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HIP HOP LIT

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Spencer Michels reports on an increasingly popular genre of streetwise fiction called "hip hop literature."

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SPENCER MICHELS: Mornings at 5:00, Renay Jackson takes up his floor polisher and his cleaning rags and performs his job as a custodian at the police department in Oakland, Calif. But in his head, a novel is taking shape.

RENAY JACKSON: To me it's like drama, and my books are a running soap opera in my ear. So by the time I get home, I kind of know what's going to happen today.

SPENCER MICHELS: "Oaktown Devil" was the first of Jackson's four novels, which together have sold about 35,000 copies. He writes in an increasingly popular style called by various names like "hip-hop" or "gangsta," using the raw, often sexually explicit language heard on the streets. African-American bookstores report books like this are becoming increasingly popular. The genre usually depicts a violent, drug-filled life in ghettos across America, including Oakland, where Jackson grew up.

RENAY JACKSON: It's coming on similar to what rap music did. Somebody is going to jump on this bandwagon and make a lot of money.

SPENCER MICHELS: Jackson hasn't gotten rich yet, but he is supplementing his custodian salary by selling his fast-moving stories of the drug life.

RENAY JACKSON: In this neighborhood, just like the majority of neighborhoods I describe in my books, you have, like, killings, you know, drug dealings -- look at that -- you know, just like the everyday life of, like, you know, the urban streets.

SPENCER MICHELS: Did you live like this or have you?

RENAY JACKSON: I grew up in poverty-infested neighborhoods, yes.

RENAY JACKSON: Barbara.

WOMAN: Hey, hey, hey. What you got for me?

RENAY JACKSON: "Oaktown Devil" because I know you're out.

SPENCER MICHELS: Jackson delivers some, though not all, of his books personally. They are self-published, meaning he pays to have them printed. They sell for \$13 each, but after paying bookstores, a distributor, and the printer, he ends up with less than \$3 a book. From all indications, his audience includes young black males who don't normally read novels. At a World of Books near Oakland, Jackson's work is nearly as popular as "Harry Potter."

WOMAN: We're way over 100 a month easily.

SPENCER MICHELS: Jackson's books can be hard to find. Many major bookstores don't carry much hip-hop literature, though a few titles, like Sister Souljah's "The Coldest Winter Ever," have been published by big companies and are on the shelves at major chains. The number of books is growing. This African-American bookstore carries two dozen current titles, which sell quickly. And so some publishing houses are getting interested. Richard Grossinger, founder of North Atlantic Books, a medium sized publisher in Berkeley, believes Jackson's work could take off.

RICHARD GROSSINGER, Book Publisher: When I got the books, I thought that they were actually pretty wonderful. They were good stories, they were funny, they had great dialogue in them, and they had a quality of authenticity that you just couldn't fake. I would say it would be disappointing to sell less than 50,000 of each of the books. And they could well sell up in to the hundreds of thousands.

SPENCER MICHELS: Grossinger would like to publish Jackson's work and other gangsta literature, something the bigger houses have mostly avoided.

RICHARD GROSSINGER: Because most publishing companies are corporate bureaucracies, somebody's going to say "who are we going to offend by this?" Or "what is this going to do to our self image?"

SPENCER MICHELS: A single father with a degree from a community college, Jackson began writing at age 40 after one of his three daughters asked for help describing her summer for a school assignment.

RENAY JACKSON: So I typed up on the computer, "it's a hot summer day, at least 95 degrees, so hot you could see waves in front of your eyes," and, you know, described myself washing a car. She bounced on away, and after she left, I just kind of continued writing, you know? It was like, "okay, I'm going to do a short story."

SPENCER MICHELS: From the beginning, his books were based on real happenings in Oakland, a town with a very high murder rate. Using vernacular laced with obscenities, Jackson's "Oaktown Devil" is a novel about Rainbow, a black city worker who is attempting to find the killer of his brother, who was murdered over drugs. Many of Jackson's characters are drawn from the streets, including Rainbow's sexy girlfriend, Cassandra, and ex-con Buckey Jones.

RENAY JACKSON: "Buckey Jones was a fool in every sense of the word. Even his closest friends on occasion could not escape his fury. You wouldn't want him going out with your daughter either. A known fact throughout the hood was that if you wanted something sinister

done to someone, Buckey was the man."

SPENCER MICHELS: At Lucky's Barbershop in Oakland, where Jackson gets his haircut, barber Jarbarie Bell enjoys his books as fiction.

JARBARIE BELL: For the most part as African Americans, we all don't live this lifestyle, but there are some that do.

SPENCER MICHELS: It's not your world?

JARBARIE BELL: No, not my world at all.

SPENCER MICHELS: In fact, not everybody in the African American community is a fan. These unvarnished tales of violent men and their women have provoked debate on the value of gangsta literature. Marcus books operates several bay area bookstores that feature the works of Toni Morrison and other black authors, and more recently, hip-hop writers like Jackson. Blanche Richardson is a manager.

BLANCHE RICHARDSON, Marcus Books: It's fiction written by, I would say, novice writers that deals with, and in many instances glamorizes, thug life, street life, gangsterism, even prison life.

SPENCER MICHELS: Why do you say it glamorizes it?

BLANCHE RICHARDSON: Because often in the books there's no socially redeeming value to them at all.

SPENCER MICHELS: Richardson praises ghetto fiction for attracting new readers; that's why she carries it. But she has problems with the way it is written.

BLANCHE RICHARDSON: I'm talking about misspelled words. Generally the works are unedited or poorly edited. Sentence structure is that of a middle school student. I would like to see these novice writers hone their craft.

RENAY JACKSON: I'm not trying to write like everything else you reading. You know? My characters... I have them talking the way if you go into the heart of the projects, black folks talk.

SPENCER MICHELS: Jackson asked his daughters if his writing was too crude.

RENAY JACKSON: "What about the sex? What about the violence?" And my oldest daughter, Patricia, man, she killed me, she was like: "Daddy, we can see that on cable every night."

SPENCER MICHELS: On the campus of San Francisco State University, in the nation's first black studies department, hip-hop literature got mostly high marks from the students.

STUDENT: It surprises people, because it's the real truth. And when it hits them, it's just so dynamic. It's like I never heard anything like this in my life.

STUDENT: His book actually gives a thug a three-dimensional life.

STUDENT: I think that writers should have some sort of moral opinions about how the characters are portrayed, and not glamorize or romanticize, like, just out and out violence.

DORTHY TSURUTA: I don't want us to discuss this book in terms of great literature.

SPENCER MICHELS: Black literature Professor Dorothy Tsuruta finds that Jackson's work is not devoid of morality.

DOROTHY TSURUTA: No, I don't think he's condoning violence at all. He wouldn't have all the bad guys get killed. He's not celebrating this. He's saying, "Folks, look at this. This is what we have come to."

SPENCER MICHELS: Tsuruta says Jackson's work isn't quite literature yet.

DOROTHY TSURUTA: He has the spark that could be honed and groomed to become a writer.

SPENCER MICHELS: Jackson says he wouldn't mind a publishing contract and a little professional grooming as long as it doesn't ruin his style. He has recently finished his fifth book, called "Crackhead," and is working on a sixth, hoping the hip-hop genre catches on big time.



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