



TEENS AND STREET LIT

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When I was a newly minted librarian in one of the nation's premier teen libraries, the inevitable always happened. I would march proudly into classrooms, extolling the virtues of our teen space. "We have Internet computers for teens only," I would say. "We have CDs and DVDs. We have a Teen Advisory Group, so your voice gets heard, and we have the stuff you want." Without fail, a student would raise her hand. "Do you have that book *Flower's Bed*? *Fly Girl*? *A Project Chick*?" When I answered that we didn't have "that kind of book," I listened to myself failing. I had confirmed the student's suspicion that the library, like so many other institutions, was not set up for her.

Street lit is a genre that speaks to teens and adults in their twenties and thirties, particularly African American and Latina women in urban areas. Street lit has been criticized on political, moral, and literary grounds, but it is nevertheless immensely popular and has become a significant genre for many otherwise reluctant teen readers. Like it or not, the inclusion of street lit is becoming an increasingly relevant part of urban library teen services. Librarians serving teens must familiarize themselves with and build collection development, programming, and reader's advisory skills around this genre.

WHAT IS STREET LIT?

Urban fiction, street fiction, ghetto lit, gangsta lit, and hip-hop lit describe a set of fast-paced, gritty novels about street life. These novels typically take place in urban settings and feature protagonists of color, usually African Americans. Often considered the literary kin to rap music, street-lit novels feature many elements common in contemporary rap: sex, drugs, crime, flashy material goods, and up-to-date street slang. The novels are fast-paced, plot-driven stories full of concrete, exterior action. Characters are more likely to act impulsively than react thoughtfully and more likely to speak than introspect. As with other reluctant reader titles, action begins in the first chapter, often on the first page.

Accused of "glorifying" street life, street-lit novels often center on characters who turn to criminal activities or "hustles" as a means of survival, inviting readers to relish the lush material gains that result from these dishonest activities. Equally present, however, is the understanding that drug dealing is not a long-term lifestyle, and that participants of "the life" will likely end up in jail or dead. Rather than paying tribute to the pleasures of crime, these novels might be considered morality tales in which desperate characters make desperate choices and, more often than not, reap harsh punishments.

Street-lit novels are also criticized for their depictions of sexuality. Detractors argue that the often-frank sexual content is “too adult” and fails to model realistic encounters or safe-sex practices. A glance at public health statistics should disabuse critics of the idea that sexuality is reserved for the over-eighteen crowd. As for realism, treatment of protection and consequences in street-lit novels varies as does the intensity and frequency of the sexual activity described. Urban erotica writers Zane and Noire rightly earn their reputation for depicting intense, titillating sex scenes. On the other hand, some street stories, including Tracy Brown’s **Black**, Teri Woods’s **Dutch**, and Nikki Turner’s **A Hustler’s Wife**, present fairly mild or infrequent sexual content. As with drug dealing, street-lit novels do not glorify sex simply by depicting sexual acts. Sex is often portrayed as an inevitability of “the life,” but astute readers can often gain from the books’ sexual content a broader picture of how sex fits into the social landscape.

WHERE DID IT BEGIN?

This relatively new genre’s roots go back more than a century and include rap music, 1970s mafia movies, “blaxploitation” films, and the 1960s and 1970s pulp novels of Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines, who had lived the life and sold their stories to publishers. Even Charles Dickens, whose works are now considered classics, can be thought of as a spiritual ancestor to contemporary street lit. Dickens’s novels follow the lives of disadvantaged young people who use crime as a survival strategy.

Street lit as we know it today first appeared in the 1990s. Two street-themed novels published by mainstream houses—Omar Tyree’s **Flyy Girl** and Sister Souljah’s **The Coldest Winter Ever**—gained a following. At the same time, street-lit authors who could not or did not wish to work with mainstream publishers found success in self-publishing. Zane, who is often lumped with the street-lit genre, began her writing career by selling erotic stories for ten dollars on her Web site. Teri Woods famously sold her first novel, **True to the Game**, out of the trunk of her car.

Publishing street fiction soon became a major enterprise. After her success, Woods created her own publishing house, Teri Woods Publications, introducing new authors, such as Shannon Holmes, in addition to putting out her own work. In 2001, Vickie Stringer, who began writing her debut novel **Let That Be the Reason** at the end of a prison term, founded Triple Crown Publications, one of the best known and most prolific street-lit publishing houses today.

Seeing the commercial success of street lit, mainstream publishers and hip-hop industry giants began to embrace the genre. Simon & Schuster’s Atria imprint publishes street-lit

titles, and Ballantine’s One World now releases books such as Noire’s **Candy Licker**. Shannon Holmes and Solomon Jones publish with St. Martin’s. Hip-hop media companies are also joining the publishing game. Both **Vibe** magazine and MTV Books (in partnership with popular rapper 50 Cent) have launched lines of street lit.

This approach brings more exposure to street-lit authors, but it is speculated that the mainstreaming of street lit has hurt its popularity with its original audience. The collaboration between street-lit authors and mainstream editors results in a seemingly altered tone for newer titles. Shannon Holmes’s **Dirty Game** is a perfect example of how mainstreaming changes street lit. The novel’s tone is oddly disjointed—the narration feels stiff, and the characters’ speech is written in exaggerated dialect. Most tellingly, the book includes a glossary of street slang, a tool original street-lit readers would never need.

CHALLENGES FOR LIBRARIES

Street lit is at new heights of popularity, yet fans still have trouble finding the books they seek and getting their needs met in libraries. Street lit is difficult to shelve, and library staff members who don’t know or respect the genre can alienate readers from the library.

Like other popular library materials, street-lit books are often stolen, perpetually checked out, or damaged from use. More troubling, they are frequently difficult to acquire. Because many are still self-published, newer titles might not be available through traditional library vendors. Street-lit novels are beginning to receive reviews in national review publications, but many new books are missing, and no youth services publications review street lit from a teen perspective.

The genre is also particularly vulnerable to censorship. Censors from the right argue that these books are inappropriate for teens because of street language and depictions of sex, violence, and the drug trade. Censors from the left feel the books should be

excluded from libraries because of their misogynistic and homophobic content and because they portray African Americans in a bad light.

Individual librarians’ attitudes present additional barriers. They might be ignorant about the genre, judge readers for their interest in street-themed titles, or offer inadequate reading recommendations. One common mistake is to assume that certain young adult titles dealing with urban poverty or featuring African American characters are automatically street lit. In fact, these “substitute” titles, although they are often widely read by teens and well-regarded by librarians and reviewers, provide a substantially different reading experience. Literary substitutes, like Sharon Flake’s **Begging for Change** and Paul Volponi’s **Black and White**, most often feature interior action and focus on the pain of struggling to survive. Other, more plot-focused substitutes, like the popular *Bluford High* series and the attractively packaged short



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BRONX ACADEMY OF
LETTERS STUDENTS
CHOOSE THEIR
FAVORITE BOOKS
ABOUT THE STREETS.

story compilation **Teenage Bluez**, push away street lit readers with their content. Both portray drug dealers as monstrous villains, a sure turn-off for readers who recognize that entering the drug game is a flawed but rational choice for young people in dire circumstances with few economic options.

TEENS NEED STREET LIT

Street-lit fans often come from disadvantaged racial and economic backgrounds and are more likely than the average library patron to feel cut off from the institutions around them. For that reason, supporting their leisure reading is vital. Offering teens books in a familiar genre that they enjoy affirms their identity both as readers and as valued community members. By stocking street lit, you say to these readers, “Your interests and your tastes matter.”

Providing street lit also supports teen literacy. Teens are more likely to enjoy reading when they choose the reading material. They will also read at a higher level when reading something that interests them personally. Street lit can even serve as a gateway into a wider literary world. Bronx Academy of Letters high school librarian Kelly Overton found that her younger students were the biggest street-lit fans. The juniors and seniors, having already read widely in the genre, had moved on to new reading material. If they were not afforded the chance to read street-lit novels initially, these students would probably not have become habitual readers.

Another benefit of reading street lit is perspective. The stories can give teens a chance to reflect on their own lives and circumstances or those of people around them. A group of librarians described in Vanessa J. Morris’s article for **Young Adult Library Services**, “Street Lit: Flying Off Teen Fiction Bookshelves in Philadelphia Public Libraries,” collaborated with Philadelphia teens to create a teen street-lit book club. Their efforts provide a striking example of how reading and discussing street lit can give teens room to consider their own opinions and assumptions about the roles of verbal and domestic violence as well as rape and physical abuse.

Street-lit readers are often distanced from libraries, don’t self-identify as readers, don’t see their tastes and experiences reflected on library shelves or in library spaces, and don’t feel that the library can connect them with the resources they need. Street lit is difficult to acquire, keep on the shelves, and get past would-be censors, especially in schools.

SIX STEPS TO MEETING STREET LIT READERS’ NEEDS

1. Respect the Genre. Teens need caring adults who respect their interests. Read a street-lit book or two. Think about what teens

find appealing in the genre. Ask street-lit fans to tell you about their favorite books and listen to what excites them. If you are not familiar with street slang or culture, you might find the language and action in these books off-putting or confusing. It creates a unique opportunity to empathize with teens who feel disaffected by classics and mainstream literature. How do you feel when you read these books? What strategies do you use to understand them?

When teens ask for reading recommendations, provide a thoughtful, nonjudgmental readers’ advisory interview. Recognize the ways teens ask for street lit. Library patrons don’t often speak in library lingo, and street-lit fans are no exception. They may ask for “realistic books,” “books about relationships,” “drama books,” or simply “adult books.” They may refer to classic street-lit titles, requesting “books like **Fly Girl**” or saying “I liked **The Coldest Winter Ever**.” Ask, “Do you mean street lit?” (It should go without saying that not all teen readers and readers of color are looking for street lit; your job is to listen to a patron’s request and not make assumptions about her needs based on appearance or age.)



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SENSATIONAL?
ACTION-PACKED?
TEENS LOVE IT!

2. Provide Satisfying Alternatives. Street lit is still a controversial genre. If your library administration or school principal is dead set against including these books in the collection, you will need interim strategies for serving street-lit readers. If you don’t have the books, explain the situation to the patron and ask if they are willing, for now, to try another type of book.

As previously discussed, many librarians use teen-focused literary or series books about African Americans in urban settings as stand-ins for street lit, even though the reading experience is quite different.

If you suggest these books to teens, be honest. Explain that they are not the same kind of books, and describe how they are different. One can think of Kalisha Buckhanon’s **Upstate** as a love story between a girl in Harlem and her boyfriend in prison that delves deeper into their emotions than street lit. Coe Booth’s **Tyrell**, about a homeless teen in the Bronx trying to make ends meet, is less about drama and more about what everyday life feels like. The **Bluford High** books feature African American characters but are more like after-school specials.

Readers looking for a reflection of hip-hop culture without literary introspection might be interested in nonfiction books by or about hip-hop musicians, graffiti artists, or political figures. Biographies of rapper 50 Cent and photography books like **We B*Girlz** and **Graffiti World** are popular. Tupac Shakur still interests teens, and his book of poetry, **The Rose That Grew from Concrete**, reflects both hip-hop music and street life. **Life in Prison** by Stanley “Tookie” Williams, co-founder of the notorious Crips gang, carries both authenticity and a strong anti-gang message.

Some street-lit fans enjoy the genre for its sensational, high-risk drama. For these readers, try other books with high stakes and

external action, such as horror, true crime, or after-school-special-style problem novels like **Cut** or **Go Ask Alice**. Other sensational favorites include Sapphire's heart-wrenching **Push**, in which a belligerent teen incest survivor partners with a teacher to learn to read, and **A Child Called "It"**, Dave Pelzer's gruesome memoir of child abuse.

3. Provide Access. Teens deserve to read books that interest them. If you don't have street lit in your collection, show teens how to find it. Public librarians can show teens how to find street lit in the adult collection. School librarians can use street-lit requests as an opportunity to help students use the public library to request and borrow materials. Use the opening to discuss the function of libraries with your patrons. Do they think your library should have street lit for teens? Why or why not? If so, how can they advocate for themselves?

4. Collect Street Lit. Collecting street lit both supports teen reading and shows street-lit fans that they have a place in the library and in the community. Because street lit is of interest to both teens and adults, you have choices about where to shelve the books. Shelving them separately makes street-lit novels easy to find and perhaps less vulnerable to challenges by would-be censors. You can also shelve street lit in the young adult section as a way of inviting street-lit readers into the library's teen section and to facilitate their discovery of other genres that might be of interest.

Use street-lit bibliographies and review sources to create a broad, dynamic collection. The definitive street-lit bibliography is Vanessa Morris's "Urban Fiction List Suitable for Public Library Collections." Other sources include **Library Journal's** new monthly "Word on Street Lit" column and the blog **Streetfiction.org**. A list of resources is also maintained at the **Library Success Wiki's** Urban Fiction page (http://www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Urban_Fiction/Street_Lit/Hip_Hop_Fiction_Resources_for_Librarians#Book_Lists). You may see street-lit books for sale on the streets of larger cities. Take note of the titles and publishers represented on street stands and consider buying them for review or for the collection. Update your collection frequently. Order multiple copies so that teens can read the books together. Be aware of publishing trends and ask readers for feedback.

5. Use Street Lit in Library Programs. Engage local teens by centering library programs around street lit. Invite a street-lit author to visit. Hold a book discussion. If you don't feel prepared to address the weighty issues that appear in street-lit books, ask a professional facilitator to moderate the discussion. Allow teens to keep the books they read as an incentive to attend and as a way of quite literally giving them ownership. Try holding a mother-daughter street-lit book club—many teens get street-lit books

from older family members. Ask teens to come up with soundtracks for the books they've read. Have them explain the songs they chose and how those songs match the books. Hold a writing workshop and have teens write original stories or fan fiction. What would they do if they were Winter Santiago or Gena in **True to the Game**?

6. Broaden Your Collection. Add materials to your collection to supplement street lit, which does not always provide accurate information about sexual health and protection. Make sure your collection contains engaging, honest nonfiction on these topics.

Gurl.com's Deal with It! is a frank resource about sex and body health topics. **Body Drama: Real Girls, Real Bodies, Real Issues, Real Answers** by Nancy Amanda Redd is a groundbreaking photographic work that

addresses physical and sexual health and body image as represented by women of diverse sizes, ages, and ethnic backgrounds. True stories about street life can also supplement street-lit novels' idealized versions. Felicia "Snoop" Pearson's **Grace After Midnight** is a hard-hitting memoir of street life, prison, and despair with a hopeful ending. Snoop is best known for the character she played on HBO's *The Wire*. Practical information about finances and careers can also help teens empower themselves to make more stable economic choices than the ones represented in street-lit novels.

Be sure to carry books at various reading levels in diverse genres and know the books well. Remember that teen services always begin with listening to teens. By respecting their reading choices, you prove yourself a trustworthy information source. If street-lit fans decide they want to try something new, they may well turn to you and the library for reading recommendations and more. ■

STREET-LIT TITLES FLY OFF THE SHELVES WITH URBAN READERS.



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