

ALAN v29n3 - The Urban Experience in Recent Young Adult Novels

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community in Houston. Manny (Parrot in the Oven), César (Crashboomlove), and Eddie in (Buried Onions) live in predominantly Mexican American neighborhoods in Southern California, while Babylon Boyz portrays a largely African American neighborhood in East Oakland. For Rania (The White Horse), the streets of the city are her home. Homeless since the age of fourteen, Rania sleeps in laundromats, on street corners, in shelters, or when she has pan-handled or stolen enough money, in hotel rooms.

Characteristic 2: A broad range of socioeconomic levels is represented.

The lives of urban youth are not monolithic. Urban adolescents grow up in middle class neighborhoods, ghettos, barrios, and upper class sections of the city. They live in two-parent and single-parent homes. Some live alone or with relatives while others live in foster care or rely on friends for a place to live. Their parents are doctors, lawyers, ministers, and store owners, as well as persons who are unemployed or living on welfare. The best literature about urban youth portrays the variety of lifestyles found in America's large metropolitan cities.

In *Fast Talk on a Slow Track* Denzel's family lives in a Tudor house in the Addelsleigh Park area of New York City—home to "local politicians and celebrities" (Williams-Garcia 1991 , 13). In *If You Come Softly* , Miah's father is a famous movie director and his mother is a recognized writer, both featured on the cover of prominent national magazines. In contrast, Jolly, in *Make Lemonade* , is a 17-year-old unwed single mother living in the ghetto. She grew up in a foster home, dropped out of high school and is having difficulty supporting her two children. Kata, in *Party Girl* , lives with her alcoholic mother and her "gabacho" boyfriends in a poor neighborhood in Southern California. Manny, in *Parrot in the Oven* , lives in an urban project in which most of his neighbors receive welfare. Though Manny's family struggles and would clearly qualify for welfare, his parents refuse to make application out of a sense of pride: "But you know how the Welfare is...A social worker comes over acting like we're criminals. Then the whole neighborhood knows we're getting Welfare...Besides, I have never done anything in my whole life that would make me beg" (Martinez 1996 , 24-25).

Characteristic 3: Perspective authors capture the language of modern urban youth.

The language of urban youth varies, and the best books about urban youth reflect this diversity. Perceptive authors capture the language of modern day American youth living in the city—youth whose speech may include standard English, Black English vernacular, hip-hop, the language of their parents or grandparents (i.e. Spanish, Vietnamese, etc) and/or slang associated with the drug culture. By incorporating the realistic speech patterns of the teens about whom they are writing, the authors create novels that have a ring of authenticity and familiarity that is important to their intended audience.

Babylon Boyz , for example, takes place in East Oakland in a neighborhood the characters describe as "a war zone after dark" (Mowry 1996, 50-51). The characters' speech reflects the harshness of the neighborhood and can be described as Black English vernacular commingled with drug culture slang: "The fat boy smirked. 'Y'all sellin' your soul for a buzz?' Then he saw Dante's scowl. "Okay. Long's you ain't gonna try an' cap me again" (Mowry 1997 , 118). In this example, buzz is slang for "high" and "cap" for shoot. Similarly, in *The White Horse* , Rania's speech and the speech of the other homeless teens is strewn with drug slang and profanity: "You were gonna leave me, you asshole, you junkie" (Grant 1998 , 45).

Parrot in the Oven, Crashboomlove and Buried Onions are set in the barrio. In Manny's, César's, and Eddie's neighborhoods, Spanish and English coexist: "Que curioso se mira ban," she said. "How curious they looked!" (Martinez 1996, 83.). The dialogue in *Shadow of the Dragon* reflects the Vietnamese character of Danny's neighborhood and his home: "You must be very good and courteous so the Kitchen God, Ong Tao, will give a good report to the Jade Emperor in Heaven" (Garden 1993, 116). In *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*, Melanin's mother attends law school and standard English is spoken in their home. On the streets of his neighborhood, however, Melanin experiences a rich mixture of Black English, West Indian, Spanish, and Southern slang, so much, in fact, that Melanin refers to himself as "bilingual" (Woodson 1995, 9).

Characteristic 4: The best young adult book about urban adolescents convey a strong sense of community

To use Rudine Sims Bishop's term, there is a "we-ness" evident in the best young adult novels about urban teens (Sims Bishop 1991, 38). Sometimes the community is the neighborhood, sometimes it is a group of friends, and at other times, it is the broader ethnic or racial group—African American, Asian, American, or Latino American.

In *Make Lemonade* the community is the neighborhood. La Vaughn learns from her mother that "you can't trust the city to keep the bad elements out"; instead you have to rely on your neighbors. La Vaughn's mother, captain of the Tenant Council, works to keep the neighborhood safe. She and the other members of the community write letters to the mayor, attend city council meetings, and patrol the neighborhood: "I get off the bus & I walk the half-block and the Watchdog lady patrolling the street nods her head at me...The Watchdog lady today is a tough one, she teaches the self defense class for girls only" (Wolff 1993, 15).

In *Babylon Boyz* the community is a group of friends who form an alternative family of sorts. Dante, Pook, and Wyatt have been friends since childhood: "I knowed you bruthas all my life! That make us homeys" (Mowry 1997, 38). They take care of each other physically, emotionally, and spiritually. They also take in other teens, like Jinx who is addicted to crack and Radgi who is homeless, providing them with a safe place to sleep, food, and friendship.

For Gayle, in *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, the community is the broader African American ethnic community. When Gayle is sent to live with her uncle and his family in Georgia, she initially resists her family's preoccupation with family history. It is only after she spends time caring for her frail grandmother, Miss Great, that she begins to understand the history of her family, from Africa through slavery to freedom, always holding onto their faith. When Miss Great makes her the next keeper of the family's oral history, the Telling, Gayle finally understands her responsibility to honor the struggles of those ancestors and the power of their faith.

Authors of the best literature about urban youth do not shy away from the dangers many urban adolescents face, specifically violence, drug addiction, drug dealing, and prejudice. Instead, they incorporate these harsh details into their stories as a way of authenticating the experiences of numerous inner-city youth.

Characteristic 5: The dangers of inner-city life are realistically depicted.

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Violence can touch the lives of urban adolescents in a number of ways. Some urban adolescents experience the horrors of child abuse and domestic violence. In *Forged by Fire*, Gerald becomes the protector of Angel, his stepsister, when his stepfather beats, then sexually abuses her. Gerald must use his wits to both successfully intervene and to convince Angel that he can help her. In *Run for Your Life*, Kisha's father, tormented by his inability to find a job after the gas station at which he worked closed down, shoots his wife in the leg, the conclusion of a bitter argument about his unemployment and his wife's assumption of the provider role in the family. Kisha, unable to face the pain of what has happened, leaves home to live with one of her teachers.

Other urban adolescents experience the consequences of gang warfare. Several novels provide a vivid look at gangs. *Party Girl*, set in Southern California, begins with the funeral of Ana, a fourteen-year old girl, killed by an enemy gang member. Kata, Ana's best friend, describes Ana's death this way:

The back window rolled down, and a sawed-off shotgun pointed at us from a backseat. The shadowy face over the gun yelled an enemy gang name in a low, growling voice...I sprang from behind the Dodge as angry white fire split the night. Ana and I rolled to the ground with gunfire spraying over us, hitting trees, chipping the cement curb, and shattering car windows...Ana's blood covered my blouse. Tiny rivulets streamed down my arms and legs (Ewing 1998, 17-19).

Eddie and Danny, in *Buried Onions* and *Shadow of the Dragon*, respectively, also experience firsthand the consequence's of gang violence. Both lose their cousins to gang warfare: Eddie's cousin Jesus, is stabbed; Danny's cousin Sang Le is brutally beaten by members of a white supremacist gang.

In *If You Come Softly*, Jacqueline Woodson reminds readers that urban victims of violence are often innocent casualties in the wrong place at the wrong time. Miah, a well-to-do African American adolescent, meets with the realities of gun violence, despite the privileged life he leads. Though his father has warned him about the need to comply immediately with police commands, Miah, innocent and lost in his thoughts, fails to respond to a police command. The police fire at him and kill him, a mortal consequence of his failure to stay alert in a threatening, though familiar, environment.

Another threat to the safety of urban teens is the prevalence of drug use and drug dealing. In some urban neighborhoods, drug-dealing activities circumscribe the daily lives of teens, forcing them to plan their movements in the neighborhood to avoid street corners designated for dealing, and to make an uneasy peace with those who control the trade. In *Run for Your Life*, Natoniah lives too close to Filbert Street, the main drug dealing thoroughfare, to be able to avoid it. In this scene, she instructs a friend on the protocol of walking down Filbert, after having just observed a drug deal:

'Don't point,' Natoniah whispered nervously. 'Don't ever point.' 'Forgot,' I said. 'You can't afford to forget. They'd just as soon kill you as look at you,' Natoniah warned. 'The only people who point at them are pointing them out to someone who has no business knowing who they are and what they're doing.' (Levy 1996, 14)

The best young adult novels about urban youth also provide a strong and clear model of decision-making about drug use without being heavy-handed. In *Slam!*, for example, Slam refuses to believe that his best friend is dealing crack: "Anyway, crack was the wrong road and anybody that lived in the hood knew where that was at, you don't have to teach fish to deal with water." (Myers 1996, 74). In *Babylon Boyz*, the boys refer to Air Torch, the local dealer, as a "reptile" (Mowry 1996, 16) and discuss dealing in terms of how it affects the neighborhood—"what sista or brutha you wanna burn" (78). Darren, the track coach in *Run for Your Life*, requires the girls stay clean of drugs, not get pregnant, and do well in school in order to participate on the team. In *The White Horse*, the imagery of cocaine as "a pet" a "white horse ballooned to carousel-size with staring eyes and a frozen mane," combined with the death of Rania's boyfriend and the abuse Raina suffers at the hands of her addict mother, send a clear message: drug use is a dead end street (Grant 1998, 216).

Prejudice is a subtle danger, but nonetheless a real danger, that threatens the well being of many urban adolescents. The best books show adolescents struggling with prejudice, especially stereotyping and racism. As Slam explains, "[Stereotyping] is what happened to brothers in the hood. People check us out and ran down who we was without even seriously checking us out" (Myers 1996, 134). In *Shadow of a Dragon*, a local store owner will not give Danny's cousin, Sang Le, a job because someone told him Sang Le was a Vietcong. In *If You Come Softly*, when Miah transfers to an exclusive private school in Manhattan, the other students think he is on scholarship and administrators place him in remedial classes, though his school record indicates no need for remediation. César, in *Crashboomlove*, becomes more and more marginalized because of the reactions his classmates have to his language and cultural differences.

The best books also work to counteract stereotypes of urban teens by creating characters from various economic and social backgrounds who in the details of their lives challenge social expectations borne of stereotype: teens like La Vaughn, in *Make Lemonade*, who are successful in school and plan to attend college, teens like Slam, in *Slam!*, who understand and choose to avoid the dangers of drug use, teens like Kata in *Party Girl* who leave gang life behind, and teens like Gerald in *Forged by Fire* who sacrifice their own safety to care for their families.

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Characteristic 6: One theme shared across books written about urban youth is a sense of survival, both physical and psychological.

Although the best young adult novels about urban teens do not always end "happily," they do provide urban teens with a sense of survival, both physical and psychological. In *Forged by Fire*, Gerald and Angel survive a number of ordeals by relying on their constant love and caring for one another. In *Make Lemonade*, Jolly, with La Vaughn's encouragement, goes back to school where she learns skills that change her life and the lives of her children. Even in *Buried Onions*, which seems at times to be an overwhelmingly bleak portrayal of the consequences of urban poverty and violence, Eddie decides to join the Navy at the end of the novel, suggesting that perhaps Eddie will finally be able to leave his bad-luck and sense of despair behind in Fresno.

The unmistakable message in all of these books is that creating a future depends on the ability to first see that choices do exist in life, and then to make the tough ones. Dante, in *Babylon Boyz*, says it best: "Life won't be easy. Maybe it never would. But there were choices, and it was better when you had friends to help you make the right ones. There was a way out of Babylon, but you had to have perspectives to find it" (Mowry 1997, 188).

Characteristic 7: Young adult novels about urban youth deal with issues of importance to all teens.

One of the key characteristics of the best young adult novels about urban youth is their appeal to all teens, not just urban teens. While the novels are set in inner cities, the issues the teens struggle with are familiar to all teens: coming of age, identity development, the need to belong, friendship, sexual identity and curiosity, relationships with parents and other family members, death, drugs and alcohol, fear of failure, school, and teenage pregnancy, just to name a few. As Melanin says: "The world turns upside-down when you are thirteen-going-on fourteen. I want to ask someone right now--when will it right itself again" (Johnson 1995, 6). The best books address that "upside-down" feeling teens occasionally experience during adolescence.

Parrot in the Oven, Slam!, From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun, and Shadow of the Dragon are coming of age stories. Like Sisters on the Homefront and Make Lemonade both deal with teenage parenting. The themes of independence, value of education, and love of family are at their core. Fast Talk on a Slow Track deals with fear of failure and fear of change. Forged by Fire and Run for Your Life explore the horrors of domestic violence and its impact on families. The White Horse looks at teenage homelessness and drug addiction. Crashboomlove and Buried Onions focus on isolation and the impact it can have on a teenager's self-esteem. Babylon Boyz and If You Come Slowly are ultimately stories about family, friendship, and love. And Party Girl is about loss, betrayal, and survival.

Characteristic 8: Celebration of family is an important feature of young adult literature about urban youth.

Although identification shifts from parents to the peer group during adolescence, family relationships are still important to most teens (Elkind 1998). The best books for urban young adults portray teens struggling to achieve independence from adults, but at the same time, remaining cognizant of the significance of family in their lives.

In Shadow of the Dragon for example, though Danny yearns to escape his responsibilities as Anh-hai, the eldest son, when his girlfriend's skinhead brother kills his cousin, Danny reports him to the police:

I did remember something, sir. I remembered that the blood of a dragon flows through my veins. Just as it flowed through my cousin's veins. An honorable, brave dragon that will do anything for his family, no matter what the cost. Yes, I did remember something after all, officer. I remembered who I am. (Garland 1993, 303)

Manny, in Parrot in the Oven , joins the Callaway Projects gang in order to fit in with his peers. When one gang member steals an elderly woman's purse, however, Manny discovers that he doesn't belong in that world: "In that instant of trying to call out to Eddie, everything changed. It was like I'd finally seen my own face and recognized myself; recognized who I really should be" (Martinez 1996 , 210). In that moment, Manny realizes that his place is at home with "the squiggly TV, the lumpy cherub angels on the frame of the painting, the glass top coffee table" and his sisters sleeping on the couch (Martinez 1996 , 215).

In The White Horse , Rania, a homeless child and new mother struggles valiantly to 'create' a family for herself and her new daughter, finally allowing herself to trust a teacher who adopts both her and her daughter. This new family structure lets an adult care for her as a daughter, for the first time in her life.

Even in Babylon Boyz where the primary focus is on the alternative family the boys have created, Dante's father and Wyatt's mother provide stability and serve as positive role models for the boys and their friends. Dante expresses love and admiration for his father who works on a towboat. The boys think "Wyatt's mom cool" (187). When Radgi gives birth, it is Wyatt's mother and Dante's dad they depend on to "figure out what to do" (187).

Characteristic 9: Much of the literature about urban young adults incorporates some aspect of cultural history or heritage and conveys a feeling of ethnic pride and identity.

Much of the literature about urban young adults features African American, Asian American, and Latino American teens. Cultural heritage and ethnic pride is one theme shared across the best books. In Shadow of the Dragon , Garland weaves authentic details about Vietnamese lore and customs into the story. In Like Sisters on the Homefront , there is a strong sense of racial pride in the heritage and oral traditions of Gayle's Georgia relatives. Manny's grandmother and father too tell stories--stories about life in Mexico in Parrot in the Oven .

Ethnic pride and identity are often revealed in subtle ways. In Run for Your Life , for example, Kisha demonstrates an appreciation for the rich hues of skin color as she evaluates the new track coach's appearance: "I like the way he looks. Nice hair, clipped real short, big full lips. And real chocolate skin, like my dad's" (Levy 1996 , p. 21). Miah, in If You Come Softly , describes feeling "warm inside his skin, protected," (Woodson 1998 ,5) and in Buried Onions and Parrot in the Oven there are references to traditional Mexican foods.

Conclusion

It is clear that young adult literature is able to provide the urban adolescent reader with protagonists "just like him." But the best of these books offer much more. Books like those we have considered in this article provide the teen reader with vicarious experiences in the responsibilities of growing independence, sympathetic recognition of the challenges of urban experience, reaffirmation of the significance of cultural, ethnic and individual differences, and a realistic sense of optimism about the future.

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