broadsides—large, poster-sized, print publications that told the news stories, songs, writings, and announcements of the neighborhood (Shepard 1973). Truth be told, broadsides and street pamphlets were precursors to the newspaper industry as we know it today. The way citizens communicate and navigate daily news has always come from the streets (Shepard 1973).

**CHARACTERISTICS OF STREET LIT**

Aside from being stories set in and depicting the livelihood of lower-income city neighborhoods, the prevailing characteristics of street lit are the following:

- fast-paced stories, often with flashback sequences
- vivid depictions of the inner-city environment, including lack of societal resources, substandard housing, and poverty
- the street as an interactive stage (things happen on the street or because of the street)
- female and male identity formation (via intense relationships, often romantic in nature), with protagonists often being young adults (common age range is nineteen to twenty-five)
- navigation of interpersonal relationships, including surviving abuse, betrayal in friendships, fantastical revenge plots
- commodification of lifestyles (name-brand this, bling-bling that)
- surviving street life and overcoming street lifestyle—the challenge of moving up and away from the streets

These characteristics are not exclusive. There are other characteristics that may come and go within street lit; therefore, street-lit elements cross and blend with other literary genres, such as romance (e.g., Tracy Brown’s *Black*, 2003), mystery (e.g., Solomon Jones’s *The Bridge*, 2003), speculative (e.g., Zetta Elliott’s *A Wish after Midnight*, 2010), and even science fiction (e.g., Octavia Butler’s *Mind of My Mind*, 1977). Some scholars and educators might prefer to point to more gritty themes common in street lit, such as the illegal drug trade and drug use, domestic violence, and possibly stereotypical gender representations of characters as definitive characteristics.
of the genre. However, these themes are not necessarily uniquely characteristic of street lit, as these themes occur in genres throughout Western literary tradition (e.g., romance novels, as researched in Janice Radway’s 1991 *Reading the Romance*; the role of women authors in horror novels as discussed in a *New York Times* article from October 24, 2008, “Shelley’s Daughters”). Such marginalizing themes are not necessarily indicative of, or unique to, street lit. But what is unique and peculiar to street lit is what I have determined as the overall qualifying characteristic of street lit—stories that depict realistic, naturalistic tales about the daily lives of people living in lower-income city neighborhoods. This opens our perception of street lit to include literature and formats that span life stages and cultural experiences. This overall qualifying characteristic of street lit also connects contemporary street literature with the literary tradition of naturalism, in which “characters can be studied through their relationships to their surroundings” (Campbell 2010, para. 1) and in which there exists tension between interpretation of experience and “aesthetic recreation of experience” (Pizer, quoted in Campbell 2010, para. 4).

With the given characteristics in mind, we can see how readers, especially in various city locations are attracted to this genre. This genre tells their stories as interpretations and re-creations of scenes and activities that realistically occur in daily life. Readers enjoy reading about what they know and live. It makes readers feel competent in their reading because they are reading stories that they can relate to and understand. It makes readers feel competent in their own interpretation of their lived life. This kind of reader response is true for the preschooler, the school-age child, the teen, the adult, and the senior; it is true for the teacher, the librarian, the author, and the reader.

**“IT’S LIKE A MOVIE IN MY HEAD”**

Readers of young adult and adult street-lit novels have been recorded as saying, “That’s not me in the story, but I know that girl. I see her walking down the street” (author’s field notes, 2007). Others have said, “It’s like a movie in my head” (D. Marcou, personal communication, 2009). Both statements attest to the ability of the reader to see their own reality reflected in street-lit stories but are also clear that it’s not real life; it is indeed like a movie in one’s head, a fiction. This idea of a movie in the head also speaks to the imagination being ignited during the reading of a street-lit story. This attests to the success of the genre in terms of igniting the reading habit in people who perhaps were not readers before.
Young adult and some adult readers have also shared that before street lit, they didn’t have anything to read that appealed to them, that was authentic or “real.” Teen readers, in particular, have stated with a huge sense of accomplishment that it wasn’t until they read True to the Game or The Coldest Winter Ever that they were able to complete a novel from cover to cover. Thus, street lit holds the power to transform reluctant readers into lifelong readers. One public librarian at the Philadelphia Librarian Book Club in November 2009 reflected on the appeal of street lit: “We create the street. We create the pain, the poverty, the violence. The street is a blank canvas and we humans are the artists who have painted the picture. It is us. The street is us.” Street lit appeals to readers because it offers an opportunity to investigate, validate, and/or make sense of the details of city life.

**STREET LIT’S STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS**

A street-literature novel’s structure is unique for the following elements: language, format, appealing book covers, and double-entendre titles. When it comes to the style of writing, street lit has long been derided for not being well edited or well written. This was true for the earlier days of the renaissance, and it may still hold true for some entrepreneurial works that lack the benefit of an editor or editorial staff. However, by and large, with major publishing houses like Simon and Schuster and St. Martin’s Press embracing street-lit authors and creating imprint presses to feature the genre (e.g., Dafina’s Kensington Books), the editorial integrity of the genre has vastly improved. Also, as independent street-lit publishers, such as Triple Crown Publications, have gained experience with editing and publishing texts, their quality of product has improved as well. In addition, readers, as they become experts of the genre, straightforwardly complain and demand that authors produce clean, tight, well-developed works. You can read virtually any street-lit customer review on Amazon.com, for example, and realize that for readers a sloppily produced book greatly diminishes the credibility and appeal of the author. Readers may forgive the authors for their debut novel or for a dud in the middle of a series, but if subsequent publications are sloppily rendered, readers may express frustration and exhibit keenly what their expectations are for a well-drafted street-lit novel. For example, one reader’s comment from May 2003 on Amazon.com for Wahida Clark’s debut novel, Thugs and the Women Who Love Them (2004), read: “This book was so bad I couldn’t even
finnish [sic] reading it. In the first story the ‘pimp’ character was sooooo unbelievable. It struck me more as a first draft, not a completely edited book.”

Years later, Wahida Clark is now a major author and publisher in the street-lit genre, having spearheaded her own subgenre, known as thug-love fiction, of which she is colloquially referred to as the Queen of Thug-Love Fiction. However, even after penning eight titles, with one appearing on the New York Times Best-Seller List at one point, readers can be ruthlessly critical and demanding. Even while street-lit readers demand that stories “keep it real,” they also passionately demand that authors “get it right.” Case in point, sixteen readers gave Clark’s seventh published title, Thug Lovin’ (2009), a one-star (out of five stars) review. Here is what one of those customer reviewers said on Amazon.com in August 2009:

I have no idea what book all these people who said this book deserved 3, 4, or 5 stars because on its best day it’s not even a 2. I waited for this book even preordered it as soon as I could. To say that I hated this book is an understatement, I feel like I was conned. . . . While reading, I kept wondering what the author’s mind set was when she wrote this book, her thoughts were all over the place, and so were the characters. Events seemed out of place almost like they belonged to another story all together, and the ending made me want to scream. I will not even talk about how Trae turned into a complete asshole or how Tasha and Kyra went from being classy well educated women to, women who allowed there [sic] once lovin husbands to make them hoes, all in the name of revenge. The ending of the book should have been the middle, and the story should have continued from there. I see now why this book was pushed back from (publication) April 09 to August 09. If the next book in this series is as bad as this one Wahida should just hang up her crown.

Social media contributions, such as online customer book reviews, provide valuable feedback and insight into the ongoing appeal and standards within street lit and reader responses. This conveys how valuable reader response is with determining the direction of the genre. As of this writing, Thug Lovin’ has received 231 customer reviews on Amazon.com, with only 18 conferring a one-star review. However, the feedback from such low-graded reviews is an important critique that contributes to the author’s relationship with his or her reader fan base, thus informing authors and publishers of what appeals to readers of the genre. Such reviews confirm the reality that, yes, readers demand quality literature, even from the pantheon of street-lit authors.
Language

Decidedly, contemporary street lit is an African American–focused genre, meaning that most of the mainstream novels today feature African American protagonists and antagonists, as well as elements of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), hip-hop slang, and American regional dialects. Though framed primarily around Standard American English (SAE), linguistically street lit is diverse. In addition to AAVE, elements of Jamaican patois, Haitian Creole, Caribbean Spanish, and West African languages underlie the SAE linguistic foundation, depending on the story.

Street lit is known for its unapologetic use of AAVE, regional dialect, and slang. This does not mean that the books are badly written. It means that the genre is written with a target audience in mind who is literate in this language and can read it. In terms of its literariness, the writings of authors such as Sister Souljah, Shannon Holmes, Tracy Brown, and K’wan Foye come to mind as possessing mainstream literary quality. That is not to say that other authors in the genre do not write literarily. I posit that such a determination ultimately lies in the mind of the reader.

Format

Street lit can also be presented with a blended format. In addition to the usual prose in which novels typically occur, there are also street-lit epistolaries (e.g., Kalisha Buckhanon’s *Upstate*, 2005), stories with poetry interspersed throughout the story (see *True to the Game* by Teri Woods, 1999, and *Black* by Tracy Brown, 2003), and illustrated stories (see *Midnight: A Gangster Love Story* by Sister Souljah, 2008).

Because the prevailing qualifying characteristic of street lit is location specific, set in low-income city neighborhoods (other synonyms are the inner city, the ghetto, and the ‘hood), we can find street-lit stories in various formats, such as poetry, picture books, and graphic novels.

There are picture books that depict inner-city living, such as Ezra Jack Keats’ 1962 classic *The Snowy Day*, in which we are introduced to the first depiction of an African American protagonist in picture books, the illustrious Peter. The question can be asked, Is this street fiction? *The Snowy Day* is a story about Peter, about five years old, walking the streets of Harlem (alone) on a snowy day, where he makes snow angels and even realizes he’s too young to participate in snowball fights. Is this street fiction? From a child’s point of view, would this be a story of a successful day surviving on the streets? What about Keats’s later story, *Goggles!* (1969), when Peter
is a bit older. In this picture book, Peter and his friend Archie have a run-in with a street gang.


There are also graphic novels that depict inner-city living, as well as many established young adult fiction authors who tell stories of the streets, such as Walter Dean Myers (notably his recently published poetry book *Street Love*, 2006, and the novel *Dopesick*, 2009); Sharon Flake (*Bang!*, 2005, and *Who Am I without Him?* (2004), a short-story compilation that includes a heart-wrenching letter from a father in prison to his daughter); Kalisha Buckhanon (*Upstate*, 2005, an epistolary that spans a decade); and Janet McDonald, whose many titles for tweens (school-age readers typically in grades 5–8) include *Twists and Turns* (2003), *Brother Hood* (2004), and *Chill Wind* (2006). Notably, McDonald’s autobiography (for young adult audiences), *Project Girl* (2000), was a graphic detailing of her struggles from transitioning from being a ghetto girl in Brooklyn to a scholarship college girl at Vassar College, where she acquired a heroin addiction.

**Book Covers**

The covers of street-lit novels are often full-colored depictions of young adults in urban settings, dressed in contemporary street wear. The covers may sometimes be sexually suggestive, with certain poses enacted that suggest romance between male and female characters. The covers have been criticized over the years for objectifying female bodily representation and glorifying male attitudes of machismo. Critics complain that with these representations, the book covers underscore stereotypical assumptions about inner-city young adults and adults as oversexualized.

It is apparent that some authors or publishers have moved away from this type of imagery on the book covers. For example, Sister Souljah’s book covers are invariably colorful and attractive to a reader’s eye, but the imagery conveys a sense of mystery about the protagonist: Winter’s eyes are gazing sternly through a haze of blue and fuchsia on the cover of *The Coldest Winter Ever*, and on Souljah’s second novel, *Midnight: A Gangster Love Story* (2008), the main character, Midnight, is depicted as a beautiful, black-skinned teen boy looking askance with a gaze to the future—again
amid a haze of the mysterious purplish hue. Teri Woods opts for bold, primary colors for her book covers, with the book titles boldly displayed to demand attention. Her book covers rarely, if ever, feature people or faces.

Triple Crown Publications, by far the largest independent street-lit publishing house, boasting more than forty authors, provides picturesque book covers that boldly show photogenic African American characters amid urban backdrops standing in groups to denote a multiprotagonist story, or perhaps softer, romantic poses of characters to denote a romantic story. Patrons are known to come into the library and ask for Triple Crown novels by brand name as opposed to title and author. Most Triple Crown novels are branded on the book cover with the name Triple Crown Publications. The colorful, photographic look of the covers appeals to readers of street lit because they can relate to the urban depictions of the clothing, jewelry, and backdrops displayed. If readers do not remember the author or title of a book, they will often be able to convey what book they are referring to through a description of the book cover.

**Titles**

Book titles for street lit are often double entendres of street slang expressions. For example, Shannon Holmes’s *B-More Careful* means literally “be more careful” but also denotes the locally recognized colloquial reference for the city of Baltimore as “B-More.” Thus, the title also means “Baltimore careful” to convey the setting of the story and the inherent dangers of the Baltimore streets that the story depicts. Both meanings can be convoluted into an interwoven understanding to be careful on the streets of Baltimore. This kind of titling is an ingenious use of language to convey a lot of meaning with few words. Readers invariably know and understand the loaded meanings embedded within the titles.

Another example comes from the foremost classic of the contemporary street-lit renaissance: *The Coldest Winter Ever*. We can take the title to mean a cold time, a span of all that the coldest winter indicates: isolation, lack (of warmth, of ease of survival, of sun), lack of happiness and good times, survival by any means necessary. When we learn that the protagonist’s name is also Winter, the title takes on another meaning to project Winter’s character as icy, mean, and raw, in addition to all the characteristics of a literal coldest winter. Colloquially, in the ‘hood, to be “cold” is to be cutthroat, ruthless, and heartless. Indeed, Winter Santiaga exhibits all those qualities in the story.
The double entendre is common in street-lit titles. We could also further examine *Push* (1996) by Sapphire, *Grimey* (2004) by KaShamba Williams, Quentin Carter’s *Hoodwinked* (2005), and Keisha Ervin’s *Hold U Down* (2006) as further examples of this formulaic double-entendre titling of street-lit novels, which has proved a very effective marketing tool to appeal to readers.
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