



NOT

YOUR
AVERAGE
AFTER-
SCHOOL
SPECIAL

▶ JOEL SHOEMAKER

AN INTERVIEW WITH
Coe Booth

From the first sentence, **Tyrell**, the eponymous first-person narrator of Coe Booth's stunning debut novel, hits you upside the head with the authenticity of his voice—that of a contemporary urban, black male teen. It wasn't until I sat down to write this introduction that I related my reading of **Tyrell** to a disturbing incident that occurred in my homeroom a few years ago. In what was meant to be a warm-fuzzy, pre-Christmas holiday lesson about the spirit of giving, I began by asking my seventh graders what they'd most like to get as a present. One of my young charges who had recently moved here from the south side of Chicago replied, *sotto voce* but loud enough that even my old rock 'n' roll-deadened ears could hear, "A blow job." We never got to the warm-fuzzy part of my intended lesson.

This incident has continued to resonate over the last few years as I've read a number of YA books that confront this matter of contemporary teens who assert that oral sex does not "count" as real sex. I continue to think about what we in schools here and around the country call "our changing student population." In our schools, in newspaper articles, and in the larger community, we continue to discuss, assess, and address the impact of these new residents—often concerned moms trying to keep their sons alive, away from gangs and drugs, and in school. These students, frequently African American young men who are performing below grade level, bring with them a culture, an ethic, and a set of survival skills that are entirely different than those of our traditional student population. They challenge us to teach in new ways. They are **Tyrell**.

The following interview was conducted via e-mail during December 2006 and February 2007.

Shoe: *How did this book get started?*

Booth: I started writing **Tyrell** to pass a class. Near the end of my second semester in the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) program at The New School, my assignment was to turn in twenty pages, but I had nothing. So I started writing what I thought would be a middle-grade book about a boy who lived in a motel shelter in the Bronx. But then I wrote the first sentence (in which he curses) and quickly realized he was a little older. I finished the first chapter in one sitting. When I turned it in for class critique, the response

I received was so positive that it motivated me to continue writing, to see where it would take me. I continued working on **Tyrell** in my writing class with my teacher, Sarah Weeks. Later, when we had to choose thesis advisors, I wanted to ask another of my teachers, David Levithan, because he edits for Scholastic PUSH. I was too shy to ask in person, but I e-mailed him, and he said yes.

I think I had about sixty usable pages by then. For my last semester of the MFA program, I met with David at Scholastic every two or three weeks to discuss the pages I'd sent him. He was very encouraging. I would always tell him that I didn't know where the story was going (because I had no outline and no idea what I was doing with it!). He would tell me that it seemed to be moving toward the party scene and that it was coming along fine. It never occurred to me that he was interested in acquiring it for Scholastic; he was very sneaky! But the day after our MFA graduation reading, David told me that he wanted to buy it. He didn't want me to know his intentions until I graduated, so as not to confuse his teacher role with his editor role. I was shocked, surprised, and excited. I had about 120 pages at that point, and I spent the next five months writing about two hundred more until it was finished.

Shoe: *How much revision did that first chapter go through between its*

inspiration and final copy?

Booth: Almost nothing about it changed. All I had when I first thought about writing *Tyrell* was a guy walking his girlfriend home from school. I knew he was homeless and his father was in jail, but that was it. So the first chapter almost wrote itself. And I really didn't do much tinkering with it afterward.

Shoe: *I see on your Amazon.com profile that you, like your protagonist, Tyrell, are a lifelong resident of the Bronx, but that the book is "not based on my own life in any way." How's that?*

Booth: I was born and raised in the Bronx, my part of which is a working-class, ethnically-diverse community, the kind you'd find in lots of cities. And it's still my home. But I grew up just a half block away from the projects and I have many relatives and friends who live there. So I know the world that *Tyrell* lives in, but I did not grow up the way *Tyrell* did. My parents were responsible, worked hard, and raised all three of their children right. I had the kind of neighbors who would tell my parents if I did something wrong (but of course I was an angel!). We had music lessons, dancing school, and summer vacations to Florida and Ontario. And we were expected to go to college.

Shoe: *So I'm guessing that your profession as a social worker influenced *Tyrell*? What, exactly, does a crisis intervention social worker do?*

Booth: I worked with families who were facing difficulties such as drug abuse, domestic violence, poverty, and homelessness. Our primary goal was to make sure that the children were safe. A lot of the parents who were brought to our attention were neglectful or abusive to various degrees. And a lot of the children and teens were considered at risk because of gang activity, drugs, unsafe sexual practices, and the abuse or neglect from their parents.

My focus was to determine what interventions were necessary in order to make the children and teens safe, and if possible, keep the family intact. Sometimes the only option to protect the children was to remove them from the family temporarily, which as you can imagine, was a very difficult decision to make. Most of the time, I would counsel the parents and children and refer them for other services such as drug rehabilitation, anger management programs, and domestic violence counseling.

For three years, I worked only with Bronx families in which one of the children or teens had been sexually abused. My educational background is in psychology; I received extensive training in the area of child sexual abuse. As a result, I spent a great deal of time testifying in court on my clients' behalf as an "expert" in the field.

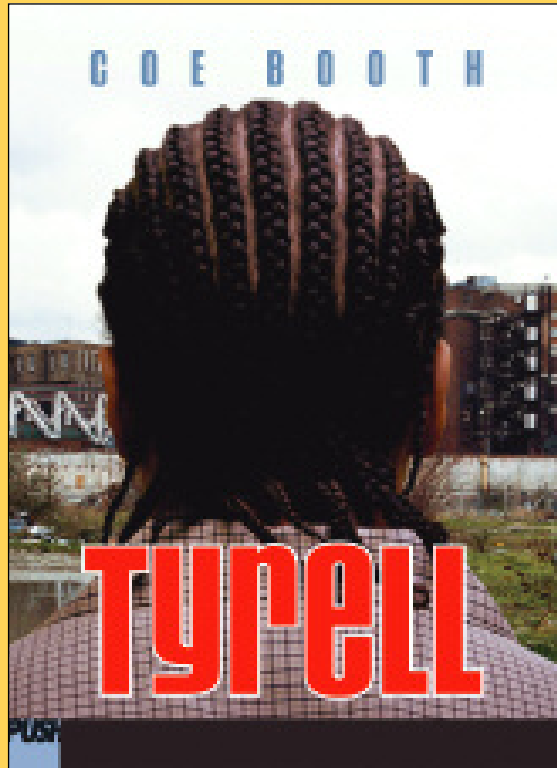
After three years, I switched to the emergency division where I provided crisis intervention to families overnight. I had to respond to any emergency that occurred after midnight involving a child or teen living in any of the five boroughs of the city. I spent lots of time at hospitals trying to assess whether the child's injuries could have occurred the way the parents reported, and at police stations trying to decide where to place the children after the parents had

been arrested. It was very challenging having to make complex decisions with very little information, but by the time I got to the emergency division, I had already seen just about everything.

While I was working at the emergency division, I began teaching English and psychology part-time at a local college during the day. I really loved teaching, so after a year of doing both simultaneously, I left social work for life as a college professor. Teaching allowed me more time to devote to writing.

Shoe: *So about Tyrell's voice—did you hear him speaking from the start?*

Booth: I have a brother, and I've always loved how guys talk, so maybe some aspect of his voice comes from those overheard conversations. And I worked with a lot of teen boys when I was a social worker, so maybe some of his mannerisms come from them. I'm not sure. But I do know there isn't one person I know who's like Tyrell. He's his own person!



Shoe: *I see that the striking cover photo is actually a collage. The back of a young man's cornrowed head is superimposed on a photograph titled "Sofa in Puddle," with buildings in the background that strongly suggest "the projects." The cover feels true to the oftentimes bleak tone of the book, even suggesting something of the difficult choices confronting Tyrell. How did it come about?*

Booth: I'd love to take credit for it, but Steve Scott at Scholastic designed it. I really didn't want to see Tyrell's face portrayed because I wanted readers to picture him the way they imagined. If they wanted him to be a pretty boy, fine. If they wanted him to be a "rough neck," that would be okay, too. I am pleased that it leaves a lot to the reader's imagination.

Shoe: *You thank David Levithan "for giving me the freedom to tell this story my way."*

What do you mean by your way?

Booth: I didn't think anyone actually read the acknowledgments! I thanked David Levithan because he was so encouraging throughout the writing process. He would calmly tell me that I was on the right track and to just go with it. He never asked me to make changes to the book that would water down its authenticity and make it more "mainstream." He's the best kind of editor to have because he knows when to guide and when to step aside and let the author tell the story that she really wants to tell.

Shoe: *Are you also referring in part to the fact that your characters use quite a bit of language that's not acceptable in school, and that there are references to sexual activities, including oral sex between young teens?*

Booth: Yes, I am referring to those things. It still surprises me when teen novels are criticized for using four-letter words or portraying sexual activity, as if teens are unaware that those things exist. Obviously not all teens curse or have sex, but I'm sure they all know peers who do.

Most of the e-mails that I've received from teens comment on how real they believe Tyrell to be. A lot of them tell me that they know so many people who are just like him. And I've even gotten e-mails from teens who tell me that they don't live lives anything like Tyrell's, but they can still relate to Tyrell for wanting to help

his family and be there for his little brother, and they understand his frustrations with Novisha and Jasmine.

In order to connect to readers in this way, it was important to me that the “Tyrell” they were reading about is the same one I wrote on the page, without having been sanitized. I think there was some discussion of my use of language at Scholastic’s editorial meetings, but it was never an issue between David and me.

Shoe: You also thank the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) ACT-SO students. Who are they?

Booth: The NAACP ACT-SO (Afro-Academic, Cultural, Technological, Scientific, Olympics) program is designed for high school students of color. We meet on Saturdays to “coach” the students in various academic areas including writing, art, science, entrepreneurship, and architecture. I coach the essay and short story categories. The students compete in their local cities in May, and then the gold medalists travel to the national competition where they compete against teens from across the country. It’s a very rewarding experience all around.

My ACT-SO students keep me in touch with the lives of teens, and they allow me to share everything I’ve learned about writing with others. I really like when I’m in the position to encourage someone else to write what has been on his or her mind. Most of the time it’s as simple as reading what they have and telling them to keep on going. Sometimes it’s sharing with them my own doubts and telling them that it’s normal to feel that way but that you have to write through those doubts. Sometimes I have to get tough and give

Booth: I had read some newspaper articles about teens who threw illegal parties. Mostly they were suburban kids who used the homes of friends whose parents were out of town. But a boy like Tyrell wouldn’t have access to a large private house, so I tried to think of alternatives. I thought about warehouses and abandoned buildings, but then as I was passing a large school bus depot not too far from my home, I wondered if that would work. It would certainly be *different*.

I also ran through a ton of different ideas for what would happen at the party. I wanted some serious drama to go on, but I didn’t want anything corny to happen, something where the kids learn a big lesson about breaking and entering, such as a big fire breaking out or the place being raided by the police. I wanted a lot of story lines to come to a head without relying on the “Afterschool Special” resolution. And I didn’t want anyone to guess what was going to happen.

Shoe: Score another one for Coe—the tension really works. Yet while Ty is clearly breaking laws, he also lives by a code of ethics he’s learned.

Booth: Yes, Tyrell does have some idea of right and wrong. It’s not very clear-cut, but it works for him. It even sets him apart from his friends at times. In his world, ethical decisions aren’t so easy because survival is the most important thing. Ty is not too bothered by scamming the city out of some MetroCard money, but he wouldn’t steal from an individual. And although cursing is okay with his friends, he knows it’s not okay to curse in front of girls and women, especially respectable women like Ms. Jenkins. For the most part, he has to make a lot of decisions for himself because his parents haven’t exactly given him clear guidelines.

Shoe: His girlfriend, Novisha, says that she does not want him “acting like some thug.” Is Ty a thug?

Booth: I don’t think of Ty as being a thug at all. There might be times when he has to get a little “thuggish” just to get by, but part of growing up in the Bronx is having the ability to act tough when you need to! He knows how to handle himself, but he doesn’t seek out confrontations unnecessarily. He’s not in a gang and he doesn’t rob people. He’s a good guy inside.

Shoe: Ty’s situation also raises the well-documented phenomena that our prison population is disproportionately made up of African American males, while African American households are disproportionately headed by females. From your dual perspectives as social worker and novelist, what’s the answer?

Booth: The statistics are very startling and depressing. The fact that there are many fatherless homes is not news to anyone, but in poorer socio-economic neighborhoods and especially in homeless shelters, it is even more drastically noticeable, which is what Tyrell is becoming aware of in that scene. As for the over-representation of African Americans in the prison system, there are many reasons for that including racism, underfunded public schools, and a lack of opportunities and hope.

It’s easy for people to sit back and wonder why others don’t just “pick themselves up,” get a job, and become contributing members of society. But there are families in which nobody has ever done that. And more important, the children growing up in some of these homes are not even *expected* to make anything of themselves. Psychologically there is a familial depression that dampens their motivation and drive. Some parents don’t encourage their children to “reach for their dreams” because they

them a deadline just to push them past their blocks and get them writing again.

Also, a few times during the writing of *Tyrell*, I asked their advice. For example, I asked them for a “job” Tyrell could do that is illegal, but not “too” illegal, and they suggested he swipe people into the subway using an unlimited MetroCard, which worked very well. They read little snippets along the way, they gave their opinions on the book jacket, and they read the ARCs as soon as I got them. By the way, the photographer who took my author photo, Jeffrey Gamble, is a former ACT-SO winner and current New York City ACT-SO photography coach!

Shoe: Speaking of illegal activities, Tyrell’s life also involves smoking tobacco and pot, drinking, and the big (although not sexual!) climax, the unauthorized bus barn party. Where did that idea come from?



don't think it's possible for them to move out of their current situation. Why encourage them when the end result will only be that their children will get hurt? I understand that.

One solution is to expose these kids to people from their neighborhood who *have* become successful. All too often those who graduate from college and get good jobs move away from the very neighborhoods that need them to serve as good role models to others. And those who do become successful should also do more to give back to the next generation in whatever way they can.

Shoe: *Ty's mom really is a piece of work. She whines about everything and pushes him to sell dope to provide for her. Is her character, too, a composite of the kinds of people you met through your work?*

Booth: When I was a social worker, I visited many homes where the teenage boy was the one bringing money into the home or buying home electronics and other luxury items. When I'd ask the mothers if they'd questioned their boys about where they were getting the money, they would tell me no. Obviously they already knew. Now I don't know if they actually *told* their sons to go out and sell drugs as Tyrell's mother does, but there was a certain amount of approval from the mothers. They set up the TVs and DVD players in the living room. And they would accept the money these boys were giving them. So in essence, they were sending the boys the message that they were doing the right thing.

Shoe: *So here you are, a first-time female author, absolutely nailing this male character. But you also do a great job with the females. Did you particularly identify with any of them?*

Booth: I did a lot of research on masculinity and the father-son relationship because I wanted to be informed about the complexities of the problems my characters were facing. The research helped me to see the reality of what a boy like **Tyrell** would have experienced growing up. It's not my job, however, to come up with solutions. I want to see the world in which my characters live as it is. My characters might come up with their own solutions, but I try to stay out of their way as much as possible.

I relate to all the characters in some ways. I relate to Novisha because, like her, I was a good girl who did well in school and cared about people's opinion of me. But like Jasmine, I was a bit of a free spirit. The good thing about telling this story from a boy's point of view is that I never felt the need to *fully* understand the female characters. Like Tyrell, I was often clueless about what they were doing and why, and that helped make his interactions with them real. He (and I) had a hard time figuring these girls out!

Shoe: *Talking with Jasmine, who has agreed to help promote the party, Ty says, "I just shake my head 'cause I can tell she got the whole thing worked out in her mind already. It don't matter what I say. I don't know why, but females always think they know what guys need. Like we too dumb to run our own life or something." I had to laugh—Ty's starting to figure out how the world works!*

Booth: I'm so guilty of this attitude! A lot of women believe deep down that without us telling them what to do, men would just wander around aimlessly until their untimely deaths! We are here to help *guide* them!

Shoe: *Did you deliberately obfuscate the extent of Jasmine's sexual experience? She seemed to be pretty casual about sexual activity for a thirteen-year-old.*

Booth: The extent of Jasmine's sexual experience is never made clear. Tyrell assumes she's a ho based on her clothes, her willingness to sleep in the same bed with him on the very first night they meet, and how she "takes care of him" without him

even asking. As the story continues, she talks about a past boyfriend with whom she was sexually active and how she was "wild" before Emiliano came into her life. Also there's the lap dance incident. Personally, I don't think Jasmine is a ho, but I can see why a boy like Tyrell would jump to that conclusion.

Shoe: *Novisha says, "I have a man" (page 5) and elsewhere Ty thinks about how he feels when she says that. It seems to be all about kids pretending to be grown up, saying things they hear grownups say and thinking that makes it true. Sad?*

Booth: Yes, they are playing at "being grown," as we say. I hear it all the time from the teens with whom I interact. I think it's because teens these days do not have a long period in which to slowly transition into adulthood. It's a short leap from having little crushes and learning to flirt in sixth grade to having "a man" in seventh. There is such a need to belong, if not to a group, at least to another person. In Tyrell's case, his family is no longer intact and he doesn't know how to support a mother and brother, but at least he's a "man" in someone's eyes. And he needs that.

Shoe: *On **The Longstockings** blog, (<http://thelongstockings.blogspot.com>), you hilariously posit a relationship between Tyrell and John Green's character, Alaska, which is a hoot and includes John Green's reaction to your post. Have you met?*

Booth: Yes, we're friends. Last fall we did a couple of library and bookstore readings together with other teen authors: E. Lockhart, Scott Westerfeld, Maureen Johnson, and David Levithan. Also there's a thing called Teen Author Drinks Night here in New York City, where we all get together every month for cocktails and pizza! The first time I went, I couldn't believe I was standing there chatting with John Green, Libba Bray, Blake Nelson, and lots of other authors whose work I admire! It's still very surreal for me. But we're all friends now, thanks to these monthly get-togethers!

Shoe: *Is a sequel to **Tyrell** in the works?*

Booth: I'm working on my second teen novel, **Kendra**, and then I'll begin the sequel to **Tyrell**. I'd also like to write middle-grade novels that boys will enjoy. So many boys can't find themselves represented in books; they can't relate to what's out there and as a result, they don't read. I'm so inspired to write books for them.

Shoe: *Do you do school/library visits?*

Booth: Yes, I especially like talking to inner-city kids because it's important for them to see that even if you're from a tough neighborhood, you can still succeed. Of course they think that anybody who writes a book is obviously a millionaire! And I don't have the heart to tell them the truth. Hey, let 'em dream!

Shoe: *Fabulous, Coe. Thanks.*

BOOK BY COE BOOTH

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This book is one of only eight titles that appear on *both* of YALSA's 2007 booklists, Best Books for Young Adults and Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers. It also won this year's **Los Angeles Times** Book Prize for Young Adult Fiction. ■

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