

The Readers' Advisory Guide to Street Literature

SECOND EDITION

VANESSA IRVIN

Foreword by Kafi D. Kumasi

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

JOYCE SARICKS AND NEAL WYATT, SERIES EDITORS

In a library world in which finding answers to readers' advisory (RA) questions is often considered among our most daunting service challenges, library staff need guides that are supportive, accessible, and immediately useful. The titles in this series are designed to be just that. They help advisors become familiar with fiction genres and nonfiction subjects, especially those they don't personally read. They provide ready-made lists of "need to know" elements such as key authors and read-alikes, as well as tips on how to keep up with trends and important new authors and titles.

Written by librarians with years of RA experience who are also enthusiasts of the genre or subject, the titles in this series of practical guides emphasize an appreciation of the topic, focusing on the elements and features fans enjoy, so advisors unfamiliar with the topics can readily appreciate why they are so popular.

Because this series values the fundamental concepts of RA work and its potential to serve readers, viewers, and listeners in whatever future-space libraries inhabit, the focus of each book is on appeal and how appeal crosses genre, subject, and format, especially to include audio and video as well as graphic novels. Thus, each guide emphasizes the importance of whole collection readers' advisory and explores ways to make suggestions that include novels, nonfiction, and multimedia, as well as how to incorporate whole collection elements into displays and booklists.

Each guide includes sections designed to help librarians in their RA duties, be those daily work or occasional interactions. Topics covered in each volume include

- The appeal of the genre or subject and information on sub-genres and types so that librarians might understand the breadth and scope of the topic and how it relates to other genres and subjects. A brief history is also included to give advisors context and highlight beloved classic titles.

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- Descriptions of key authors and titles with explanations of why they're important: why advisors should be familiar with them and why they should be kept in our collections. Lists of read-alikes accompany these core author and title lists, allowing advisors to move from identifying a key author to helping patrons find new authors to enjoy.
- Information on how to conduct the RA conversation so that advisors can learn the tools and skills needed to develop deeper connections between their collections and their communities of readers, listeners, and viewers.
- A crash course in the genre or subject is designed to get staff up to speed. Turn to this section to get a quick overview of the genre or subject as well as a list of key authors and read-alikes.
- Resources and techniques for keeping up to date and understanding new developments in the genre or subject are also provided. This section will not only aid staff already familiar with the genre or subject, but will also help those not familiar learn how to become so.
- Tips for marketing collections and lists of resources and awards round out the tools staff need to be successful working with their community.

As readers who just happen to be readers' advisors, we hope that the guides in this series lead to larger to-be-read, -watched, and -listened-to piles. Our goal is that the series helps those new to RA feel supported and less at sea, and introduces new ideas or new ways of looking at foundational concepts to advisors who have been at this a while. Most of all, we hope that this series helps advisors feel excited and eager to help patrons find their next great title. So dig in, explore, learn, and enjoy the almost alchemical process of connecting title and reader.

FOREWORD

KAFI D. KUMASI

It's been fifty years since the birth of hip-hop, which seems like both a lifetime and a mere drop in the bucket on humanity's grand time line. Similarly, the meaning of the term "street literature" has evolved in a way that illuminates the essence of hip-hop. Hip-hop is an idea that is grounded in both the now (aka "The New School") and the past (aka "The Old School"). In this second edition of *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Street Literature*, Dr. Vanessa Irvin helps readers discern the Old School origins of street literature from its New School pinnacle, which happens to coincide with the zenith of hip-hop in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Irvin's treatment of the subject matter is fortified by personal anecdotes from her experiences as a public librarian in inner-city Philadelphia, sample book titles, and scholarly references that reflect her library and information science research background.

Irvin's depiction of street literature maps nicely onto the hip-hop vernacular terms of "Old School" and "New School." In a recent podcast episode of *The Grio Daily* on the topic "What Is the Blackest Music?," Michael Harriot breaks down the difference between Old School music and music that is merely enjoyed by elderly people. For example, Harriot cites music by the band Earth, Wind and Fire as an example of Old School music because their music is still enjoyed by young people today despite it being produced four and five decades ago. By contrast, Harriot considers country music as simply "old music" because it is typically consumed by older people, especially in the context of Black American music listeners.

In this book, Irvin describes the kind of street literature that could be placed into an Old School category as those gritty tales of Black Americans living in inner cities during the 1960s and '70s. These Old School works include titles such as Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965) and Donald Goines's *Black Girl Lost* (1973). Evidence that these titles are Old School and not simply

“old” is that librarians still recommend these titles to readers some fifty years after their publication. These titles are enjoyed today in the same spirit as when someone plays a “throwback” record by a pioneering hip-hop group like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, who formed in the South Bronx of New York City in 1978. By contrast, Irvin describes the conservative origins of the term “street literature,” which refers to written works that were pedaled in the streets of Europe during the 1700s. According to this definition, one might classify the Declaration of Independence as a form of street literature, which is ironic given that street literature has evolved into capturing everyday neighborhood dramas rather than austere political documents now attributed to the white establishment in the US.

While it is true, as Irvin writes, that some authors sold their works on the street because publishers rejected them for their gritty content, it is also true that some of the most successful authors in this genre embraced one of hip-hop’s core principles—street entrepreneurialism. These authors took more of a self-determined social justice route to getting their work published and distributed. Vickie M. Stringer is an excellent example of a Black author who turned rejection by mainstream (white) publishing companies into starting her own company, Triple Crown Publications, and published *Let That Be the Reason* in 2001. When asked what made Triple Crown so successful, Stringer stated, “We know our market. What we write is not urban fiction. It’s not street fiction. It’s hip hop. We have addressed an audience that has said to the world, ‘This is the music we want to listen to, this is the way we want to dress’: Now they’re saying: ‘This is what they want to read’” (Stringer quoted in Murray, 2004).

Stringer linked hip-hop, street literature, and the social justice ideology that undergirds them both. She and other authors and publishers of color (e.g., Teri Woods’s Meow Meow Productions and Carl Weber’s Urban Books) pushed back against the all-white world of book publishing by taking control of their stories and the entire publication process, including marketing and distribution. This ethos of street entrepreneurialism crossed over into a

few other hip-hop cultural realms, including music and fashion. For example, rapper Master P famously rejected a million-dollar record deal from Interscope Records executive Jimmy Iovine. He went on to sell millions of records under his own label, No Limit Records, while also building a diverse portfolio of wealth based on the principle of education and self-determination among urban Black communities (Yates, 2022). In fashion, Daymond John founded FUBU (For Us, By Us), a hip-hop apparel line he funded by mortgaging his home for \$100,000, and with that seed money, John rebuilt half of his home as a factory while the other half remained living space (The HistoryMakers, 2003).

Overall, with this second edition, Irvin has contributed a canonical readers' advisory source that stands alone. Just as hip-hop music and fashion have unique periods indexed in the annals of history (e.g., the Golden Age of Hip-Hop 1988–1995), so should these first and second editions be considered self-contained reference sources, needing no further updates. For anyone interested in an old-school readers' advisory sample of the street-lit genre . . . pop open this classic throwback textbook and get ya learn on!

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INTRODUCTION

The Canonical Agency of Street Lit

More than fifty years ago, in August 1973, a Jamaican American young man known as DJ Kool Herc “broke the beat” at a street dance party in the Bronx, New York. Musical artists heard the new sound and, from that spark, told their stories with this new musical form known as hip-hop. Hip-hop culture was a sociocultural outcome of the 1970s. During that decade, freedom was being redefined in American culture as society absorbed the triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement with the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. The 1970s was a time when artistic expression was abundant in Black urban life, with the emergence of reggae from Jamaica and the Black Arts Movement in the United States coalescing to redefine Black American culture. It makes all the sense that the progenitor of hip-hop, DJ Kool Herc, walks with the fused identity of Jamaican and Black American artistic culture.

Hip-hop music was infectious and spread like wildfire throughout Black America. Riding atop the waves of fluidic percussionist broken beats, hip-hop lyrics were an artistic expression of truth-telling about the realities of lived lives in urban American enclaves, predominantly housed by African Diasporic and Latino Americans, which were colloquially called “the hood.” This means that hip-hop told stories with as many themes as lived in people’s lives in low-income city neighborhoods: stories about love, family, and fun, as well as the complicated survival experiences of being Black and Brown in America. Thus, hip-hop became a testifying art form, giving report about the underbelly of hood living, particularly the dark side of folks navigating a violent survival economy while navigating a violent American judicial system whose ethos is based on a sociopolitical system of white supremacy. To tell the raw truth about Black stories, hip-hop emerged out of a coalescence of multiple art forms that came from the streets of urban America: emceeing (spoken word in a rhythmic rap style), DJing (facilitating music to accompany emceeing), break

dancing (fluid movement to the beat), and graffiti (scribing the land/environment). These initial four elements of hip-hop coincide with elements of nature, as emceeing is the air aspect, DJing is the fire aspect (requires friction), break dancing is the water aspect (fluidity of movement), and graffiti is the earth element. And during the height of hip-hop, during the 1990s, street lit emerged as the literature that documented the stories of the coming of age of the hip-hop generation. These stories became a literary genre covering and blending various forms such as fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and biography.

In the first edition of this book, I shared my personal story of how I became a reader and advocated for the literary genre of street lit. When I was a girl during the 1970s reading at my father's feet (see first edition), these books were then known as crime novels or just simply novels, although research had been done by that time which termed these kinds of stories as "city novels" (Ault, 2006). Such research has been classified under library catalog subject headings such as "Comparative literature; Modern literature; American literature; British and Irish literature." Literary criticism abounds with ongoing explorations into the city as a setting and character for urban narratives that have conveyed the American experience from the publication of Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934), which gives a vivid insight into the Jewish American immigrant experience, to Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* (1969), depicting the Italian American early immigrant experience, to (Hakutani and Butler, 1995) to Robert Beck's (i.e., Iceberg Slim's) chronicling of urban street life of post-North Migration African Americans (Gifford, 2015).

I was a public librarian in lower-income Philadelphia neighborhoods from 1998 to 2008. When teens started coming into my library during the late 1990s and early 2000s asking for the same novels, by title and author, that were narratives about Black characters in Black city neighborhoods, I remembered my father's love for the same kinds of books. I remembered that Paul Laurence Dunbar had written a similarly themed novel, *The Sport of the Gods*, published in 1902. I recalled my readings during my African American studies classes at Rutgers University during my undergraduate years that author Richard Wright (1908–1960) had written *Native*

Son (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945) and that those novels had a raw, gritty, urban presentation to them. I then started wondering about the women writers for the Black experience in city settings. My research led me to Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) and brought me back to revisit Ntozake Shange's poetry, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1977), and Lorraine Hansberry's stage play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). Thus, for me, it was not a far stretch to appreciate the genre-blendedness of contemporary Black city novels/urban fiction/street lit such as Teri Woods's *True to the Game* (1994), where diary entries and poems are blended into the narrative and where many other street-lit titles included hip-hop lyrics and messaging from the new media of the day (e.g., text and social media) as part of the narrative.

As I started to research the history of these kinds of raw, gritty novels as a literary form, I learned that the genre's original name, "street literature," stems from British literary tradition dating back to the birth of the novel during the early eighteenth century, as an offshoot of compiled broadside installments from daily newspapers (the original literature talked about what was happening in the streets, sold on the streets). The term or assignment of "street lit" didn't arrive until the early 2000s, coined by library science academics (not me) who studied the reading phenomenon of urban/city novels during that time.

I remember balking at the term "street lit." I wouldn't say I liked it. I did not know where it came from or why the genre needed to be called that. Why the truncation? And why a different, separate, new(ish) name to label a genre where all the characteristics of its tradition were there (stories about the underbelly life experiences of living in the city) except for one thing: the characters in these "new novels" were Black, African Diasporic, Latinx, and LGBTQ . . . all . . . unapologetically cityfied, hip-hop, hood, and street. At the turn of the twentieth century, European immigrants had the streets talking, and their stories were being told and published as classic contributions to the American literary canon. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the descendants of Black migrants from the South, alongside a cornucopia of diverse heritages, had the streets talking in the musical form of hip-hop, translated into the literary form of street literature.

The goal of the first edition of this book was to explain, almost justify, the literary merits of contemporary American street literature. With the current iteration of this genre, librarians, teachers, and other community-based educators seemed to be at a loss as to how to handle the stories of Black and Brown people telling their raw truths about living in impoverished city communities. For some reason, we librarians were very uncomfortable with sassy, saucy, sexy, violent, visceral stories of Black and Brown young adults and adults navigating and surviving poverty and all its requisite indicators (lack of resources, higher daily stress levels, early exposure to vices). At the same time, Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) and Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) were tucked neatly on the "Classics" shelf of public and school libraries, and V. C. Andrews's incestuously violent *Flowers in the Attic* (1979) series was merchandized on young adult (YA) public library shelves as a guilty pleasure for teen readers (I was one of those teens!).

I vividly recall my colleagues' frustration with Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999), Teri Woods's *True to the Game* (1994), and Zane's *Addicted* (1998). I remember one library administrator yelling at me over the phone for purchasing authors Zane, KaShamba Williams, and K'wan Foye (also known simply as K'wan) to "Return those books now!" I recall colleague librarians hiding street-lit books so that teens could not have access to read them. Street lit was not just a literary problem; it was a collections problem and an information services problem with a central question: How do you perform readers' advisory (RA) for "those books"? This guide helps librarians, teachers, and other community-based educators perceive street lit as more than just being "those books" by applying RA services to meet readers' interests and information needs.

This second edition answers the call of the following goals: (1) If you are not a reader of this genre, here are some vetted titles you can read and recommend so that you can perform RA in terms of "reading what the readers read"; (2) if you want to develop your library collection with the addition of street lit, here are some suggestions; and (3) if you want or need to promote street lit in your community, here are some programming ideas.

Reader response theory has become helpful to aid librarians in appreciating that every text has its rhyme and reason, and every

reader has their own aesthetic and interactive relationship with a book as story and experience (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1986; Iser, 1980). Indeed, this transactional reading experience is foundational to conducting RA: the reader has had a meaningful experience with the story and seeks out the librarian whom they trust will be interested in helping them navigate literature to read more, to think more, to appreciate and understand more, all in the quest to realize the purpose of reading in the first place, to become, more.

I began the previous edition by sharing my childhood reading autobiography. That part of my autobiographical experience came from my childhood as an inner-city Black girl growing up in the Philadelphia-Camden, New Jersey, area and from my frontline information service work as a young adult public librarian with the Free Library of Philadelphia in North Philadelphia. The introduction also recounted my first encounter with a teen patron who came to my library in 1999 asking for *The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sister Souljah. That reference interview/RA interaction was a pivotal event in my work with the genre of street literature:

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:

Teen patron: "Do you have *The Coldest Winter Ever* by Sister Souljah?"

Me: "No, I haven't heard of that one, but we have her book *No Disrespect*."

Teen: "Nah, I saw that. She's got another one now. It's really good. You should get it. For in here."

Me: "Thanks, I will. What's it about?"

Teen: "Oooh! It's about this girl who in the 'hood and she a ghetto princess, but then she loses everything, and it's like a rags-to-riches kinda story."

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

Teen: “Naw, those are corny.”

Me: “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?”

And that conversation was the beginning of my decades-long journey into street lit as we know it today. I do not remember the teen patron’s name. Still, I can attest that the same thing that fascinated me many years ago when, as a teen, 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, interest, enthusiasm, and demand.

The popularity of street lit that occurred during the early days of the genre, arriving in public libraries throughout the United States and beyond during the Golden Age of Hip-Hop (Caramanica, 2005), raised questions about access to materials that met readers’ interests and tastes coupled with librarians’ reader response to twenty-first-century American street literature (Brooks and Savage, 2009; Morris et al., 2006). Since then, the genre has simmered and settled into library collections, with readership embracing digital formats (e-books) for reading.

As librarians, we must listen to what street lit has to say. As information professionals, we must learn and understand street lit’s various characteristics and features 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., RA and outreach), and readers of our libraries (i.e., collection development, open and equal access). Thus, it behooves us to care about what patrons read: we must locate ourselves as readers along with the patrons.

As the title of this book denotes, this RA guide to street literature addresses librarians as readers of the genre. This book is also an overall readers’ guide to street lit because all of us, patrons and librarians, are readers of the genre, the library, and the social interactions we participate inside and beyond library

walls. This multimodal reading practice is a social literacy that simultaneously makes us readers and patrons of the libraries we serve. Thus, we are not the only experts in the stacks; patrons also have much to teach us.

This second edition has rearranged chapters to present American street literature in its proper historical, literary, and pragmatic context within professional librarian practice. This readers' guide chronicles a history of street literature to situate it along a historical, literary continuum (chapter 1), outlines the characteristics of street lit as a literary genre (chapter 2), explores the diversity of topics and themes within the genre itself (chapter 3), and offers RA (chapter 4) and collection development strategies (chapter 5). The book also articulates how we interact with the genre via library programming and outreach initiatives (chapter 6). Because a large part of my 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 7). This revised second edition concludes with a new epilogue that chronicles how street lit emerged as the fifth element of hip-hop—it is a literary genre that situates the stories and lives of contemporary American city life as a solidified literary genre with its own canon.

Lastly, at the end of the book, you'll find an annotated booklist of the canon of the street-lit genre. This booklist will serve as a foundational assemblage for librarians, teachers, and community-based educators to confidently consult to build collections appropriate for their communities. This work aims to assist the American public and school librarians and teachers in understanding and appreciating twenty-first-century American street literature. Street-literature authors and readers may also find this book helpful for their research and reading interests. Resources are provided to expand collection and research possibilities.

This second edition is intended to be the final edition of this book because, from my standpoint, we don't need to continue to convince the profession that street literature is a genre, or that it is a literature that needs to be constantly explained, or that its readers' interests need to be justified ongoingly. Contemporary American street literature is a distinctly twenty-first-century

genre that vividly depicts the social and economic concerns of current-day city living and survival in the United States. In this information age of social media, novels are published across various platforms: print, digital (e-books), and graphic novels. In this era of equity, diversity, and inclusion, the genre doesn't need to exist on the margins of the literary brow.

My advocacy for street lit remains solid and determined. In that vein, I am no longer interested or invested in convincing anyone of the merits of this genre or its authors and readers. During these historical times of the twenty-first century, which has become an era of reflective inquiry for every citizen, if you need to be persuaded, convinced, or impressed about the efficacy of any literary genre, that says more about one's internal biases than the morals or humanity of a genre's authors and readers.

That said, no book is ever a final draft; we don't know what the future holds for how reading interests and tastes may shift and evolve. I look forward to continued conversations about contemporary American street literature and continued learning about librarianship—the best profession in the world. Thus, as this second edition “writes back” to the first edition to solidify street lit's canonical nature, may you, the librarian reader, experience this guide with the joy of reading what the reader reads.

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