

“What a Man Do”:

Coe Booth and the Genesis of *Tyrell*

Tyrell Green is facing a man’s share of problems. His father is in prison, his mother is on probation for welfare fraud, and the New York Emergency Assistance Unit can’t find his family a decent place to live. Until more suitable housing is available, they have been deposited, along with other families, at the Bennett Motel, a dirty, roach and rat-infested, garbage littered, bloodstained dump. Over the course of one week, Tyrell needs to earn more money than a regular job can pay, secure his family a safer place to live, put food on the table, find a new high school and enroll, keep his seven-year-old brother, Troy, alive and safe and out of the custody of New York’s Administration for Children’s Services, steer clear of drug war gun battles, figure out who he can trust and who he can’t, and try to make sense of his love life. All at age fifteen.

Tyrell (Scholastic, 2006) is the creation of BRIO Award winning author, Coe Booth, whose honest and accurate portrayal of families caught in “the system,” as Tyrell puts it, comes from years of experience as a social worker in the New York City Emergency Children’s Service. Ironically, as Coe began her MFA in creative writing at New York’s revered The New School, she had not intended to write about the experiences of the typical teenage boys she encountered as a social worker. She had other stories in mind.



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Tyrell Green, her book’s protagonist, took her by surprise. As the words flowed out onto the page, Coe had no idea where this teenaged boy’s voice was coming from or where it would take her. She hadn’t outlined the plot, didn’t know where the story was going, and had no idea how it would end.

What she did know was that the manuscript she had been anguishing over for her creative writing class wasn’t working for her, and she wanted to turn in a

different set of pages for the teacher and the class to critique, something new, something real. The basic idea for Tyrell had been tugging at the corners of her mind for a while, but she imagined him as middle school age, and when the very first line of the narrative flowed onto paper, she was surprised to find the voice of a fifteen-year-old teen, curses and all.

The spirit, as well as the details, of Tyrell Green’s story could not be more accurate. Coe’s career as a social worker in New York City provided her with plenty of background to draw from as she followed Tyrell through a few crucial days of his fifteenth year. Coe’s record as a social worker is commendable. The immense workload and high level of emotional intensity that accompany a field worker’s job in the New York City Emergency Children’s Service (ECS) are not for the weak of heart or anyone who is less than devoted to the job. In a profession in which 82% of

public agencies blame “caseloads [that are] too high and too demanding” for one of the highest turnover rates for professions requiring a college degree (O’Neill 1), Coe Booth saw a lot of human tragedy. During the first three years with ECS, she worked out of the Bronx field office, working exclusively on sex abuse cases, handling a huge caseload, interacting with families and following them through court and legal proceedings to completion.

Coe’s BA and MA in psychology gave her special preparation for dealing with the clients she encountered with ECS. Her training also gave her a different perspective on these clients from the one held by most of her coworkers, who were more likely to come from criminal justice backgrounds. Coe did not look at her clients as people in need of punishment, but rather as people in need of help, people with deep-seated emotional problems they could not solve themselves. “Obviously, criminal offenders had to be prosecuted to the full extent of the law,” she explains, but her goal was to mend dysfunctional families, figure out what had gone wrong in a parent or child’s life, try to repair the damage to a “broken spirit” and guide the family to a healthy functioning.

After an injury suffered on the job put her on the sidelines for seven months, Coe chose to switch to an even more stressful ECS position and she became a Crisis Worker. This change in responsibilities put her on the night shift, beginning each evening at midnight and dealing with middle-of-the-night emergencies in which children’s lives, safety and well-being were at risk, such as police raids or hospital emergency room patients whose injuries suggested child abuse. Rather than working solely in the Bronx, with the new position, Coe was required to cover all of New York City (the entire Five Boroughs area). As she describes that experience, she recounts how the sheer physical exhaustion of 70-hour work weeks, constantly on the run all over New York City, would often take precedence over the emotional toll of seeing families in nearly impossible situations while she was on-call 24 hours a day.

Coe’s job meant a lot to her, but she came to realize that it was totally consuming her life, leaving no time for her lifetime passion for writing.

I have been writing my whole life. I sometimes judge my happiness at a given time by my writing output, so no matter what I’m doing, if I’m writing, I’m OK, but if I’m doing

something and I’m not able to write, I’m not happy. Period! When I was working for ECS I was not writing, I had no time to write, I was miserable. I wanted to start writing again. My friends pointed out to me that I wasn’t writing and that this wasn’t right for me. They believed I was destined to be a writer.

After Coe left ECS, she would eventually move from part-time to full-time at Bronx Community College, teaching English. Even after leaving ECS, her writing wasn’t what she knew it could and should be. She was not finding the rhythm, the routine, or the discipline. Even though she was writing more, she didn’t believe her writing was improving as much as it could. She was certain that if she went back to college for an MFA in creative writing, it would be the incentive she needed to return the act of writing to center stage in her life.

Coe was determined to find the right college with the right degree program, one that specialized in writing for young people. She felt she would be out of place in an adult fiction writing MFA program if she wanted to write for teens. She was thrilled to discover that her alma mater, The New School, well-known for its strenuous but innovative programs, offered an MFA in creative writing with a concentration in children’s writing. It was there that she fell under the tutelage of David Levithan, award winning author and founding editor of Scholastic’s cutting edge PUSH imprint. The stars were moving into alignment.

David Levithan and The New School proved to be exactly what Coe needed:

It really made me write. Every few weeks we had to hand in twenty pages of what we were working on to be critiqued. I needed that. I started to feel that I was getting better.

I didn’t think I was going to be writing about the social work kind of thing, at all. I had other stories that I wanted to write. When Tyrell came along, I was writing a different story called *The Throwaways*, a book I had been writing for a long time, trying to get it out on paper, putting it away in a shoebox, trying again, and putting it away again. I just

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couldn't get past the sixty-five page hump, which is my personal barrier. I can write anything at all for sixty-five pages, at which point, I question where the story is going and if it's not going anywhere, the manuscript goes in a shoebox for another year.

I had dug out *The Throwaways* again as I started at The New School, but it just wasn't working. When it was my next turn to hand in twenty pages for critiquing, I wasn't satisfied with what I had, and I had the beginning of an

idea for Tyrell, a story about a middle-school-age boy, so I started writing. I wrote the very first sentence, Tyrell cursed, and I knew immediately, he wasn't going to be a middle school age student.

Tyrell, the protagonist, just sort of channeled through me. I didn't know where the story was going, but I wanted the twenty pages to hand in, so I just let it come pouring out. People in the class were excited about this new story, much more so than they had been about what I had been working on before. So, I said, 'Let's see where it goes.' I really didn't

have a plan. I had no outline or ending. I had nothing more than the first sentence when I began, and anytime I tried to force the direction of the story, it would suffer. So I just followed this teenaged boy wherever he wanted to go. He seemed to have a story to tell. I had heard authors in the past say they just followed their characters as they wrote a novel, and I thought it was ridiculous, that it couldn't possibly work. But it turned out to be true. I had no plan for the book, but just let it come out.

As I was writing, I started thinking about issues of masculinity and other aspects of Tyrell's life, but I didn't start the story with the idea of illuminating these things. The character just had a story to tell and I had to go with it.

Tyrell's story had distilled in the author's subconscious over many years from her observations on the job. One of the family issues that Coe dealt with often in ECS was the absence of a father figure living in the home. In this situation, she found that the oldest boy was likely to be forced into the role of provider and protector at a very early age. The obstacles to success in this role would discourage a grown man, let alone a boy, and the effects on the young man included a hardening, a toughness that belied his age. Later, if a

father came back or a stepfather entered the picture, a quick return to childhood would be impossible, and a new problem appeared. In a neighborhood where drugs and gang violence prevailed, how could the teenaged head of a family succeed? Often turning to crime, like selling drugs, or other illicit work, was the answer. In some communities, the drug dealers are the ones who have respect, wealth, material possessions and power.

And yet, many young men choose a different path. Coe also saw, and continues to see, young men who forego the immediate temptation of quick respect and money available to them. Coe talks about her students and how many of them walk to her class at Bronx Community College, passing, along the way, their old friends who have chosen another path in life and are out on the street at work. "I think it's amazing that some young men resist that temptation and say, 'I'm going to get those things later. Right now, I'm going to go to college.' If I were a boy that age, and I was around other guys my age who seemed to have it all, I don't know if I could resist the temptation. I admire my students for this."

In the story, Tyrell has repeated invitations from his best friend, Cal, to join him and his brothers in their family business, drug dealing. They have money, they have expensive cars, they have a nice apartment, they have respect; they have it all. Tyrell has refused this offer for as long as he can remember:

"Cal, I ain't working for you."...

Me and him had this conversation 'bout twenty times already, and he know how I feel ... "I told you, man, I get locked up, Troy gonna end up back in the system. My moms can't take care of him by herself. You know how she is." (62)

What it means to "be a man" is at the heart of this book. At fifteen years of age, Tyrell has made a man's decision. He will forego potential wealth and respect as offered by Cal for the sake of the well-being of his family, especially his little brother, Troy, who is always on the verge of being placed in a foster home due to their mother's negligence.

Masculinity is defined differently, however, according to who is doing the defining. Tyrell's mother thinks he is the man of the family and should provide for them, keep them out of the rat-hole Bennett Motel, take care of their needs, whatever that takes, and fifteen is plenty old enough to do it. In this conversa-

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tion she makes it clear, the important thing is that the family is taken care of, and the how of that is Tyrell's problem"

"You damn near sixteen. What kinda man you gonna be? [. . .]

"What you want? You want me to go out there and sell weed? That what you want?

"We wouldn't be at Bennett if you *was* out there, would we? (22)

Coe has a good understanding of how the pressures to "be a man" can wear upon a teenaged boy, especially the twenty-four hour a day expectation of being in control, as she explains: "Men are under a different kind of pressure than women. It's hard to be the man all the time, the one who must appear to be confident and in control, the one who has things figured out. It seems like it would be hard to be the person who is always expected to be brave, who is not afraid of anything."

A central problem in *Tyrell*, a "how to be a man" problem, involves being a father, and in particular, how to provide a father figure for Tyrell's little brother, Troy. Tyrell is critical of most of the father figures he knows, including his girlfriend Novisha's father, as well as his own. He criticizes Novisha's father for divorcing her mother but visiting their house and enjoying all the benefits of being married when it suits him. He is critical of his own father for spending much of his life in jail and leaving his wife and children to provide for themselves. Even so, Tyrell manages to sort through the truth and falsehood of his father's few instructions in the interludes when he is out of jail. He has been taught that a woman needs to be hit by her man sometimes, but he doesn't believe it. He has arrived at some of his own conclusions about being a man and a father, including that a man needs to think of children before thinking of himself.

Tyrell has also arrived at the conclusion that a boy needs a man in his life, all the time. A boy needs a man in his life to look out for his safety. Tyrell is constantly fearful that Troy is going to get hit by a car or harmed by some derelict because their mother has mostly abandoned her role as caretaker. A boy needs a man in his life to make sure he gets a fair chance in life to reach his potential. Tyrell visits Troy's teacher when a note comes home from school requesting a meeting, and he learns that Troy has been wrongly

placed in special education (Their mother wants to keep him there for the extra Social Security Income dollars that come with a special needs child). A boy needs a man in his life to teach him about sports and how to win and earn respect. Tyrell takes Troy to a park when he can, to "show him some moves, let him know that even though our pops ain't there, he still got somebody to teach him how to play" (222). But, most of all, he needs a man to always be there for him and to show him how to be a man:

I don't want Troy to grow up and miss all that 'cause, to be honest, he need a man to teach him what a man do. [. . .]

Now me, I know I can't take my pops place or nothing, but Troy need somebody for now. So that's what I'ma try to do. Be there. (223)

Even though she has a good handle on the problems faced by a boy trying to figure out what it means to be a man, Coe wasn't sure she could create and sustain the voice of a young man throughout a whole novel:

I would never have thought I could write a whole book from a boy's point of view. Never. I didn't assume I could do it as I was writing it, either, but I just wrote another chapter and another chapter and all of a sudden it had become a whole book. I didn't know that voice was inside of me. I don't sound anything like Tyrell. I don't know where that voice came from. He's talking about rap music and hip hop, and I don't know about those things. It came out of me in this very strange way.

Nevertheless, the voice in Tyrell's first person narration is 100% authentic in language and spirit, so much so that people are often surprised when they meet Coe Booth: "When I do author talks at libraries, sometimes the people there are surprised to find out that I am not a man. I love this because I was worried

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that boys and men might not find it authentic, not in the real voice of a man.”

Coe’s characterization of the male voice is insightful even if she doesn’t always understand the why of it. It’s also funny. She is quite entertained by some of the characteristics:

Men have conversations with each other that are just hysterical to me. They hardly say anything, but they seem to come away with meaning from it, whereas women tend to analyze and discuss things in much greater detail.

Men’s conversations are so

quick. Tyrell has a phone conversation with Cal, for example, that consists of one or two word responses:

“Yo, Cal.”

“Ty?”

“What up?”

“Chillin’. Where you at?”

“Bennett.”

“Damn, man.”

“Word. . .” (58)

I tried to capture that brevity.

Tyrell contains humor, humor about the roaches at the Bennett Motel, humor about the flaws in human nature manifested by the people in Tyrell’s life, humor as a coping mechanism. For Coe, humor was an important part of surviving the day to day tragedy and sadness of being an Emergency Children’s Services worker, much like the humor police use to survive what might otherwise be insurmountable sadness at the plight of many human beings. “You have to find something to laugh at to survive the tension and sadness or you’ll go crazy. I had two cases involving fatalities that I had to deal with, for example, and you have to break the tension somehow or you wouldn’t be able to survive.” Tyrell’s humor comes from an

attitude, an attitude that somehow he is going to rise above all this, and if he can just laugh at parts of it, sometimes, he will survive it all.

The book is authentic, the events are informed from real life experiences and the narrator’s voice is believable. The most remarkable thing about the book, however, is the language. Coe Booth takes a chance by telling the story in first person in the most realistic language possible, and it works. It works like magic. The voice is in the exact syntax the real Tyrell would speak, captured perfectly by the author’s listening ear and released through her pen:

The voice didn’t require a lot of revising at all. It just flowed out. It was never a problem. I was concerned at times about where the story was going to go, how it would end, that kind of thing, but the way Tyrell speaks—it just came out.

Growing up in my neighborhood, I did hear this vernacular/dialect from some people. I did not grow up cursing or using nonstandard English, but I was around it a lot. David Levithan, my editor, thought the language was great, but when he was in editorial meetings, it would come up at times, in regard to how it might affect sales, but it never went beyond that.

I wrote it for teenagers and I wanted it to be real. I read lots of books where there is street lingo but no cursing, and I believe that appeals to schools and teachers, and that’s fine, but in my book, I was going for a different thing. This is how he speaks.

If anything, it is the language that makes Tyrell, the character, so real, and helps make *Tyrell*, the book, stand alone among books with similar content.

Coe’s association with David Levithan has proven to be mutually beneficial. David was one of Coe’s teachers at The New School and chair of her master’s project, the manuscript that would turn out to be *Tyrell*. He was supportive, he was instructive, and he kept a big secret the whole time she was working on the book, a secret that is a testimony to his integrity as an editor, and as a professor. The secret, which he waited patiently to divulge to Coe after she graduated with her MFA, was that he was interested in publishing the book through his Scholastic imprint, PUSH. This imprint and David Levithan are well known for discovering new talent and encouraging authors who push the envelope of good literature.

Like many of today’s best authors, and many of the authors under the PUSH banner, Coe had experienced something of a hole in the literature available to

young adults when she was a teen:

When I was growing up, most of the characters in books who looked like me were either slaves, or growing up during the Depression, or sharecroppers, or something. I appreciated those books as I got older, but when I was a teen, although these characters may have looked like me, their lives were nothing like mine and I couldn't make any connection to them. I could relate better to the Judy Blume type books because they dealt with what I was experiencing, like the regular insecurities of being a teenaged girl, just coming into adolescence.

I couldn't get those two kinds of books in one; you know, like, a story about a little black girl who was getting her first bra. But I didn't find that, and so I read what was available. A lot of kids are turned off to reading because they don't find themselves. The stories that I was writing in grade school and middle school were about girls like me and my friends who were living everyday lives and facing those problems. I also want to write middle grade novels one day.

Coe maintains a beautiful website at <http://www.coebooth.com/>, complete with a blog, links, a biography, her schedule of appearances, and information about her publications. She also has a personal site at MySpace.com/coebooth and has found that:

Kids think you're cool if you have a MySpace account. I did a library author visit recently, and the kids were on the computer looking at my MySpace site before I even left, starting to write me messages.

I get lots of emails from boys on my MySpace site. I got one, for example, from a fifteen-year-old boy who said *Tyrell* was the first book he's ever read. They email me to say that they don't like to read or that they start books but never finish them. And they are writing to tell me that they finished *Tyrell*. They always tell how long it took, like "I finished this in three days!"

Kids write me, too, who live lives that are nothing like Tyrell's, who also like the book. About the only question they have in common is will there be a part two, and then

they tell me the issues they want resolved in the sequel: What will happen to Jasmine, When will Tyrell's father get out, all the things they want me to address.

Coe's autobiography is available on her website. She tells the reader that she is a true native of New York City, and grew up in a working class neighborhood of mostly immigrants (like her mother, who is from Guyana) in the Bronx. She led the happy, normal childhood of an urban child: "dancing school [. . .] piano lessons [. . .] jumping double Dutch and riding my bike up and down the block with my friends. Parking lots were our playgrounds and fire hydrants were our sprinklers on hot, sticky summer days. It was great! (Booth 1)

She also explains that she has been a novelist since second grade although her masterpieces were sometimes confiscated by unappreciative teachers. By the time she was in middle school, however, she was well-known as a writer among her peers, and just as the manuscript for Tyrell would eventually be critiqued by her peers, her fellow middle school students enjoyed reading her "novels-in-progress" and begged her to keep writing (Booth 1).

And, thank goodness, she has!! Her second book, *KENDRA* is now in progress.

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