

The Problem of Poverty in three Young Adult Novels: *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, *Buried Onions*, and *Make Lemonade*

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Millions of adolescents living in urban America must worry more about safely navigating the streets of their neighborhoods than in pursuing the American Dream. Their available income does not meet needs as basic as health care, nutrition, sleep, personal space, and quality education. Thus, the problems associated with growing up in poverty are a relevant topic for young adult fiction. Three writers, Alice Childress, Gary Soto, and Virginia Euwer Wolff have addressed this subject, each revealing underlying beliefs about the conditions of poverty and the strategies young people can employ to overcome it. Childress and Soto both suggest that inner city poverty is the result of institutional racism. To succeed in the White mainstream, individuals must reject the values of their ethnic culture. Wolff, on the other hand, suggests that poverty crosses all racial lines and to escape poverty one must choose to take advantage of whatever resources are available, however limited they may be.

Today, poverty is associated in the American mind with urban slums. The terms *inner city* and *inner city youth* are code words for ethnic enclaves in the crowded streets of large cities. In the popular mind, the words *impoverished youth* call up images of Black or Hispanic teenagers involved in drugs, street gangs, prostitution, and murder. This widespread conception springs not only from racial stereotyping propagated by the media, but also from the civil rights activism of the sixties. To highlight the disastrous effects of systematic racial oppression, ethnic American writers of young adult literature have portrayed their characters struggling to break free of poverty against overwhelming odds. Entrenched racism made it nearly impossible for young protagonists of color to rise above circumstances designed to keep them in place.

A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich

Alice Childress' novel, *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich* (1973), reissued in February, 2000, is valued as a classic; many African American students, teachers, and critics read it as one of relatively few books that reflect experiences from an African American point of view. It depicts the overwhelming forces of racism which keep the characters from escaping ghetto life. Benjie, the thirteen-year-old protagonist

living in Harlem says, it is "hard to be a chile because my block is a tough block and my school is a tough school" (9). Dangers abound in the form of sexual predators, muggers, street bums, gang members, and dope pushers. A child is forced to stay alert and grow up fast because, like rats forced into an overcrowded cage, people living with such diminished prospects turn and feed on one another. Benjie knows that he must either be tough or be a victim. However, he relies on heroin to get him through the dreary reality of his days.

Childress suggests, through the voices of her other characters, that rising above the circumstances of the ghetto neighborhood is an option available only to those who are superhumanly dedicated to that goal. Further, like Benjie's best friend Jimmy, they must turn their backs on their culture and community to succeed in the White world. More than lack of money keeps average people like Benjie and his family in place. These individuals are enmeshed in the coils of systematic racism. Butler, Benjie's stepfather, resents social workers and school officials who blame Benjie's addiction on a troubled home life. Butler asserts that Benjie's problems go deeper than being "understood," or "misunderstood" by the family. He says, "Damn, *nobody* ever understood me! . . . I damn, for sure, don't understand bein treated like a dog cause I got a dark complexion" (17). As Butler sees it, poor Black men have three choices in life: criminal behavior, living off a woman, or working at a menial job. Butler chooses to work and doesn't expect much more than peace and quiet and a home where he can "close the door and shut the people-eaters outta [his] life" (20). Nigeria Greene, Benjie's teacher, an educated Black man, also believes that the odds are stacked against Benjie because of his race. He asserts that any Black man who succeeds in the White world must deny his own reality and give back to people in authority "all the silly answers required" because Black children "are shut off, shut out and shut up, forced to study the history of their white conquerors, this peculiar place of white facts, white questions, white answers, and white final exams" (44-45). Even Walter, the local drug pusher, insists he is only a cog in the vast machinery of capitalistic racism. He says, "If I quit pushin tomorrow, you think any junkie is gonna do without this poison cause I

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didn't show? . . . From city to city, town to town, from block to block and house to house, there is someone who will get you anything you want, if you got money" (62-63).

Childress' resolution to the problem of poverty is for members of "the [Black] nation" to work together to fight racism and overcome the institutional barriers which keep Black people poor. In pushing this agenda, she celebrates Black endurance, Black heroism, Black culture, and Black community. "It's nation time" is the war cry of the enlightened characters in the novel.

Buried Onions

Gary Soto's more recent novel, *Buried Onions* (1997), takes a similar but more pessimistic approach to the problem of poverty than Childress does. Soto's subject is the poor Mexican American community in Fresno, California. He suggests that both racism and the macho Mexican culture transposed to the slums of a big city keep the underclass in place. Eddie, the protagonist, is another average young man who finds it impossible to break out of the ghetto. He thinks of the forces aligned against him as a giant onion buried under the streets of the city. This onion releases vapors, which hang in the air over the black asphalt of the city neighborhoods. Eddie says, "The onion made us cry. Tears leapt from our eyelashes and stained our faces. Babies in strollers pinched up their faces and wailed for no reason. Perhaps as practice for the coming years" (2). The onion is a metaphor for racism, lack of opportunity, and the violent street culture, which combine to keep young men like Eddie in a perpetual cycle of despair. Eddie, like Butler Craig, doesn't want much from life, a steady job, a family, and a television to watch in the evening. However, he is prevented on every hand from achieving these modest goals. Also like Butler, Eddie's life choices are limited to criminal activity, living off a woman, in this case, his mother, or working hard at a menial job.

All of Eddie's choices are either dangerous or lead to another kind of dead end. Eddie cannot simply walk down a city street. His head swivels, continuously on the look out for the enemies who could take his life at any moment and "spill [it] like soda on the black asphalt, spill [it] before you could touch your wound" (6). Eddie knows these dangers from personal experience. His father and uncles are dead. His best friend from high school was killed in an industrial accident. His cousin Jesus was knifed at a public urinal for commenting that the fellow next to him wore yellow shoes. Eddie's aunt and Angel, Jesus' best friend, urge Eddie to kill the killer. Eddie is unwilling, mostly because he strongly suspects that Angel himself killed his cousin. In Fresno, friends can change into deadly enemies in an instant. Eddie notes that the mortuary students at the local community college are most likely to find steady work because bloodshed and early death are part of the air he breathes, in the onion vapors that rise from the asphalt.

Eddie might go to school or work hard to improve his lot in life. At the local community college, he could study air conditioning, but a future in air conditioning in inner city Fresno where the streets burn with unrelenting summer heat, and the paint blisters on the houses, is unpromising. Both his lack of education and his brown skin keep him from getting a steady or meaningful job outside the ghetto. Even those who do find steady jobs are subject, like Juan, to having their heads "ironed in those huge industrial rollers," or to being stabbed by roving bands of bored and nihilistic teenage boys.

Eddie works long hours just to live from day to day. He thinks, "If hard work is the road to salvation, heaven must be packed with a lot of people from Fresno" (18). Eddie stencils addresses on the curbs in front of houses in a part of Fresno that can afford such small luxuries. This labor allows him to stock his cupboards with Ramen, Fritos, Jello and boxes of Wheaties. He likens life in the ghetto to babies in strollers, "going back and forth, back and forth, getting nowhere" (2). Even riding his bike around White neighborhoods looking for customers exposes Eddie to sudden accusations and arrest based on racial profiling.

Eddie's friends suggest another option. He could join the armed services, which offers him both education and opportunity. All he has to do is sign away his life. Eventually, Eddie is persuaded to join the Navy. As he boards the bus for boot camp, he sees that "Larry the stoner" is also one of the recruits. He is not heartened when Larry yells, "Eddie! We're in together." Eddie thinks to himself, "Look at the company I keep. . . . It's either homies or stoners" (143). In the final images of the novel, Soto indicates that the Navy will not solve Eddie's problems. He will carry them with him wherever he goes. The bus to boot camp breaks down. Eddie goes for a walk under the sweltering sun and finds himself in an onion field. "I was overwhelmed with sorrow. I realized I had trudged over onions, acres of buried onions." He drops to his knees in tears, and a man raises him up and hands him two more onions, "one for each hand. And whether it was from the sun or the whipping wind, my eyes filled and then closed on the last of childhood tears" (146). No matter where he goes, Eddie will not escape the buried onion, "that great bulb of sorrow," all of those forces of racism that keep him in the underclass. Soto offers no overt solution to Eddie's dilemma, just the suggestion that racism is a debilitating and constant feature of Mexican-American life which closes off most opportunities for those already forced to live in poverty.

In contrast to the views of Childress and Soto, the sociologist William Julius Wilson, in *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* (1978), asserts that most poverty is not caused by racial discrimination. He maintains that structural changes in American life have left people who have no other options marooned in the inner city. He cites the change in the American economy from manufacturing jobs to those providing services. The new jobs require a higher level of education and skill. Corporations grew larger, and seniority became entrenched. Thus, the best-paying jobs are the last to become available while the most menial are the first to be eliminated. Freeways, improved communications, the rise of the trucking industry, high urban taxes, and escalating urban crime rates combined to move business away from the city to the suburbs (93-108). Meanwhile, a population surge among young black people and a rising tide of immigration has filled the inner cities with the uneducated, the impoverished, and the hopeless (108-172). Wilson believes that systematic racism may have initially created urban ghettos, but now location, opportunity for work, and education play a larger role. Instead of thinking of poverty as a racial problem, he urges Americans to address it as a class, one to which all ethnicities might be subject.

Farai Chideya, in *Don't Believe the Hype: Fighting Cultural Misinformation about African-Americans* (1995), also argues against the ethnic identification of poverty. She counterbalances prevailing negative stereotypes by looking at statis-

tics about poverty from a different perspective. For example, she observes that while Blacks are *more likely* to be poor than Whites, a growing number of Whites are also poor. She notes, "Overall, 30 percent of black families and 9 percent of white families are poor; the figures for individuals are 33 percent for blacks, 11 percent for white" (18). She points out, "The reality is that in terms of sheer numbers, most poor children and poor Americans in general are white" (24). She explodes another myth by showing that 54 percent of all Blacks live in the South, not in large northern industrial inner cities. Additionally, while 56 percent of Blacks live in central cities, 26 percent of Whites also live in the central cities of this country (16).

Further, poverty is not a problem that is going away as other Americans enjoy increased prosperity. Economist Bruce W. Kimzey declares that "income distribution in the U.S. over the past 30 years has become decidedly more unequal The share of total income going to the poorest 20 percent of the population has fallen from a high of 5.5 percent in 1967 to 4.1 percent in 1994, while the share going to the wealthiest 20 percent has risen from 40.4 percent to 47 percent over the same period" ("Is There Enough?" 5). He attributes this widening gap to a "drop in relative wages for poor and unskilled workers compared to those with advanced skills and technical training, entrepreneurs, and executives." In the last 30 years, the 20 percent of people at the bottom of the income scale have seen their "average income fall by three percent" (5). These figures signal that an impoverished, angry, and despairing underclass is growing, and the government and people of this country need to view poverty as an alarming and urgent economic problem for all groups.

Make Lemonade

While the government and the American people figure out how to deal with the problem of poverty, individuals still caught in its coils can only try to escape it. Virginia Euwer Wolff, in *Make Lemonade* (1993), addresses this issue by removing all racial and geographic markers from her novel and focusing on the individual choices of her characters and on the power of friendship. Her fourteen-year-old protagonist, LaVaughn, is determined to leave her neighborhood and poverty behind by excelling in school and going on to college. With this end in mind, she works and saves all of her money. She sees college as the way out of despair (65). LaVaughn is not alone in her struggle. Although her father is dead, killed accidentally in a gang shooting, her mother is equally determined to see LaVaughn succeed. She is a formidable ally because, as LaVaughn says, "My Mom is big, a big Mom." And she got even larger after LaVaughn's father died. "She got huge. Like she multiplied. . . . I don't mean fat It's a bigness about her she got some way, not a bigness she could diet off" (13, 81). And so, even though no one in their building has ever gone to college, both LaVaughn and her mother focus on this goal. LaVaughn says, "The word COLLEGE is in my house, and you have to walk around it in the rooms like furniture" (9). LaVaughn also receives frequent encouragement and advice from teachers at school.

Problems arise for LaVaughn when she meets someone who struggles against even greater odds, someone more like Benjie or Eddie of the earlier novels. Seventeen-year-old Jolly is a single mother of two young children. Apparently abused as a child, she lived in a box under the freeway. The two men who fathered her children abandoned her. She has been beaten for trying to escape gang life, and is sexually harassed and then fired from her low-paying job. LaVaughn baby sits for Jolly and finds that she's asked to give them a lot more than her time. LaVaughn's mother blames Jolly's problems on Jolly's poor decisions: "You need to take hold, girl," she says to Jolly again and again (35). LaVaughn's mother is worried that Jolly's problems will suck LaVaughn into the cycle of continuing poverty, that in helping her, LaVaughn will not be able to focus in school. LaVaughn's sympathy for Jolly has her babysitting for free instead of earning the money she must have for college. Sometimes her mother's attitude about Jolly irritates LaVaughn, because she knows how Jolly struggles with the daily reality of "baby puke on my sweater & shoes,

and they tell me they'll cut off the electricity and my kids would have to take a bath in cold water. And the rent ain't paid like usual" (20). But, LaVaughn knows that her mother is right: friendship with Jolly is a risk, and Jolly must become more self-reliant. Jolly must make better personal choices in order to succeed, and LaVaughn, too, must decide how much time and energy she can give Jolly and

her children before giving away her own hopes and dreams. The answer lies in the responsible choices that both girls make together. Their friendship helps each of them.

Rather than suggesting that the odds are stacked so overwhelmingly against Jolly that she cannot succeed, Wolff suggests that in spite of her many burdens, Jolly, with a little help from LaVaughn and a little help from the government, social workers, and teachers, can take responsibility for her own actions and improve her life and the quality of her children's lives. In an interesting contrast to Soto's buried onion, the metaphor for this novel is the lemon seeds LaVaughn keeps bringing to Jolly's house and planting with the promise to Jolly's son that the seeds will take root and a tree will grow. Again and again the seeds fail to thrive. Jolly accuses LaVaughn of bringing phony lemon seeds that will never grow and will end up breaking Jeremy's heart (132). LaVaughn keeps trying, however, in concert with Jolly's efforts to go back to school. In a last ditch attempt to make the seeds blossom, she brings potting soil and plants new seeds once again. At the end of the novel, as Jolly begins to take hold in school and in managing her burdens more successfully, she tells LaVaughn that the lemon seeds have finally sprouted, "We got a little green thing, a little lemon thing comin' up" (199). As Jolly has earlier told LaVaughn, you can take lemons and make lemonade—even if you have been cheated out of the oranges you deserve.

While the problem of poverty persists and eliminating it from American life becomes an ever knottier issue, Wolff's novel suggests a rejection of the ethnic stereotyping of poverty in favor of seeing it for the human problem it is. As long as resources for those in poverty are limited, people must make responsible personal choices, set personal goals, en-

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gage in friendships, and reach out hands to help each other live better, more productive lives. Race may well be a factor in poverty, but so are lack of education, location, crime, and an attitude of despair. Poverty can be an equal opportunity destroyer of lives but hope, effort, and friendship can cross all racial boundaries.

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