THE ALAN REVIEW

The Urban Experience in Recent Young Adult Novels

Sandra Hughes-Hassell and Sandy L. Guild

The year 1967 is often recognized as the birth of new realism in young adult literature (Donelson and Nilsen 1997). Two novels were particularly noteworthy that year: S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* and Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender*. Both novels presented the life of urban youth—a population that had been ignored in young adult literature to that point. Hinton and Lipsyte understood that urban youth, just like other adolescents, want to see their world represented in literature. Both realistically depicted the lives of urban teens who instead of living in "idyllic and pleasant suburban homes," grew up in harsh and difficult places (Donelson and Nilsen 1997, 86). Hinton introduced us to the hostility and violence that often exists between social classes, and Lipsyte told us about Alfred Brooks, an African American teen who hoped to use boxing as his ticket out of the slums.

Today there are over 34 million teens living in urban areas and, just like the teens of 1967, these young adults want, and need, to see their lives represented in the literature they read. In a recent YALSA book discussion, a librarian from an urban community posted a message to the listserv asking for books that depict "life in the hood." A 13-year-old African American male who lived in her library's community had requested books about "teens just like him." Teachers too recognize the need for realistic fiction about urban youth. In an article in the *New Progressive*, Rodney D. Smith, an English teacher in California, tells readers about how reading *The House on Mango Street* affected one of his students. Consuella, a gangbanger, paid very little attention in English class, often choosing to skip class altogether. Her behavior began to change, however, when Smith began to read aloud Cisneros's book. Consuella's attendance improved and she pleaded with Smith to extend reading aloud beyond its allotted time (Smith 1995). At the core of Consuella's changed behaviors, just as in the case of the young urban library patron who prompted the listserv question, was the need to 'put herself into the book,'—to read about a childhood and a neighborhood that could have been her own. Consuella describes it this way: "Sometimes I think back when we read this book [*The House on Mango Street*] and picture me being the main character...It is like, here is this Latino girl writing a book that I really like. I never have gotten into a book like I do now. And that is the truth" (Smith 1995, 38).

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Despite the ground-breaking work of Hinton and Lipsyte, only a handful of young adult novels set in urban areas are published each year. A recent study found that between 1990 and 1999, only 20 novels depicting the lives of urban minority youth were published and reviewed positively in standard selection tools (Guild and Hughes-Hassell 2001). As Walter Dean Myers observed in his acceptance speech for the 2000 Michael Printz award, the lives of inner-city adolescents remain all but absent from the literature (Myers 2000).

While the number of books written about urban youth is indeed small, the outstanding young adult novels that have been published demonstrate a genuine sensitivity toward the lives of urban youth living in the United States. Urban teens can see themselves in the pages of these books. They can hear the language of their neighborhoods. They can feel what the characters feel as they interact with their friends and family. And they can see teens like them struggling with the same issues they must cope with and perhaps learn from the decisions that the characters make.

Why do these books speak to urban teens? What characteristics do they share? In this article, we will use 14 novels to illustrate nine characteristics we believe exemplify the best young adult novels written about urban youth. The novels, published between 1990-1999, were chosen because in their characters, their settings, and the problems that drive their plots, they respond honestly and with understanding to the needs of urban teens to read about people "just like" them.

Common Characteristics

Characteristic 1: The racial and ethnic make up of the urban communities varies.

Recent census data show that America's inner cities have a more racially diverse mix of minority population groups living in close proximity to each other than can be observed in either suburban or rural populations. Within the neighborhoods of these inner cities, however, the mix of population groups varies widely. The best young adult literature about urban youth reflects this reality. It shows young adults living in ethnically and racially diverse neighborhoods, as well as in more ethnically homogeneous communities of inner cities across the United States.

In *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*, Melanin describes his Brooklyn neighborhood as "a world of first generation West Indian and Puerto Rican people. A world of akee and pasteles, of salsa and calypso" (Woodson 1995, 9). Slam's Harlem neighborhood, in *Slam!*, is also diverse—an ethnic blend of African Americans, Arabs, and West Indians. In contrast, *Forged by Fire* is set in a mostly African American community in Cincinnati, Ohio. Danny, in *Shadow of the Dragon*, too, lives in a homogeneous neighborhood. He and his family live in an Asian community in Houston. Manny (*Parrot in the Oven*), César (*Crashboomlove*), and Eddie in (*Buried Onions*) live in predominantly Mexican American neighborhoods in Southern California, while *Babylon Boyz* portrays a largely African American neighborhood in East Oakland. For Rania (*The White Horse*), the streets of the city are her home. Homeless since the age of fourteen, Rania sleeps in laudromats, on street corners, in shelters, or when she has pan-handled or stolen enough money, in hotel rooms.

Characteristic 2: A broad range of socioeconomic levels is represented.

The lives of urban youth are not monolithic. Urban adolescents grow up in middle class neighborhoods, ghettos, barrios, and upper class sections of the city. They live in two-parent and single-parent homes. Some live alone or with relatives while others live in foster care or rely on friends for a place to live. Their parents are doctors, lawyers, ministers, and storeowners, as well as persons who are unemployed or living on welfare. The best literature about urban youth portrays the variety of lifestyles found in America's large metropolitan cities.

In *Fast Talk on a Slow Track* Denzel's family lives in a Tudor house in the Addelsleigh Park area of New York City—home to "local politicians and celebrities" (Williams-Garcia 1991, 13). In *If You Come Softly*, Miah's father is a famous movie director and his mother is a recognized writer, both featured on the cover of prominent national magazines. In contrast, Jolly, in *Make Lemonade*, is a 17-year-old unwed single mother living in the ghetto. She grew up in a foster home, dropped out of high school and is having difficulty supporting her two children. Kata, in *Party Girl*, lives with her alcoholic mother and her "gabacho" boyfriends in a poor neighborhood in Southern California. Manny, in *Parrot in the Oven*, lives in an urban project in which most of his neighbors receive welfare. Though Manny's family struggles and would clearly qualify for welfare, his parents refuse to make application out of a sense of pride: "But you know how the Welfare is...A social worker comes over acting like we're criminals. Then the whole neighborhood knows we're getting Welfare...Besides, I have never done anything in my whole life that would make me beg" (Martinez 1996, 24-25).

Characteristic 3: Perceptive authors capture the language of modern urban youth.

The language of urban youth varies, and the best books about urban youth reflect this diversity. Perceptive authors capture the language of modern day American youth living in the city—youth whose speech may include standard English, Black English vernacular, hip-hop, the language of their parents or grandparents (i.e. Spanish, Vietnamese, etc) and/or slang associated with the drug culture. By incorporating the realistic speech patterns of the teens about whom they are writing, the authors create novels that have a ring of authenticity and familiarity that is important to their intended audience.

Babylon Boyz, for example, takes place in East Oakland in a neighborhood the characters describe as "a war zone after dark" (Mowry 1996, 50-51). The characters' speech reflects the harshness of the neighborhood and can be described as Black English vernacular commingled with drug culture slang: "The fat boy smirked. 'Y'all sellin' your soul for a buzz?' Then he saw Dante's scowl. "Okay. Long's you ain't gonna try an' cap me again'" (Mowry 1997, 118). In this example, buzz is slang for "high" and "cap" for shoot. Similarly, in *The White Horse*, Rania's speech and the speech of the other homeless teens is strewn with drug slang and profanity: "You were gonna leave me, you asshole, you junkie" (Grant 1998, 45).

Parrot in the Oven, Crashboomlove and *Buried Onions* are set in the barrio. In Manny's, César's, and Eddie's neighborhoods, Spanish and English coexist: "'Que curiositos se miraban,' she said. 'How curious they looked'" (Martinez 1996, 83.). The dialogue in *Shadow of the Dragon* reflects the Vietnamese character of Danny's neighborhood and his home: "You must be very good and courteous so the Kitchen God, Ong Tao, will give a good report to the Jade Emperor in Heaven" (Garden 1993, 116). In *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*, Melanin's mother attends law school and standard English is spoken in their home. On the streets of his neighborhood, however, Melanin experiences a rich mixture of Black English, West Indian, Spanish, and Southern slang, so much, in fact, that Melanin refers to himself as "bilingual" (Woodson 1995, 9).

Characteristic 4: The best young adult books about urban adolescents convey a strong sense of community.

To use Rudine Sims Bishop's term, there is a "we-ness" evident in the best young adult novels about urban teens (Sims Bishop 1991, 38). Sometimes the community is the neighborhood, sometimes it is a group of friends, and at other times, it is the broader ethnic or racial group—African American, Asian American, or Latino American.

In *Make Lemonade* the community is the neighborhood. LaVaughn learns from her mother that "you can't trust the city to keep the bad elements out"; instead you have to rely on your neighbors. LaVaughn's mother, captain of the Tenant Council, works to keep the neighborhood safe. She and the other members of the community write letters to the mayor, attend city council meetings, and patrol the neighborhood: "I get off the bus & I walk the half-block and the Watchdog lady patrolling the street nods her head at me...The Watchdog lady today is a tough one, she teaches the self defense class for girls only" (Wolff 1993, 15).

In *Babylon Boyz* the community is a group of friends who form an alternative family of sorts. Dante, Pook, and Wyatt have been friends since childhood: "I knowed you bruthas all my life! That make us homeys" (Mowry 1997, 38). They take care of each other physically, emotionally, and spiritually. They also take in other teens, like Jinx who is addicted to crack and Radgi who is homeless, providing them with a safe place to sleep, food, and friendship.

For Gayle, in *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, the commu-

nity is the broader African American ethnic community. When Gayle is sent to live with her uncle and his family in Georgia, she initially resists her family's preoccupation with family history. It is only after she spends time caring for her frail grandmother, Miss Great, that she begins to understand the history of her family, from Africa through slavery to freedom, always holding onto their faith. When Miss Great makes her the next keeper of the family's oral history, the Telling, Gayle finally understands her responsibility to honor the struggles of those ancestors and the power of their faith.

Characteristic 5: The dangers of inner-city life are realistically depicted.

Authors of the best literature about urban youth do not shy away from the dangers many urban adolescents face, specifically violence, drug addiction, drug dealing, and prejudice. Instead, they incorporate these harsh details into their stories as a way of authenticating the experiences of numerous inner-city youth.

Violence can touch the lives of urban adolescents in a number of ways. Some urban adolescents experience the horrors of child abuse and domestic violence. In *Forged by Fire*, Gerald becomes the protector of Angel, his stepsister, when his stepfather beats, then sexually abuses her. Gerald must use his wits to both successfully intervene and to convince Angel that he can help her. In *Run for Your Life*, Kisha's father, tormented by his inability to find a job after the gas station at which he worked closed down, shoots his wife in the leg, the conclusion of a bitter argument about his unemployment and his wife's assumption of the provider role in the family. Kisha, unable to face the pain of what has happened, leaves home to live with one of her teachers.

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Other urban adolescents experience the consequences of gang warfare. Several novels provide a vivid look at gangs. *Party Girl*, set in Southern California, begins with the funeral of Ana, a fourteen-year old girl, killed by an enemy gang member. Kata, Ana's best friend, describes Ana's death this way:

> The back window rolled down, and a sawed-off shotgun pointed at us from a backseat. The shadowy face over the gun yelled an enemy gang name in a low, growling voice...I sprang from behind the Dodge as angry white fire split the night. Ana and I rolled to the ground with gunfire spraying over us, hitting trees, chipping the cement curb, and shattering car windows...Ana's blood covered my blouse. Tiny rivulets streamed down my arms and legs (Ewing 1998, 17-19).

Eddie and Danny, in *Buried Onions* and *Shadow of the Dragon*, respectively, also experience firsthand the consequences of gang violence. Both lose their cousins to gang warfare: Eddie's cousin Jesús, is stabbed; Danny's cousin Sang Le is brutally beaten by members of a white supremacist gang.

In *If You Come Softly*, Jacqueline Woodson reminds readers that urban victims of violence are often innocent casualties in the wrong place at the wrong time. Miah, a well-to-do African American adolescent, meets with the realities of gun violence, despite the privileged life he leads. Though his father has warned him about the need to comply immediately with police commands, Miah, innocent and lost in his thoughts, fails to respond to a police command. The police fire at him and kill him, a mortal consequence of his failure to stay alert in a threatening, though familiar, environment.

Another threat to the safety of urban teens is the prevalence of drug use and drug dealing. In some urban neighborhoods, drug-dealing activities circumscribe the daily lives of teens, forcing them to plan their movements in the neighborhood to avoid street corners designated for dealing, and to make an uneasy peace with those who control the trade. In *Run for Your Life,* Natonia lives too close to Filbert Street, the main drug dealing thoroughfare, to be able to avoid it. In this scene, she instructs a friend on the protocol of walking down Filbert, after having just observed a drug deal:

> 'Don't point,' Natonia whispered nervously. 'Don't ever point.' 'Forgot,' I said. 'You can't afford to forget. They'd just as soon kill you as look at you,' Natonia warned. 'The only people who point at them are pointing them out to someone who has no business knowing who they are and what they're doing.' (Levy 1996, 14)

The best young adult novels about urban youth also provide a strong and clear model of decision-making about drug use without being heavy-handed. In *Slam!*, for example, Slam refuses to believe that his best friend is dealing crack: "Anyway, crack was the wrong road and anybody that lived in the hood knew where that was at, you don't have to teach fish to deal with water." (Myers 1996, 74). In *Babylon Boyz*, the boys refer to Air Torch, the local dealer, as a "reptile" (Mowry 1996, 16) and discuss dealing in terms of how it affects the neighborhood—"what sista or brutha you wanna burn" (78). Darren, the track coach in *Run for Your Life*, requires the girls stay clean of drugs, not get pregnant, and do well in school in order to participate on the team. In *The White Horse*, the imagery of cocaine as "a pet" a "white horse ballooned to carousel-size with staring eyes and a frozen mane," combined with the death of Rania's boyfriend and the abuse Raina suffers at the hands of her addict mother, send a clear message: drug use is a dead end street (Grant 1998, 216).

Prejudice is a subtle danger, but nonetheless a real danger, that threatens the well being of many urban adolescents. The best books show adolescents struggling with prejudice, especially stereotyping and racism. As Slam explains, "[Stereotyping] is what happened to brothers in the hood. People check us out and ran down who we was without even seriously checking us out" (Myers 1996, 134). In *Shadow of a*

Dragon, a local storeowner will not give Danny's cousin, Sang Le, a job because someone told him Sang Le was a Vietcong. In *If You Come Softly*, when Miah transfers to an exclusive private school in Manhattan, the other students think he is on scholarship and administrators place him in remedial classes, though his school record indicates no need for remediation. César, in *Crashboomlove*, becomes more and more marginalized because of the reactions his classmates have to his language and cultural differences.

The best books also work to counteract stereotypes of urban teens by creating characters from various economic and social backgrounds who in the details of their lives challenge social expectations borne of stereotype: teens like LaVaughn, in *Make Lemonade*, who are successful in school and plan to attend college, teens like Slam, in *Slam!*, who understand and choose to avoid the dangers of drug use, teens like Kata in *Party Girl* who leave gang life behind, and teens like Gerald in *Forged by Fire* who sacrifice their own safety to care for their families.

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Characteristic 6: One theme shared across books written about urban youth is a sense of survival, both physical and psychological.

Although the best young adult novels about urban teens do not always end "happily," they do provide urban teens with a sense of survival, both physical and psychological. In *Forged by Fire*, Gerald and Angel survive a number of ordeals by relying on their constant love and caring for one another. In *Make Lemonade*, Jolly, with LaVaughn's encouragement, goes back to school where she learns skills that change her life and the lives of her children. Even in *Buried Onions*, which seems at times to be an overwhelmingly bleak portrayal of the consequences of urban poverty and violence, Eddie decides to join the Navy at the end of the novel, suggesting that perhaps Eddie will finally be able to leave his bad-luck and sense of despair behind in Fresno.

The unmistakable message in all of these books is that creating a future depends on the ability to first see that choices do exist in life, and then to make the tough ones. Dante, in *Babylon Boyz*, says it best: "Life won't be easy. Maybe it never would. But there were choices, and it was better when you had friends to help you make the right ones. There was a way out of Babylon, but you had to have perspectives to find it" (Mowry 1997, 188).

Characteristic 7: Young adult novels about urban youth deal with issues of importance to all teens.

One of the key characteristics of the best young adult novels about urban youth is their appeal to all teens, not just urban teens. While the novels are set in inner cities, the issues the teens struggle with are familiar to all teens: coming of age, identity development, the need to belong, friendship, sexual identity and curiosity, relationships with parents and other family members, death, drugs and alcohol, fear of failure, school, and teenage pregnancy, just to name a few. As Melanin says: "The world turns upside-down when you are thirteen-going-on fourteen. I want to ask someone right now—when will it right itself again" (Johnson 1995, 6). The best books address that "upside-down" feeling teens occasionally experience during adolescence.

Parrot in the Oven, *Slam!*, *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*, and *Shadow of the Dragon* are coming of age stories. *Like Sisters on the Homefront* and *Make Lemonade* both deal with teenage parenting. The themes of independence, value of education, and love of family are at their core. *Fast Talk on a Slow Track* deals with fear of failure and fear of change. *Forged by Fire* and *Run for Your Life* explore the horrors of domestic violence and its impact on families. *The White Horse* looks at teenage homelessness and drug addiction. *Crashboomlove* and *Buried Onions* focus on isolation and the impact it can have on a teenager's self-esteem. *Babylon Boyz* and *If You Come Slowly* are ultimately stories about family, friendship, and love. And *Party Girl* is about loss, betrayal, and survival.

Characteristic 8: Celebration of family is an important feature of young adult literature about urban youth.

Although identification shifts from parents to the peer group during adolescence, family relationships are still important to most teens (Elkind 1998). The best books for urban young adults portray teens struggling to achieve independence from adults, but at the same time, remaining cognizant of the significance of family in their lives.

In *Shadow of the Dragon*, for example, though Danny yearns to escape his responsibilities as Anh-hai, the eldest son, when his girlfriend's skinhead brother kills his cousin, Danny reports him to the police:

> I did remember something, sir. I remembered that the blood of a dragon flows through my veins. Just as it flowed through my cousin's veins. An honorable, brave dragon that will do anything for his family, no matter what the cost. Yes, I did remember something after all, officer. I remembered who I am. (Garland 1993, 303)

Manny, in *Parrot in the Oven*, joins the Callaway Projects gang in order to fit in with his peers. When one gang member steals an elderly woman's purse, however, Manny discovers that he doesn't belong in that world: "In that instant of trying to call out to Eddie, everything changed. It was like I'd finally seen my own face and recognized myself; recognized who I really should be" (Martinez 1996, 210). In that moment, Manny realizes that his place is at home with "the squiggly TV, the lumpy cherub angels on the frame of the painting, the glass top coffee table" and his sisters sleeping on the couch (Martinez 1996, 215).

In *The White Horse,* Rania, a homeless child and new mother struggles valiantly to 'create' a family for herself and her new daughter, finally allowing herself to trust a teacher who adopts both her and her daughter. This new family structure lets an adult care for her as a daughter, for the first time in her life.

Even in *Babylon Boyz* where the primary focus is on the alternative family the boys have created, Dante's father and Wyatt's mother provide stability and serve as positive role models for the boys and their friends. Dante expresses love

and admiration for his father who works on a towboat. The boys think "Wyatt's mom cool" (187). When Radgi gives birth, it is Wyatt's mother and Dante's dad who they depend on to "figure out what to do" (187).

Characteristic 9: Much of the literature about urban young adults incorporates some aspect of cultural history or heritage and conveys a feeling of ethnic pride and identity.

Much of the literature about urban young adults features African American, Asian American, and Latino American teens. Cultural heritage and ethnic pride is one theme shared across the best books. In *Shadow of the Dragon*, Garland weaves authentic details about Vietnamese lore and customs into the story. *In Like Sisters on the Homefront*, there is a strong sense of racial pride in the heritage and oral traditions of Gayle's Georgia relatives. Manny's grandmother and father too tell stories—stories about life in Mexico in *Parrot in the Oven*.

Ethnic pride and identity are often revealed in subtle ways. In *Run for Your Life*, for example, Kisha demonstrates an appreciation for the rich hues of skin color as she evaluates the new track coach's appearance: "I like the way he looks. Nice hair, clipped real short, big full lips. And real chocolate skin, like my dad's" (Levy 1996, p. 21). Miah, in *If You Come Softly*, describes feeling "warm inside his skin, protected," (Woodson 1998, 5) and in *Buried Onions* and *Parrot in the Oven* there are references to traditional Mexican foods.

Conclusion

It is clear that young adult literature is able to provide the urban adolescent reader with protagonists "just like him." But the best of these books offer much more. Books like those we have considered in this article provide the teen reader with vicarious experiences in the responsibilities of growing independence, sympathetic recognition of the challenges of urban experience, reaffirmation of the significance of cultural, ethnic and individual differences, and a realistic sense of optimism about the future.

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