

# TOUGH GIRLS: Fiction for African American Urban Teens

Miranda Doyle

**"Do** you have any more books just like **The Coldest Winter Ever?** Or **Push?** Or **Flyy Girl?**"

At my branch library in a predominantly African American neighborhood, that is my most frequent reader's advisory question. Although I purchase copies of these three titles by the dozen, I can't keep them on the shelf. What magic ingredient makes these novels so popular? And what in the world do I recommend to the patron, usually an African American girl, who has read all three?

I identify seven essential characteristics present in the most popular books in my teen section, based on conversations with these teens:

1. They feature an African American teenage girl in an urban, inner-city environment. It's no surprise that patrons like to read about characters like themselves.
2. Characters overcome one or more obstacles, whether it's poverty, drugs, rape, teen pregnancy, HIV, violence, incest, or some other trauma. In Sapphire's **Push**, it's all of the above.
3. The teen girl character starts out selfish, vain, uneducated, or defeated by life; by the end of the novel, she has triumphed—or at least gained maturity and insight. In **Flyy Girl**, Tracy is shallow, materialistic, and boy-crazy, but eventually mends her ways.
4. Vice is punished, virtue rewarded. These three books have a similar message, although some are more heavy-handed and moralistic. In **The Coldest Winter Ever**, Winter Santiago zips through life without a thought for the people she hurts, but her bad behavior catches up with her when she ends up in prison. Still, Winter—and other characters—enjoy breaking the rules while they can.
5. Sex. The more libidinous the main character, the better. "I want a book about a girl who loves sex," one patron told me. "One where she steals all her friends' boyfriends." All three of these popular books are adult titles, with fairly graphic sexual content.
6. Characters live out a teen's fantasy life, at least for a while. Tracy and Winter are sexy, popular girls who wear brand-name clothes and can have any guy they desire.
7. They contain realistic, sometimes strong language—including up-to-date slang—and plenty of pop-culture references.

Given these seven characteristics, I have identified ten books—including the three mentioned above—that appeal to urban African American girls. Five are adult titles and five are young adult novels.

Flake, Sharon G. **Money Hungry**. Jump at the Sun/Hyperion, 2001. 192p. \$15.99. 0-7868-0548-X. PLB \$16.49. 0-7868-2476-X. YA. Characteristics 1, 2, 3, 4, 7. [VOYA February 2002.]

*Thirteen-year-old Raspberry borrows her hard-earned dollars, and it's no surprise—she equates money with security, something that is severely lacking in her life. After she and her mother left her drug-addicted father, they were homeless for a time and now live in the projects. Raspberry's money-making schemes rarely go as planned. When she sells old candy bars at school, her classmates complain. When she cleans houses, her customers don't always pay up. She isn't thrilled about her mother's budding romance, either. Raspberry's spirit comes through on every page, and by the end she and her mother are on their way to having a home of their own. This novel might not satisfy older teens looking for harder edges, but middle school girls will love it.*

Flake, Sharon G. **The Skin I'm In**. Jump at the Sun/Hyperion, 1998. 171p. \$14.95. 0-7868-0444-0. PLB \$15.49. 0-7868-2392-5. \$5.99 pb. 0-7868-1307-5. YA. Characteristics 1, 2, 3, 7.

*Thirteen-year-old Maleeka is teased in school because her clothes aren't right and her complexion is "too black." She borrows clothes from a popular girl, but at a price—the other girl tries to force Maleeka to do things that she knows are wrong. Possible salvation comes in the form of Miss Saunders, a new English teacher who might understand Maleeka's problems. Like Flake's **Money Hungry**, it's another great read for younger teens.*

McDonald, Janet. **Spellbound**. Frances Foster Books/Farrar Straus Giroux, 2001. 144p. \$16. 0-374-37140-7. YA. Characteristics 1, 2, 3, 7. [VOYA October 2001.]

*Sixteen-year-old Raven, a bookish girl living in the Brooklyn projects, finds her college plans derailed when she becomes a single mother and high-school dropout. Plenty of lively dialogue spices up this account of Raven's struggles. She eventually wins a spelling bee and gets her life back on track, but her best friend Aisha is not so lucky in this story suitable for middle school students.*

Morris, Monique W. **Too Beautiful for Words**. Amistad Press, 2001. 288p. \$24. 0-06-621105-0. \$11.95 Trade pb. 0-06-093594-4. Adult. Characteristics 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7.

*It's 1979, and Angie lives in a rough neighborhood in Oakland with her strict, churchgoing grandparents. A girl who craves excitement and money, Angie soon falls under the influence of a sweet-talking pimp named Jesus. Soon she changes her name to Peaches and starts working on the street corners, turning tricks even after she gives birth to Jesus's son, Jason. The novel is alternately narrated by Peaches, Jesus, Jason, and a Black Panther named Chinaka, who befriends Peaches and tries to save her. In the end it's too late for Peaches, but not for her son, who must decide whether to follow in his father's footsteps or break away and live his own life. The violence, sex, and raw language will appeal to older teens who like edgy books about inner-city life.*

Porter, Connie Rose. **Imani All Mine**. Houghton Mifflin, 1999. 212p. \$23. 0-395-83808-8. \$12 Trade pb. 0-618-05678-5. YA. Characteristics 1, 2, 3, 5, 7. [VOYA October 1999.]

*"Mama says I'm grown now because I got Imani. She say Imani all mine." So begins Tasha, the fifteen-year-old narrator of this tragic, lyrical novel about a teen mother in inner-city Buffalo. As the story unfolds in her own authentic voice, we learn that Tasha was raped by a boy who now attends her school and doesn't recognize her as the girl he brutalized. Tasha loves Imani with all her heart and does her best to be a good mother, despite the obstacles. When her baby daughter is killed by a stray bullet, Tasha struggles with guilt and grief. This book is tough and uncompromising but also realistic and wonderfully written.*

VOYA booklists are reproducible without permission for library, classroom, and workshop use. Reprinting in any medium for sale by a commercial or nonprofit entity or posting on the Internet requires written permission from the publisher.

Sapphire. **Push**. Knopf, 1996. 179p. \$20. 0-679-44626-5. Vintage Books, 1997. \$11 Trade pb. 0-679-76675-8. Adult. Characteristics 1, 2, 3, 5, 7.

*At sixteen, Precious Jones is an illiterate teen mother in Harlem who has endured a life of shocking poverty and hardship. She has been raped by her father, abused by her mother, and—as we discover by the end of the book—is HIV-positive. Precious not only survives, but with the help of a special teacher, she learns to read, discovers the joys of journal-writing, and begins to transform herself. Most suitable for older teens, it includes graphic rape scenes and strong language.*

Souljah, Sister. **The Coldest Winter Ever**. Pocket Books, 1999. 337p. \$23. 0-671-02578-3. \$7.99 pb. 0-671-02536-8. Adult. Characteristics 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.

*Winter Santiago is the spoiled, selfish sixteen-year-old daughter of Brooklyn's top drug dealer. Anything she wants, she gets, from expensive jewelry to designer clothing. A snooty princess who lost her virginity at twelve, she considers sex a form of recreation and will stop at nothing to seduce the men she lusts after. When her father's fortunes suffer, however, Winter's life falls apart. Her refusal to change her ways has dire consequences. Despite not-so-subtle messages about values, materialism, and African American unity—oddly, Sister Souljah writes herself into the novel to deliver these lessons—this is a slick, somewhat shallow, but still enthralling read. There is no sequel yet, but teens might enjoy Souljah's nonfiction title, **No Disrespect** (Vintage Books, 1996).*

Swindle, Renee. **Please Please Please**. Dell, 2000. 323p. \$6.99 pb. 0-440-22376-8. Adult. Characteristics 1 (the main character is in her twenties), 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.

*Whatever Babysister wants, Babysister gets. She has been indulged and cosseted ever since she was four years old and saw her mother die. Now in her twenties and working as a bank teller in Los Angeles, she wants her best friend's boyfriend, and will stop at nothing to get him. Sexy and beautiful, Babysister will amaze and amuse readers with her outrageous antics. Of course she gets her just desserts in the end, and grows less bratty and more insightful along the way. The writing is lively, the plotting swift, and the sex scenes explicit—this is definitely an adult book, but older teen girls will eat it up.*

Tyree, Omar R. **Flyy Girl**. Simon & Schuster, 1996. 416p. \$22.50. 0-684-82928-2. Scribner, 2001. \$6.99 pb. 0-7432-1857-4. Adult. Characteristics 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.

*As Tracy Ellison comes of age in Philadelphia, she discovers that her curves, attitude, and slanted hazel eyes win attention from the boys. Spoiled and materialistic, Tracy sets out to get everything she wants. She trades one boy for another the same way she changes outfits. Only when she sees a friend's older sister brought low by drugs and sex does she begin to see the error of her ways. The writing is awkward and there's not much plot, but teen girls will relate to Tracy or dream of living her exciting life. Readers might also try **For the Love of Money** (Simon & Schuster, 2000), in which Tracy is 28 and a Hollywood movie star—although some have expressed disappointment with the sequel.*

Williams-Garcia, Rita. **Like Sisters on the Homefront**. Dutton, 1995. 144p. \$15.99. 0-525-67465-9. Puffin, 1998. \$5.99 pb. 0-14-038561-4. YA. Characteristics 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7. [VOYA April 1996.] *When fourteen-year-old teen mother Gayle gets pregnant for the second time, her own mother pushes her to have an abortion and then sends her to live with her aunt and uncle in the rural South. Gayle begins the book as a sour, troubled teen with a bad attitude, but slowly comes to realize the importance of family. Unflinchingly honest, with realistic dialogue and wonderful characters—from the sweet, naïve cousin to the crusty great-grandmother—this story is truly memorable.*

*Miranda Doyle has been a teen librarian at the Bayview-Waden Branch of San Francisco Public Library for two years. Her position, in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city, is funded by a grant for youth at risk. Previously she spent a year as a teen librarian at Los Angeles Public Library, two years as a high school librarian in the Bay Area, and a year as a children's librarian in a rural area of the Philippines.*