

Critiques and Controversies of Street Literature: A Formidable Literary Genre

a friend of mine gave me the book to read and it took me a day and a half to finish. i could not put it down. i love the characters and the storylines. i got so caught up in them it felt like a movie happening in my head. i could not believe 3 educated strong women would fall for men with those types of jobs and all of them had a happily everafter ending, it goes to show you that love is a mystery. i cannot wait to read more of wahida clark's novels, keep them comin lady. (Amazon, "PP Thugs")

Who is Wahida Clark? According to Wendy, the writer whose criticism appeared on Amazon.com, Clark is an exceptional author who crafts entertaining, thoughtful and engaging stories. In fact, writers such as Wahida Clark, Nikki Turner and Teri Woods represent only a few authors of "Street Literature" (street lit/fiction), a genre permeating the African American literary tradition in surprising ways. Chain bookstores such as *Borders* and *Barnes and Noble* now incorporate street fiction within literary sections designated for "African American Interests." Some public libraries as well as Black-owned bookstores have increased the number of books they own to include writers like Clark, Turner, and Woods (Morris, Hughes, Hassell-Agosto, and Cottman 20; Young 22).

Street lit readership appears to be on the rise, and this growth brings into question some disturbing research findings. Results of a National Endowment of Arts' study (Bradshaw and Nichols 26) indicated a sharp decline in the number of young adults who engage in literary reading, yet, a proliferating and possibly unprecedented increase in African American

adolescents who read street fiction may currently exist. As a contemporary trend, however, this arguable increase in reading has not surfaced statistically but continues to reveal itself anecdotally to those of us working among teenage populations in both urban and suburban areas (Morris et al. 20). We noticed initial evidence of the genre's appeal at least two years ago. Street fiction began flooding local bookstores and showing up in the hands of urban high school students participating in a community, after-school arts and literacy program near our university. Since that time, empirical data such as the high rankings given to some street fiction books on Amazon.com confirmed our suspicions. Further, while some books falling within this genre are not written explicitly for adolescents, the proprietor of a Black owned bookstore in Philadelphia, PA recently explained that the readership extends as low as middle and upper elementary school students. When asked about the increasing appeal of these narratives, she reasoned, "You don't have to live the life to get wrapped up in the storylines" (Anonymous).

To provide insight about this literary trend, throughout we highlight street fiction as a formidable, contemporary genre that has grown in popularity throughout the past decade. We begin by offering a definition, a brief literary and production history, general characteristics and a view on the controversial nature of the genre. This section is followed by a discussion that incorporates theory, related research and excerpts from electronic book reviews (inspired by street fiction) to illustrate how readers actually

interpret the narratives. Specifically, we examine a range of reader responses to varied street texts extracted from Amazon.com (a website that permits readers to upload electronic book critiques). We conclude with practical and research-based implications.

Definition, History, Characteristics

The genre of street fiction is grounded in the tradition of urban literature novelists from the 1960s and 1970s like Donald Goines and Robert Beck (Hill, Perez, and Irby 77). These writers crafted ultra-realistic tales of urban living rife with explicit language and street slang told through characters who were often pimps, prostitutes, and drug dealers. According to Ghose (106), eventually the appeal of the urban novel faded but was revived in 1999 with the publication of best-selling novel *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah) and subsequent increased popularity of *Flyy Girl* (Tyree) and *True to the Game* (Woods). One library in Madison, Wisconsin describes these books in the following way:

Called street literature, urban drama, and hip-hop literature, this exciting genre features fast-paced action, gritty ghetto realism, and social messages about the high price of gangsta life. Following in the tradition of Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines, the new generation of street lit writers speaks to the experiences of a wide range of characters—from the ordinary people trying to get by in the projects to hard-core drug dealers, prostitutes, pimps, and gangbangers. (“Street Lit”)

Despite the recent recognition, street lit has not been eagerly embraced by major publishing houses, although this trend is now changing (see Young 22). Therefore, in order to initially get their books into the hands of readers, street lit writers often self-publish (Hill, Perez, and Irby 77). Independent publishing houses like Triple Crown Publications and Urban Books have created another avenue through which authors can have their work printed. The books are then sold wholesale to street vendors and bookstore owners or the authors themselves sell the books directly to consumers. The Internet boom has also provided an additional outlet for publicizing and selling street fiction, which has added to its popularity and success (Spavlik 65).

The genre typically consists of stories centered on African American protagonists between the ages of 16-

24 who struggle to survive despite immense obstacles including but not limited to abject poverty, overt and institutional racism, as well as violence in its various forms. The protagonist’s saga is conveyed through heavy use of African American Vernacular English and quick-moving storylines. The novels are typically set in urban locales with hip-hop culture serving as a prominent backdrop. Themes such as young women who fall in love with the wrong men and plots that revolve around premarital sex, violence, crime, abortion and illegal activities such as drug dealing are common (Morris et al. 19). Despite these characteristics, street lit authors Vickie Stringer and K’wan Foye consistently refer to their stories as a means to warn readers of the pitfalls of illegal activity (Reid 11). In other words, these narratives might be classified as cautionary or redemptive tales.

An excerpt from a popular street narrative titled *True to the Game* (Woods) reveals some of these characteristics. Narrated by Gena, who is a young adult, the following events describe her first meeting with Quadir, “a millionaire associated with the [drug] cartel.” (Woods back cover)

She said goodbye to Quadir and pocketed his number. Even though he wasn’t driving, he was nice and he was dark-skinned, and that was definitely a plus. Not to mention the diamond bezel Rolex watch he had on. *Damn*, she thought, *the man is dark as night, but his beard and his moustache was so sexy*. She would definitely be trying to see him tomorrow, which for her was a lifetime away. (Woods 4)

A few chapters later, we learn more about Quadir’s cartel activities as well as his associates. Readers are privy to a dialogue between Rasun and Reds, two young men employed by Quadir:

Back in Philly, the summer heat had driven everyone outside onto the sidewalks, porches, corners and streets. There were open fire hydrants with bursts of water spraying children . . . Rasun drove back down to North Philly. . . .

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“What’s up?” he said as he pulled up on the corner of 25th Street.

“Nothing, man. What’s up?” asked Reds.

“You got the money?”

“Yeah,” Reds said, pulling a knot of paper out his pocket. . . .

“Is everybody out here tonight or what?” Reds asked.

“Most definitely,” Ra said. . . . (Woods 45-46)

“What you need the gun for?” Reds asked.

“Man, what you need it for? You’re going to a party, right?” Reds didn’t want to give up the gun. “What the f*** (*expletive in original*) you need it for?

“We’ll, take that s*** (*expletive in original*) up with Quadir when he comes back,” Ra said, knowing Qua wasn’t giving them no guns like that. Mentally, they couldn’t handle a gun . . . and Quadir knew it and wasn’t taking any chances . . . (Woods 47)

As the storyline evolves, the relationship between Gena and Quadir develops. In the next passage, Gena reflects on men, in general, and especially those like Quadir whose elevated financial earnings appeal to young women despite the emotional costs:

The majority of the brothers that were out had woman at home. The funny thing about it though, was that even though you might be with a guy and really call him your man, you knew in the back of your mind that he wasn’t your man. . . . the brothers were socially acceptable whoremongers inheriting the earth. Gena’s girlfriends all knew this, but it didn’t make a difference. As long as they were spending money, nothing really made a difference. Nothing else mattered. (Woods 44-50)

In these brief selections, we generally capture street fiction’s essence. Although deeply rooted in a familiar young-adult storyline that depicts the ebbs and flow of a new romantic relationship, this narrative also embodies the potential to valorize infidelity, criminal activity and a wide range of unprincipled and even stereotypic behaviors. This potential (whether realized or not) undergirds a good deal of the controversy encasing street fiction.

Canons and Controversy

Throughout history, competing claims have existed about whether high brow, canonized, western or classical literature ought to give way to the types of books some have argued will diminish our society’s cultural standing because of an over-emphasis on popular and folk culture or our presumed base desires, (e.g., controversy over romance and graphic novels). Within the focused area of African American literature

(for adults, young adults and children) an analogous type of canonization occurred over the past forty years as literary theorists and scholars identified characteristic elements of these texts (see, for example, Bishop 273) and selected writers, for a variety of reasons, gained prominence over others. Esteemed African American young adult and adult writers who have received this canonized sanctioning include, among others, Walter Dean Myers, Toni Morrison, Mildred Taylor, James Baldwin, Alice Walker, Jacqueline Woodson, Virginia Hamilton, Ernest Gaines, Christopher Paul Curtis, and Walter Mosley. These authors composed compelling narratives that make up the list of middle and high school African Americans literary texts frequently read in today’s classrooms.

Books by the above writers receive high literary honors, such as Newbery and Coretta Scott King awards. They are repeatedly selected for school district curriculum because their stories convey the themes, ideologies, illustrations and literary qualities deemed up to standard by teachers, librarians, and parents. The cultural messages and representations embedded in the fiction often correspond with a long-standing literary tradition in which novelists compose stories with particular purposes in mind. According to literary critic Bishop:

African American literature has been a purposeful enterprise, seldom if ever art for art’s sake. . . . Across genres, in poetry, picture books, and contemporary and historical fiction, Black authors and artists have created a body of children’s literature that 1) celebrates the strengths of the Black family as a cultural institution and vehicle for survival; 2) bears witness to Black people’s determined struggle for freedom, equality, and dignity; 3) nurtures the souls of Black children by reflecting back to them, both visually and verbally, the beauty and competencies that we as adults see in them; 4) situates itself through its language and its content, within African American literary and cultural contexts; and 5) honors the tradition of story as a way of teaching and as a way of knowing. (273)

Since the well-regarded African American writers of whom Bishop refers frequently situate their narratives within realistic urban contexts (Walter Dean Myers and Jacqueline Woodson are two noteworthy examples), some might wonder how street lit compares in literary legitimacy, sustainability and quality to other well regarded African American literature (Venable 25). Currently, two perspectives exist.

Rightly or wrongly, values of nihilism, misogyny,

homophobia, physical abuse toward women and violence circulate within and around a number of artists (i.e., rap) who claim membership in the hip hop culture, such as some street lit writers. Critics of the genre have made these hip hop life-text associations (Young 22). To them, the narratives likely intensify a growing cultural disconnect between today's poor, African American urban adolescents and our larger society. Voices largely within the African American community are weighing in and questioning the denigrating cultural messages, ideologies, stereotypes and moral values that they contend street lit reifies, not to mention the presumed lack of literary quality (Stovall 56; Venable 25; Young 22).

On the other hand, a range of folks now consider street literature a viable genre to discuss and debate (Hill, Perez, and Irby 78; Wright 42). They contend that street fiction symbolizes neither a fad nor an oddity in African American culture. Rather, as a literary production, it should be situated within the long-standing debate about high brow and popular culture that has vigorously reemerged as largely self-taught and self-published writers, sometimes identifying themselves as members of the hip hop generation, began publishing, promoting, and lucratively distributing this genre of literature (Morris et al. 17). Unlike in the past, the self-publishing, hip hop ethos of these writers has positioned their stories within postmodern sensibilities that mitigate constructs of power and authority. As a result, assigning a cultural hierarchy of either high or low to this emerging genre becomes rather complicated (Young 23). As scholars have argued with respect to the criticism aimed toward the musical genre of rap as well as other non-traditional text sources like spoken word, these books may be nuanced and varied across a continuum, not unlike any collection of texts falling within a particular literary genre or other popular culture medium (Fisher 365; Morrell 74; Wright 42).

Reader Appeal and Interpretations

Notwithstanding literary merit, the appeal of street fiction books has received minimal attention. A senior editor at One World/Ballantine (a major publishing house) recently said the following about street lit readership and the genre's appeal, "You can't force them (readers) to read James Baldwin. There is a

reason why people are choosing these stories and maybe we should look at what is causing this hunger" (Young 22). Reader response criticism validates the rationale driving this editor's argument. If well-established writers of African American young adult and adult fiction are, in some instances, being de-centered by street lit authors, what compelling meanings are youth and young adults deriving from these narratives?

Because studies within the field of literacy exploring reader responses to texts have revealed that despite what is embodied in any piece of fiction, readers interpret stories in highly complex and often unanticipated ways, reader response criticism and research can shed some light on how to examine the street fiction trend (Beach 8). While not a unified theory, many scholars writing within the field of reader response criticism do share a common belief in the distinct influence and transactive nature of the reader, text and socio-cultural context within any reading experience (Rosenblatt 135; Tompkins ix).

Drawn to titles such as *Project Chick* (Turner), *True to the Game* (Woods) and *Thugs and the Women Who Love Them* (Clark), African American adolescents and young adults (a percentage of whom likely resist or struggle with reading in school) make-up the largest population currently reading street fiction in non-school contexts or as unofficial curriculum during school hours (Morris et al. 20). Indeed as customer reviews on Amazon.com suggest, a significant proportion of those attracted to the books are adolescent girls and young adult women. One example Amazon.com reader review posted by 'Sha' about the book *Thugs and The Women Who Love Them* (Clark) reads:

Unlike in the past, the self-publishing, hip hop ethos of these writers has positioned their stories within postmodern sensibilities that mitigate constructs of power and authority. As a result, assigning a cultural hierarchy of either high or low to this emerging genre becomes rather complicated (Young 23).

I am from Trenton NJ and I can relate [relate] to this book.

This book is how it is on the street and also describes [describes] passion a lot.

Ms. Clark is a wonderful writer.

This is the second book of hers that I have read.

(Amazon "PP Thugs")

Commenting on the urban novel some have coined a classic, *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah), which received a commendable ranking in the Amazon best selling books category (# 2,164) and boasts more than 1000 customer reviews/responses on the website, another electronic critic, 'school marm', wrote:

For a responsible adult, this is an entertaining novel. For a teen, it is a map to destruction. This is a popular book for teens because of all of the sex, profane language and crime. We wonder why our teens are so out of control! Teens are not responsible enough to read this.

The main character is spoiled, extremely audacious, and headstrong. She thinks she's street smart and ahead of the game. But her character has flaws that demonstrate her weakness and vulnerability. This book leads you on a journey that wakes you up to the realities of your own life through this character and her support cast of characters. Each one of them along with the various events of this novel will help to define why this is, in my opinion, one of the "Best Reads Ever". (Amazon "The Coldest")

As these responses reveal, the appeal of street lit narratives derives, at least in part, from readers' perceptions of literary quality (e.g., characters, storyline, theme) as well as the writer's ability

to depict a reality that resonates with her readership (e.g., "this book is how it is on the street"). However, the depth and range of critiques found on Amazon certainly stand out as noteworthy, as a post by "chocolate" about Wahida Clark's *Thugs and the Woman Who Love Them* (which is ranked # 249, 389 on January 12, 2009 on Amazon's best selling category) suggests:

I am not sure if I read the same book that all the other reviewers read. I really wanted to love this book, but it wasn't my cup of tea. . . . But for the most part, I was never on the

edge of my seat. The story never developed into what I thought the book was about. The three friends in the book didn't seem like they had their own heads on straight, but were supposed to have such "high inspirations". . . please. The pimp portion of the story was garbage. . . . It made no sense. Wahida didn't show the girls to be ambitious and doing something with their lives. I just couldn't get into the book. (Amazon "PP Thugs")

Along with literary criticism, adult street lit fans aware of the teenage readership voice real-world concerns. Reacting again to *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah) (ranked #3,464 on January 12, 2009, by amazon.com), 'loni' cautioned:

What can I say that hasn't already been said about this acclaimed novel? I can say that I would be upset if it were recommended reading for classroom assignment. There is too much careless promiscuous behavior, crime, drugs and other ingredients in the gumbo mixed story. For a responsible adult, this is an entertaining novel. For a teen, it is a map to destruction. This is a popular book for teens because of all of the sex, profane language and crime. We wonder why our teens are so out of control! Teens are not responsible enough to read this. They generally are copycats. Let your teens read it at their and your own risk. (Amazon "The Coldest")

As evidenced by the reviewer stances above, street literature exists on a continuum, and Amazon critics evaluate the books across this range. These nuances may not be readily apparent to an outsider to the genre, however. Looking closely at the types of approaches readers take while engaged in street fiction literary interpretation should assist with illuminating these variations. Beach (8) contends that five groupings of theoretical foci best depict the range of reader response theorists and, thus, approaches to reading stories: textual, experiential, psychological, social and cultural. Each of these foci contributes to a fuller understanding of how readers construct meaning from literature.

For example, textual response theorists such as Rabinowitz and Smith (54) discuss the ways readers rely on text-based narrative and genre conventions when making sense of fiction. Adolescent street lit readers taking this stance might, then, pay close attention to how the realism of the genre is constructed, perhaps stating an interest in how writers bring readers along through plot construction. An example of this stance emerges in the following comments by 'chocolate' who describes *Thugs and the Women Who Love Them* (Clark):

The story didn't have a moral or even a followable storyline to me. One page will talk about one of the girls going to the club, shooting heroine and then the next page she will be a aspiring doctor. (Amazon "PP Thugs")

Rabinowitz writes about rules of signification; among these are narrative conventions in which the "authorial audience and the narrative audience must share some beliefs about reality in order for the situations and actions to have the consequences they do and for the plot to get from point A to point B" (100). The reader above appears quite troubled by the inconsistent rules of plot structure coupled with characters' seemingly unbelievable hopes and dreams.

From experiential (Rosenblatt 22) or psychological (Holland 29) reader response stand points, readers of street lit might become engaged because the storylines allow them to vicariously and emotionally live through experiences that resemble their own lives. Research has shown that, at times, African American girls and adolescents do identify with stories about others who look like them racially and with respect to gender, but identification represents neither a static nor uncritical reading of a text (Brooks, Browne, and Hampton 665; Davis 260; Sutherland 391). For instance, Radway (71) studied a group of women who avidly read romance novels. She found that even when texts rhetorically and discursively depicted patriarchal ideologies, romance readers reinterpreted the ideologies. The women viewed their reading purposes as resisting the text as well as re-imagining life circumstances. Street literature may be for some readers, therapeutic and empowering as J. Brea, an Amazon critic of *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah), points out:

First Off this Book is a must buy no Questions Asked! As a hispanic female born in harlem raised in Yonkers I can relate to many "Black" girls in the neighborhood. This Novel Not only Spoke the truth but gave you front seat to the same world we live in only through the eyes of someone from the "hood". You will Notice how most of the things that happen to Winter are self fulfilled prophesies and sometimes what we think we need is just what we want, not a necessity nor an asset. Will Have you thinking twice about the route you're taking. A real Eye opener! (Amazon "The Coldest")

Here the story helps the reader answer subconscious or unanswered questions about her own life because she lives through the protagonist's experiences.

Lastly, from social (Lewis and Fabos 482) or cultural (Beach 87) reader response stances, adolescent girls and young women might opt to read these books because they provide a forum for discussion amongst their family and friends, either through face to face communication, posting messages to sites such as Amazon, written messages via e-mail or by text messaging. These interactions can also provide feelings of group membership and define cultural practices of reading in out of school settings as the next post indicates:

While at work on a Saturday I stopped at my friends desk and she just so happened to be reading this book. She told me I just had to read it since she wasn't able to put it down. Right then and there I left the building, walked across the street, and purchased the book immediately. I started reading that Saturday and didn't put it down until Sunday night. YES, I FINISHED IT THE ENTIRE BOOK IN A LITTLE OVER 24 HOURS!!! I then passed it to my mom & she couldn't put it down. Then to my cousin and then her gentleman friend. I am an avid reader and this book tops my top 3 books of ALL time. It's been 5 years since I read it and now I'm dying to read it again. So after buying a couple of copies for gifts, I'm back to buy another for myself. (Amazon "The Coldest")

Moreover, because these texts often flourish outside of the school curriculum, an unusual blurring has occurred. An out-of-school literary pastime encourages its readers to come together socially around books. Learning transference across contexts appears to be taking place.

Practice and Research Implications

Notwithstanding the explosion of this emerging genre, a search on the Ebsco Host ERIC Database, using the

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following terms: “street lit,” “hip hop lit,” “ghetto lit,” “gansta lit” and “urban fiction” returned one research article based on a public library program and a mere six articles focusing on genre descriptors and unmethodical summarizations of these texts. Rather than research- or practitioner-based literacy or literary journals, writers for magazines, newspapers and web sites sit at the forefront of this literary trend. On the whole, literary scholars, educational researchers and classroom teachers remain at the periphery of emerging debates surrounding street fiction’s popularity although the demand for these books continues to increase. For instance, nine years after the release of the best seller *The Coldest Winter Ever*, Souljau’s newest tale, *Midnight: A Gangsta Love Story* has already been reviewed by a *Washington Post Newspaper* columnist (Valdes C05). To date, 113 comments/responses on Amazon.com (just two months after the release) have been posted about *Midnight* (Souljau) along with five active links on the discussion board (Amazon “Midnight”).

How might practitioners, literary critics and educational scholars attend to the growing street fiction phenomenon? A recent article by Hill, Perez, and Irby (79) represents a step forward. The authors suggest ways English teachers might incorporate these texts in their classrooms. The article provides a thoughtful list of possible approaches, such as allowing students to edit the street fiction narratives, to conduct literary analysis on the stories as they are bridged to the analysis of canonical and contemporary literature, as well as to compose their own version of a street lit saga.

Because we reside in the infancy stage of this dialogue, we suggest examining these stories more closely to uncover some of the underlying areas of appeal for readers as we generally attempted through this article. Since reading this genre manifests largely as an out-of-school reading practice, scholars and practitioners involved with youth in these capacities (e.g. after-school clubs, sports leagues, community groups, etc.) have been given an unusual opportunity to explore the nature of engaged reading outside of school as Smith and Wilhelm (182) recently documented with young adult males. Studies focused on close reads of these narratives coupled with analysis of readers’ interpretations through a wide variety of

response forms such as electronic, oral, written, poetic and artistic might prove valuable. We also argue for the importance of discussing street fiction with youth in out of school settings where fewer restrictions guide the solicitation of reader interpretations. Results of these types of studies might eventually inform wide-ranging ideological discussions about the social constructions of ethnic groups, cultural shifts as well as the heterogeneity of gender construction, sexuality, urban life, and adolescence.

To conclude, because educators often encourage youth to spend time engaging in literary pursuits for leisure, giving increased attention to this genre and its readership appears to be justified and needed. Scholarly input will be invaluable to practitioners who continue to gauge whether and how literature influences or subverts the literacy, cultural and moral development of youth, particularly those identified as “resistant” or “disengaged” learners.

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