
A Tool for Change: Young Adult Literature in the Lives of Young Adult African-Americans

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ABSTRACT

AFRICAN-AMERICAN YOUNG ADULTS face a great challenge. Many fight daily for mere physical survival. All struggle in one way or another for emotional wholeness in environments that militate against this. Statistics paint an appalling picture of deteriorating black family life, random and senseless violence in black urban ghettos, spreading poverty, death at an early age by gunshot, and rampant teenage pregnancy. While these problems are entrenched and seemingly intractable, a virtually untapped and neglected resource is available. At a time when multiculturalism is gaining a modicum of respect, young adult literature written from an authentic black cultural perspective can prove to be a valuable tool in helping black young adults achieve the skills and knowledge they require to succeed in this society. Because libraries, both public and school, have traditionally been the repositories of this literature, they have the responsibility to ensure that these books are more positively used.

Over the years, countless scholarly works have been written about the African-American experience. In addition to examining the African-American's place in American history, some scholars have taken special interest in the black family, black youth, and black urban life (Billingsley, 1968; Frazier, 1939; Glasgow, 1980; Glick & Mills, 1974; Gutman, 1976; Hill, 1973; Moynihan, 1965; Wilson, 1987). As early as 1908, W. E. B. DuBois wrote *The Negro American Family* and, years before that, described black life in the city of Philadelphia (1899). Since that time, except for that of a handful of scholars, interest

in these subjects has waxed and waned, invariably increasing after incidents of urban unrest and turmoil such as the riots of the 1960s. The most recent riot, occurring in Los Angeles in May 1992, and escalating incidences of senseless urban violence have combined to renew scholarly, as well as public, concern for discovering why such events occur.

One has only to look at statistical data compiled and interpreted in book form (Hacker, 1992) or data directly from the U.S. Bureau of the Census or from other government agencies to see why there might be unrest, despair, and even a sense of hopelessness in the black urban ghetto in general and among black young adults in particular. It is clear that these young people have much to contend with and have fewer and fewer tools to overcome the obstacles before them, obstacles that have the power to defeat them even before they are out of infancy. These are forces that weaken the black family, that undermine education, and that glorify violence.

The 1990 census report indicates that African-Americans make up 11.9 percent of the total population of this country, yet they disproportionately contribute to statistics which, when translated, portray the face of ongoing human tragedy. To begin with, almost two-thirds of all black babies are now born outside marriage. This means that a large percentage of black families are headed by females. In fact, 56.2 percent of all black families are headed by women and 55.1 percent of these women have never been married (Hacker, 1992, pp. 67-74). More disturbing is the tendency of black teenagers to begin sexual activity at a relatively early age. It is estimated that, by age fifteen, 68.6 percent of black teenagers have engaged in sexual intercourse. The results of this activity are that some 40.7 percent of all black teenage girls become pregnant by age eighteen. Some 99.3 percent of these girls elect to keep and raise their babies (p. 76). Many of these girls live in multigenerational households with a mother, other children, and the daughter's children (p. 72).

Perhaps the most devastating statistics have to do with the effect these lifestyle patterns have on the way many of these black families live. Fifty-six percent of black single parent families have incomes less than the poverty level of \$10,530 for a family of three. In fact, 39.8 percent of families receiving federally sponsored Aid for Dependent Children (AFDC) are black. This means that they are, because of income, relegated, for the most part, to substandard housing, inadequate health care, and inferior schools.

The litany continues, but the statistics concerning black men are particularly disturbing. Nationwide, 500,000 black men are serving time in jails and prisons for criminal offenses. More than 1 million have criminal records (p. 74). Violent death now accounts for more

deaths among young black men than any other cause. If a black man is fifteen to twenty-five years old, he is 3.25 times more likely to die than his black female counterpart. What is most dismaying is that the leading cause of death among black men in this age group is gunshot wounds (Hacker, 1992, p. 75).

Historically, African-Americans have, in very large numbers, been poor. In 1990, they made up 10.1 percent of the work force but received only 7.8 percent of all earnings. In that same year, the median income for all black families was \$21,423 as compared with \$36,915 for all white families. In 1990, 37 percent of all black families earned less than \$15,000 a year, and 44.8 percent of all black children lived below the poverty line (Hacker, 1992, pp. 98-99). Even with added education, there still remains an income disparity between blacks and whites. With a high school diploma, black men earn approximately \$797 for every \$1,000 earned by a white man with the same diploma. With a college degree, black men earn only \$798 compared with the \$1,000 earned by their white counterparts. Black women, on the other hand, are much closer to achieving parity with the earnings of white women at every educational level (Hacker, 1992, p. 95).

The majority of poor African-Americans live in the central cities of this country, and 70 percent are concentrated in low income neighborhoods. Here, it is difficult to find work or to get to the place of employment even if one is fortunate enough to have a job. With few factory jobs available—the mainstay of the black working class—unemployment remains high. The unemployment rate among blacks since 1974 has been in double digit figures. In 1983, it was at a high of 20 percent and has consistently remained twice that of the white unemployed (Hacker, 1992, pp. 102-03).

In the area of education, 63.3 percent of all black school-age children still attend segregated schools (Hacker, 1992, p. 162). This statistic reflects not only school segregation but housing segregation as well since blacks tend to be concentrated in predominantly black neighborhoods. Looking more closely at black school attendance patterns on a state by state basis, Illinois tops the list of segregated schools, with 83.2 percent of its black students attending segregated classes. New York is not too far behind, with 80.8 percent attending segregated schools, followed closely by Mississippi, with an 80.3 percentage rate (p. 163). To compound the problem, the schools that service these students are failing. The ills of the nation's public schools have been well documented (Kotlowitz, 1991; Kozol, 1991; Rist, 1973).

A brief look at crime statistics reveals that African-Americans make up 47 percent of those awaiting trial or serving short jail terms. More disheartening, blacks account for 40.1 percent of those prisoners on death row and 45.3 percent of the prisoners in state and federal

prisons. Blacks account for 61.2 percent of robbery arrests nationwide, 54.7 percent of all arrests for murder and manslaughter, and 43.2 percent of all arrests for rape. Most of the crimes committed by blacks were against the person or property of another black person (Hacker, 1992, pp. 180-81).

These statistics clearly indicate that the African-American family is under siege, that young blacks are especially vulnerable, and that tremendous and seemingly intractable problems are pandemic in the black community. Is it any wonder that a young African-American boy or girl might feel alienated from school and from home, that he or she might come to accept violence as a way of life and idleness as something to do? Is it surprising that a young black girl, seeking love and affection in the only way she knows how, might come to see having a baby as giving her life focus and meaning? Through the years, programs, services, and projects were introduced to the black community in hopes of improving lives. Most have failed if statistics can be believed.

Yet, there is a resource that can be enlisted in this battle to save black youth, and it is virtually an untapped commodity. This commodity is young adult literature. This literature can provide black young adults with a means of transcending racism and segregation, can lead them to self-discovery, and can help them eliminate whatever sense of isolation or alienation they may have. It can also help them overcome entrenched personal problems. And because the nation's libraries have traditionally been the repository of such literature, these are the institutions, both public and school libraries, that need to be recruited in this effort. It is the library that has a great responsibility, even greater than that of the schools, to see that this literature gets into the hands of the people who need it the most.

The idea that literature can be used for self-understanding, for understanding the human condition, and as an agent for change is not a new one. Robert Probst (1988) contends that, in the process of reading literature, some of the reader's concepts of the world are reaffirmed, modified, or even refuted, and that this can have the result of changing the reader. This reading of the text can be for the reader a process of self-creation, where, in searching for a response to the text, in responding, and in finding errors, the reader gains a greater sense of self. Here, atmosphere, suitability of the literature, reader receptivity, and textual reliability are crucial to the process that Probst describes. Louise Rosenblatt (1968) describes the reading of literature as an intensely personal experience which can help develop in the reader habits of critical thought, heightened sensitivity to others, and a more fully articulated set of values and principles.

This power of the book, of literature, of the written word, coupled with the reader, is nowhere more forcefully demonstrated than in the life of Frederick Douglass, the black abolitionist. In his *Narrative*

of the *Life of Frederick Douglass*, he wrote of the revelations brought about by a book:

I was now about twelve years old, and the thought of being a slave for life began to bear heavily upon my heart. Just about this time, I got hold of a book entitled *The Columbian Orator*. Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book....In the same book, I met with one of Sheridan's mighty speeches on and in behalf of Catholic emancipation. These were choice documents to me. I read them over and over again with unabated interest. They gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away from want of utterance....The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery. (in Chapman, 1968, pp. 240-41)

In describing his boyhood in slavery, Douglass movingly recounted his passionate desire to learn to read so that the knowledge contained in books could be his. He finally understood, he said, how to find the "pathway from slavery to freedom."

While Frederick Douglass was able to transform himself from slave to free man through books, Malcolm X transformed himself from hoodlum to revolutionary. Books allowed him to become, by turns, first Malcolm Little, then Malcolm X, and finally El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. He writes this of himself in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*:

I suppose it was inevitable that as my word-base broadened, I could for the first time pick up a book and read and now begin to understand what the book was saying. Anyone who has read a great deal can imagine the new world that opened. Let me tell you something: from then until I left that prison, in every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading in my bunk. You couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge....In fact, up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life. (X, 1965, pp. 172-73)

Could not these same kinds of transformations take place in black young adults today? After all, both men were writing about freedom of the spirit, about healing their psychic wounds even in the direst of circumstances, one on a slave plantation and the other in a prison cell. Books—the right books at the right time—spurred their growth as human beings and enabled them to be more than they had been.

Others have shown the need for literature about the African-American experience as seen from an African-American perspective. Rudine Sims (1982) discusses the value of books which reflect a black cultural perspective, books, for instance, which make use of black vernacular. Sims contends that culturally legitimate books can contribute the most toward improving the image black children have of themselves.

Houston Baker (1980) looks at the impact black literature has had on the lives of black people since the eighteenth century. He writes that autobiography, in particular, has always been important,

and that the lives of prominent and not so prominent blacks have been a beacon of sorts for other blacks to follow. For him, all the major African-American writers have had something unique and important to say to black people about the black experience.

Still others discuss the importance of choosing the right books for use by young black readers (Stanford & Amin, 1978; Williams, 1991). To be effective, the best books are those which develop empathy, enhance self-image, reflect black culture and tradition, and help in understanding the effects of racism. Most importantly, the vast majority of the books discussed by these authors are books which fall into the category of young adult literature. Books with adult characters of any color, including the classics, are not the books that black young adult readers most readily identify with. Of all groups, they are most in need of books which depict protagonists whose lives, lifestyles, and problems mirror their own.

For the poor disadvantaged black young adult, the ideal books should reflect reality but then point the way to a different and better reality. They should demonstrate that there is indeed a way out of the ghetto, out of poverty, and out of dreadful situations. They should show that life does not have to be lived the way it is being lived now. There are books that have the potential to do this, but, like medicine, the reader must have a steady dose.

The books that are discussed here can be found in many libraries. The list is not intended to be exhaustive by any means, but it does represent a beginning and, by necessity, presents a limited selection. These books are fine examples of books for young adults that can evoke the kinds of feelings about the history of the African-American struggle, about the nature of black protest, and about overcoming personal adversity that can cause positive change in the reader. Young black readers can see themselves in these pages. They can feel and see what the characters see and feel, engage in a unique dialogue, know that they are being spoken to in a special way, and embark on a great journey of self-discovery. These books tell the reader that there is value in knowing African-American history and that strength can be gained from sharing in African-American cultural traditions. They tell the reader that it is important to take responsibility for oneself and to be responsible to one's community. All are presented with the viewpoint that life may not be a "crystal stair," but it is certainly worth climbing (in Davis & Redding, 1971, pp. 306-07).

Slavery was once a fact of life in America. The labor and toil of the African slave created this nation's wealth. But it was also slavery that nearly destroyed this country, leaving a legacy of poverty and ignorance that is still in evidence today. Knowledge of that period for the black young adult is self-knowledge. It is not enough to know

the names of battles and generals. It is more important to know that human beings with human feelings lived behind the slave's mask.

Virginia Hamilton's (1988) *Anthony Burns: The Defeat and Triumph of a Fugitive Slave* pulls off the mask of one slave, revealing a human being with fears, desires, and faults. More important, the reader is given a sense of how it felt to be a slave, to be a young child in slavery, and then a young man. Anthony's exhilaration at being free of slavery is shared but so is his despair at being recaptured. Through flashbacks, the reader experiences with Anthony how it must have felt to lack the protection of both parents, to not know whether your father is the white plantation owner or another slave, and to be slapped or beaten for the slightest offense. The reader comes to know, as Anthony came to know, that slave life was precarious, unpredictable, and frightening.

In his captivity, Anthony feels great pain and a deepening despair about ever regaining his freedom:

He was aware of all that went on around him, but it was hard now for him to keep his mind on any one thing for long. His head felt light. He wanted so much just to lie down. The wrist irons and the chain that connected them grew heavier by the minute. Anthony couldn't find the strength or will to lift a finger even to scratch his nose, which itched him. The itching became a dull aching. It in turn spread into a throbbing loneliness throughout his body. He felt miserably hot in his shoulders and deathly cold in his legs. (Hamilton, 1988, p. 35)

Anthony's thoughts in a whirl, he can only repeat, "Here I be!... Caught, I am, and no longer a man. Father, protect me!" (p. 33). He wants only for the long nightmare to be over: "He gripped the bars, pressing his head up against the iron stripes. Get it over, he thought. Lord? Lord God. I can't take much more" (p. 71). This is how slavery looked and felt, and it is this kind of portrayal that has the potential to change and move readers. They will learn about loneliness and despair but also about loyalty and dedication to a cause.

When Anthony thought himself to be most alone, help emerged. Lawyers, both black and white, volunteered their services to the captured slave. Ministers took to their pulpits and to the streets on his behalf. Mass meetings were organized and held, meetings which protested both Anthony's seizure and the legality of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Young black readers will learn much here, not only about slavery but about themselves. They will come to know more about slavery and the struggle against it than they possibly could from any textbook.

The story of Anthony Burns is based on biographical fact and is beneficial because it is only through the telling of hard truths that doors to a deeper knowledge are opened. Hamilton's *The Magical*

Adventures of Pretty Pearl is no less truthful in its depiction of slavery, but it is told through the use of traditional black folklore and myth. For some, reading the black dialect used in Hamilton's book may prove difficult, but it is well worth the effort.

Hamilton introduces the reader to John de Conquer and John Henry, two of the major heroes in black folklore. Here, however, they are linked and made to be brother gods who come to earth to alleviate the suffering of the slaves. Through them and their sister, Pretty Pearl, the slaves are given medicines of many kinds to soothe their physical pains and laughter and song to soothe their emotional pain. Lesser gods are made to take physical form and assist slaves in running away.

As a young and innocent god, Pretty Pearl sees the plight of the newly enslaved African and is moved to pity:

Not long, and the two of them came upon a sorrowing crowd moaning through the tall grass. Staying hidden, they witnessed some other ones who forced the crowd along with prodding poles. The crowd wept pitifully. All were shackled—neck, wrists and ankles—with chains. Dirty and tired, they jibbered and jabbered in twelve tongues. (Hamilton, 1983, p. 13)

Hamilton sweeps the reader along from the world of the slave ship, to the world of plantation life, and finally to life after the Civil War. Here the reader sees that the leap from slavery to freedom was not a very long one. Both slavery and this new free life look much the same. Young adult readers are shown what hunger and poverty can do to a people and how oppression can wear them down and wear them out.

Most striking is Hamilton's look at a neglected area of African-American history: the groups of ex-slaves who formed communities in isolated places to avoid contact with whites. These communities often allied themselves with American Indian tribes for mutual aid and protection. History lives, and it is not only palpable in Hamilton's hands but also fun. Now young black readers may begin to see why magic, spirits, and the "mojo woman" still weave their spells in black life. Hamilton's book might also help them understand why some of their older relations still insist upon using traditional folk remedies for some ailment or another instead of two aspirins.

By way of biography, Mary Lyons takes the reader on a journey into the life and times of a prominent writer in *Sorrow's Kitchen: The Life and Folklore of Zora Neale Hurston*. Who cannot help but be inspired by the life this woman lived and by the struggles she waged against adversity. Farmed out to relatives by her stepmother after the death of her mother, her early years were desperate:

While she yearned for "family love and a resting place," Zora lived in a series of homes where she got hand-me-downs and hit-or-miss meals

instead. She was expected to provide some money for her support, so despite her longing for books and school, she dropped out to work as a maid. Feeling "restless and unstable," Zora held many such jobs, but never for long. She found work boring, and it depressed her to see others who were able to go to school. (Lyons, 1990, p. 21)

Yet, despite these uncertain beginnings, Hurston did finish high school, began college, and even studied anthropology at Columbia University, all under conditions of grinding poverty. She is quoted as saying, "I love courage...I worship strength" (p. x), two traits she must have had in abundance. During the course of her life, she wrote seven books and more than 100 articles, essays, and short stories but against a backdrop of sometimes harsh criticism from her peers and public neglect. What was it that kept her going? Perhaps she answered that question herself when she wrote, "I took a firm grip on the only weapon I had—hope—and set my feet" (p. 24).

Hurston's desire to succeed did go deeper than simply hoping. Her formative years were spent in the all black town of Eatonville, in Florida, an environment that nurtured her sense of herself as a black woman. Her mother had encouraged her curiosity and imagination, urging her to "jump at de sun." Her source of strength seemed to come from her own innate tenacity, from her determined mother and belligerent father, and from Eatonville itself. Most young African-Americans do not have this unique combination of elements in their lives, but from this book they can certainly experience what it really means to struggle and to overcome with only the aid of hope, talent, and determination. They can remember and perhaps take heart from Hurston's bold challenge to herself and her fate as a black woman in a white world: "I shall wrassle me up a future or die trying" (Lyons, 1990, p. 120).

Hamilton's *W. E. B. DuBois: A Biography* introduces the black young adult reader to W. E. B. DuBois, whose ninety-five years of life began in Reconstruction and ended on the eve of the great March on Washington in 1963. Talented and gifted, he fought a long hard battle for fair treatment of American blacks, championed the destruction of colonialism in Africa, and called for closer ties between Africans and African-Americans. A Ph.D. sociologist from Harvard, he wrote several groundbreaking books about the black experience and was a founder of the NAACP. Persecuted and hounded by the federal government in his later years, he paid a heavy price for his activism.

Aristocratic, almost white in appearance, and aloof in manner, he might be perceived by today's black youth as unimportant to issues now facing black America. However, his words, written in 1914, refute this:

for the great mass of 10,000,000 Americans of Negro descent these things are true: We are denied education....We can seldom get decent

employment....We are forced down to the lowest wage scale. We pay the highest rent for the poorest houses. We cannot buy property in decent neighborhoods....We cannot get justice in the courts. (Hamilton, 1972, pp. 106-07)

For far too many black Americans the conditions DuBois listed seventy-eight years ago are a fact of life. Few can argue with his 1915 assessment that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line." And is this statement he made in 1914 any less true today for many living in America's black urban ghettos? "As a race we are still kept in ignorance far below the average standard of this nation and of the present age, and the ideals set before our children in most cases are far below their possibilities and reasonable promise" (Hamilton, 1972, p. 113).

Young readers of Hamilton's book will not only get to know W. E. B. DuBois and his contributions but will be provided with an intimate glimpse of his times. They will actually receive a series of mini-lessons on Reconstruction, race relations, World Wars I and II, black political agitation, and strategies of the NAACP. They will learn about lynchings, about persecution, about injustice, and about blacks and communism. It is just possible that the young African-Americans who read this book will see the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s in a new light. They might be inspired by the notion that there are no easy roads to justice and freedom, and that every road taken represents sacrifice on someone's part.

Autobiography, too, can provide the elements needed for growth and understanding. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* is one such book. If for no other reason, the young adult African-American should read this book for its depiction of black rural Southern life. Everything is here, the black church with its look and feel, the black child's anguish at being black, cotton picking season, and black community life.

Angelou writes about the pain of growing up black in the South but also about its joys. Life in the South of the 1930s was difficult and often dangerous, and these things stamped Angelou for life and made her what she became. She writes about the threat of white violence in this way:

His twang jogged in the brittle air. From the side of the Store, Bailey and I heard him say to Momma, "Annie, tell Willie he better lay low tonight. A crazy nigger messed with a white lady today. Some of the boys'll be coming over here later." Even after the slow drag of years, I remember the sense of fear which filled my mouth with hot, dry air, and made my body light. (Angelou, 1970, p. 14)

At another point, she describes the black cotton pickers who came daily to her grandmother's store for supplies:

Brought back to the Store, the pickers would step out of the backs of trucks and fold down, dirt-disappointed, to the ground. No matter how much they had picked, it wasn't enough. Their wages wouldn't even get them out of debt to my grandmother, not to mention the staggering bill that waited on them at the white commissary downtown....In later years I was to confront the stereotyped picture of gay song-singing cotton pickers with such inordinate rage that I was told even by fellow Blacks that my paranoia was embarrassing. But I had seen the fingers cut by the mean little cotton bolls, and I had witnessed the backs and shoulders and arms and legs resisting any further demands. (p. 7)

The scenes of rural life, where shanties, outhouses, coal-oil lamps, and freezing well water are all a part of the daily routine, tell the reader that this is how their grandparents might have lived. This is a book that can tell the reader how it used to be and how it still is in certain parts of this country.

In Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, the reader can learn even more about rural Southern life, this time in rural Mississippi in the 1930s. With its tale of white hatred of blacks and black oppression, the young black reader may come to understand why so many blacks fled the South for the North during the so-called "Great Migration." Yet, this is not a gloomy book. It is about a strong black family determined to keep its hard won land despite threats from all sides. It depicts a quietly strong father who is able to protect his family, a mother who sees the value of education for her children, and a loving grandmother. And it describes a black community which supports its own in times of crisis.

From this book, young black readers should come away with a sense of the forces that helped shape their grandparents, their parents, and continue even now to shape them. They will learn about sharecropping, about night riders, about inferior schools, about poverty, and about racism in its most destructive and insidious form.

Down in the Piney Woods, by Ethel Footman Smothers, is a work which can also contribute to the young black reader's knowledge of life in the rural South, this time in Georgia. The dialect spoken by Annie Rye and her family may even be familiar to readers, for it still can be heard in a variety of forms in the South as well as in the urban North. And the renditions of children's rhymes sprinkled liberally throughout the book should also be familiar. Even the characters and their ways of speaking and their mannerisms have an old familiar ring to them.

This book is about life in the country, with its pig and chicken feeding chores and crop planting and harvesting. Life goes along at a slow simple pace following the seasons and tradition. But more than this, *Piney Woods* is about becoming a family and of knowing

the value of family. When her stepsisters come to live with the Footman family, Annie Rye cannot bring herself to accept the three new additions to the family. It takes some time for her to realize the truth of her grandmother's words:

Sometimes it takes some of us a little longer to come up to where we oughta be. And maybe some of us never will. The good Lord ain't made none of us perfect. We all got our shortcomings. That's why we gotta take a little and give a little. And bear along wit each other. Make allowances....That's what being a family is all about. (Smothers, 1992, p. 27)

Racism does rear its ugly head in the form of a white neighbor, but this only serves to forge deeper family ties. For those readers who are not from the South and whose families are not from the South, this book allows them to share in some black Southern cultural traditions. Black Southern foods are fried, baked, and boiled; uniquely black insults are exchanged; nicknames are everywhere; and children know what happens to them when they "git into devilment." One feels as if one is sitting on the front porch on a warm summer evening listening to someone tell old family stories. For readers who have never experienced this, here is a great opportunity.

A number of young adult books with black protagonists take place in cities and in urban ghettos. They deal with a variety of issues—e.g., drugs, abandonment, gangs, violence. They can be used by readers facing these and similar problems to better understand themselves and their situations. Alice Childress's *A Hero ain't nothin' but a Sandwich* is a good example. Benjie is a thirteen-year-old drug addict, only he doesn't know it. He says he can stop taking drugs anytime he wants to; he just doesn't want to:

When I'm wrong, I just be it. I ain't scared of a livin ass, not even if they kill me. Why folks got to lie and say I'm on skag, say I'm a junkie? My grandmother say, "You a dope fiend." I don't call her coffee fiend or church fiend. No, I don't do that. They lyin! If you "on" somethin, that mean you hooked and can't give it up. I ain't hooked. (Childress, 1973, p. 10)

Benjie knows that life is difficult, that the ghetto is horrible, that "my block ain't no place to be a chile in peace" (p. 9). But Benjie has a choice in the matter. He can choose to get off of drugs and change his life because he has the support of his family, or he can choose to destroy himself. Unfortunately, this is the choice facing far too many real-life Benjies. But it is not beyond the realm of possibility that some very real Benjies might read this book and get a message that does change their lives.

Scorpions, by Walter Dean Myers, looks at gangs and gang violence. In black urban ghettos all over this country, black boys more and more have to contend with gang violence in one way or

another—as members of gangs, as victims, or as observers. Gangs can be attractive, and they can offer protection. Jamal does not want to join the Scorpions, but he finds it hard not to join. He does not want the gun he owns, but it makes him look and feel tough and protects him from bullies.

Scorpions describes real problems, and the reader of these pages will immediately see this. The reader will also recognize Jamal's lack of direction as well as the absolute powerlessness of the schools to help students who are most in need of help. Myers offers no solutions, but he does show that innocence, conscience, and responsibility still are important, even in the ghetto.

Rainbow Jordan, It Ain't All For Nothin', and *The Friends* all deal with issues of loss of a parent through irresponsibility, abandonment, or death. Life is hard in the ghetto, and children have to grow up fast. They often have to grow up without fathers, mothers, or teachers who understand them. They have to contend with intransigent bureaucracies that do not or will not protect them and with schools and teachers that have given up on them. These are tremendous odds, but each of these books, in its own way, can help black kids. Friendship and loyalty are important, they say, so, too, is honesty, and "somebody in your corner" is also important.

There exists a treasure trove of young adult literature for young black readers. It consists of books which speak to black youth in a special way, mirroring their lives and feelings and reflecting their history and culture. These books have much to say to these young people, be it realistic fiction, biography, or folklore. The realistic novels confront readers with real life situations that force them to evaluate the actions and decisions of the protagonist. Historical fiction provides readers with information about their pasts, allowing them to better understand their present. Biographies demonstrate that there are others who have trod the same or similar path as the reader and that the reader need not feel alone.

The interaction of young black readers with texts about themselves is a powerful exchange, one that is limited only by access and opportunity. Libraries must take special pains to see that their collections of these materials do not just sit on the shelves. Libraries must get these books off the shelves and into the hands of readers.

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