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'Hip-hop lit' is full of grit New literary genre emerging from underground authors

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Sunday, October 19, 2003



Charlotte Bowens first spotted a copy of Renay Jackson's "Oaktown Devil" -- a raw, fast-paced, street-talky, violent novel infested with sex, drugs and murder -- at her Oakland beauty salon. But the self-published book with the crudely drawn cover was so popular that Bowens could never get her hands on it, so she went out, bought her own copies of Jackson's four novels and read them all -- several times each. Now she recommends the book to everyone she knows.

Such devotion -- especially among African American readers -- has made Jackson an underground phenomenon in and around Oakland, the city he writes about with an insider's eye for the mean and mystical streets. A custodian at the Oakland Police Department by day, Jackson said he has sold about 35,000 copies of his \$13 books, largely at independent bookstores like A World of Books in San Leandro, where Jackson is far and away the best-selling author.

So far, the corporate book chains have turned up their noses. But that may be about to change.

"Hip-hop lit," "urban lit," "street lit," "ghetto lit" -- all terms for this new literary genre -- has exploded in cities across the country, and the publishing industry is taking notice. The genre, which got a big boost from the 1999 publication of Sister Souljah's violent coming-of-age novel, "The Coldest Winter Ever," now accounts for more than 30 percent of the sales at the Black Library Booksellers, which sells African American literature online and at kiosks in Boston.

Hip-hop lit runs the gamut from better known books such as Vickie Stringer's "Let That Be the Reason," Shannon Holmes' "B-More Careful," and Teri Woods' "True to the Game" to newcomers with titles that offer a good hint about what's inside the cover: "Thugs and the Women Who Love Them," "One Crazy- Ass Night: A Hardcore Novel," "Revenge: When Nothing Else Works" and "Threesome."

"People are stepping out to the forefront, saying, 'This is the music we like, the clothes we like to wear and the books we like to read,'" said Stringer, who co-founded Triple Crown Publications with Holmes after their street-wise manuscripts were rejected from countless publishing houses. Recently, Simon & Schuster signed Stringer and Holmes to six-figure deals, following the runaway success of their first books. Both authors started writing while serving prison sentences.

"I was happy to add them to my list for two reasons. They sell. Shannon sold over 150,000 of his first book. Vickie has followed suit with her first," said Malaika Adero, an editor at Atria Books, a division of Simon & Schuster. "And I like the work in the sense that they're good storytellers.

And they are writing in the same sensibility as hip-hop recording artists are in that they're writing to this generation. They know what this generation appreciates,

what their values are, what the realities of their lives are."

As the books gain wider distribution, it's inevitable that they'll reach beyond their core black audience, Adero said -- just as hip-hop music did. "These books, if they haven't crossed over yet, I don't see why they wouldn't," she said, adding, "Surely there will be an Eminem coming around any day."

The so-called hip-hop books can be easily identified: They are page-turners rife with violence, sex and crime; they're often populated by African American characters; they're especially popular among reluctant readers, notably including young, black men; and the language, cadences, subject matter and aesthetic evoke comparisons to hip-hop music. The books also tend to have a following in jail -- authors and merchants say they frequently ship the books to prison addresses and some accept payments in stamps, one of the few currencies prisoners can accrue.

Jackson, 44, a relentless salesman, fast talker, former rapper, and a single father to three daughters and a niece, is a prototypical street lit author: He has an irrepressible entrepreneurial spirit, a following in prison, and a need for a good copy editor. He also has a big issue with Barnes & Noble and Walden Books in Oakland, which have refused to carry his series. And, of course, he has the action and the characters, such as evil Buckey Jones, "a fool in every sense of the word . . . not really ugly, you wouldn't want him going out with your daughter either."

His bad guys tend to say things like, "dis s -- gone put us on da map, let all dem fools know we ain't ta be f -- wit, y'all wit me?" And female characters are often described from head to toe, as in, "a large woman, her legs were as thick as tree trunks. . . . She had a small waist and large booty which switched from side to side with each step she took." Readers rarely have to wait more than a couple chapters to get to a murder or a racy sex scene.

Jackson became a novelist almost by accident. To help his daughter understand descriptive writing for a homework assignment, he composed a paragraph about washing a car on a hot summer day. After his daughter took off,

he sat staring at his computer screen for a few minutes. Then, figuring he had nothing better to do, he started to type, sending his car-washing character to Baskin Robbins, where, lo and behold, he met a "phine" woman.

Every day after work, Jackson said, he raced home to write more of his story. "By the time I got to chapter four," he said, "I was sitting there thinking: 'I could write a book.'"

"I knew I could do this, but not many people believed me," he said. "I didn't know anyone personally who had written a book, especially a fictional novel. If you don't know anyone who's done it, then you don't think you can. You can't picture it."

But he purged his life of naysayers -- including a girlfriend who didn't like the idea of investing money to self-publish -- and released "Oaktown Devil" in 1999. The book begins with the very paragraph Jackson had used as an example: "It was a very hot summer day, at least 95 degrees.

So hot you could see waves in front of your eyes. After procrastinating all morning I finally washed the car."

Jackson said that it wasn't until someone purchased a book and asked him to sign it that he thought, "I guess I'm an author." His first reading was held at the West Oakland branch of the public library, by coincidence, also the first building he had cleaned for the city of Oakland 20 years earlier.

Since those early heady days, Jackson has continued to write on a rigorous schedule -- he tries to produce a page a day and has pumped out a book almost every year. "Oaktown Devil" was followed by "Shakey's Loose," "Turf War" and "Peanut's Revenge." "Crackhead," his fifth novel, is complete but not out yet, and he's working on No. 6, "Sweet Pea's Secret." Last year, he won the Chester Himes Award, the top prize at the annual Chester Himes Black Mystery Writers Conference.

Jackson, who grew up with eight siblings and a single mom in North Richmond, East and West Oakland, says he mines people, places and events of his occasionally rowdy past for inspiration.

"These eyes have seen a lot," said Jackson, who briefly ran with a "hood rat" crowd in Richmond before voluntarily straightening out in high school. "Of course, I make it up. But I know it could be real, because it happens every day. . . . It's my version of what happens in the ghetto. Unlike most people, I'm not outside looking in."

Though hip-hop lit in general might seem overly simplified or terribly exaggerated, it's this keeping-it-real quality that fans most frequently say they respond to.

"I could relate to it because it's like the stuff going on in Oakland . . . killing for no reason, drugs and turf wars. He understands what Oakland has to go through," Michelle Hang, a ninth grader at Oakland Technical High School,

said of "Oaktown Devil."

"It's just like picking up the newspaper and finding out what's happening to other people in the community," said Bowens, 47, who now owns a complete autographed set and a reading set of the series. "If you've lived, you've experienced some of the stuff in (Jackson's) books, especially if you're in the black community. It could be someone in your family or someone you know. . . . It's real."

Booksellers and librarians have been marveling at the popularity of the books among young, black men -- a demographic group that tends to veer away from novels. "If you read the surveys," said Lloyd Hart Jr., the co-owner of the Black Library Booksellers, "most black males do not read a lot of fiction. "

At Oakland High School, librarian Iantha Cooper shrugs it off when Jackson's books disappear and buys more -- occasionally with her own money -- because she's happy to see teenagers so enthused about fiction.

"If a boy wants to have the book, let him have it," she said. "Let him have it."

"If nothing else," said Clara Anthony, who owns a black bookstore in Baltimore, "it's caused a whole generation to read."

Not everyone is enthusiastically welcoming these new literary arrivals, however.

"I'm not happy about it because I like good literature. If you don't hone your craft, if don't put effort and energy into honing your craft, it's an insult to writers that do," said Blanche Richardson, the manager of the Afrocentric Marcus Bookstores in Oakland and San Francisco. "I don't mean to be snooty about it, but some of this stuff, you couldn't possibly read. There's a book in here called 'Booty Call.' I keep turning it sideways because I don't want to look at it." Some of the books are so hastily thrown together, she said, that sentences are missing verbs, or the words "their" and "there" are confused throughout, or the errors are so abundant it would be a compliment to call them typos, because "that assumes they know how to spell."

Some also object to what they see as the books' uncritical relationship to crime and violence.

"The glorification of pimps and ho's -- that bothers me a lot," Richardson said. "That codification of culture which I find demeaning. They truly do glorify street life." Some employees at Alameda County's Juvenile Hall don't like street lit to circulate because they think the books promote criminal behavior, said Jackson, who's been invited to talk to youth there on several occasions.

But even Richardson said some hip-hop lit -- and she includes Jackson's books here, though she hasn't read them -- are more sophisticated or more cautionary than others.

"Our books are true to hip-hop, but our books have consequences," said Stringer of Triple Crown Publications. "We take them on that ride, but at the end of that ride they crash into a wall. We encourage them not to live like that."

The bad guys in Jackson's series also always go down in the end, which some fans say makes the books morality tales, after a fashion. But Jackson doesn't concern himself with those kinds of questions.

"I don't try to write for nobody's social conscience or nothin'," he said.

"I don't worry about nothin' when I write, I just write. . . . It's, like, fiction. I can say what I want to."

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