

## In Defense of Urban Fiction

By Madeline King

Urban fiction, also called ghetto lit, gangsta lit, hip-hop lit, and street lit, has varying definitions depending on who you ask. Essentially, urban fiction centers around low-income inner city dwellers whose metropolitan lives are survivalist. Stories involve sex, prostitution, violence, drugs, homelessness, gangs, and crime, and usually have fast-action plots and impulsive characters. Due to its loosely defined nature and recent popularity, street lit is thought to be a new genre, but it has in fact been around for a long time. Some argue that the same themes which characterize street lit today, such as disadvantaged young people using crime to survive, can be traced back to the writings of Charles Dickens (Morris, 2012).

The genre is dominated by African American writers and protagonists, especially in the United States, but is not race or culture specific (Morris, 2012). Canadian urban fiction is still forging its own identity as it has been heavily influenced by US street lit. The Canadian urban experience is different than the US urban experience and thus it is not surprising that Canadian urban fiction is developing its distinct brand. Urban fiction is not just about African Americans, but about street culture in general (Kya Publishing, 2012). The youth on Canadian streets are of all races and ethnicities; urban centers and

low-income neighbourhoods and schools are multicultural. It is this multiculturalism that helps create a distinctly Canadian vibe.

There are many important reasons to include urban fiction within your collections and when providing readers' advisory. For one, urban fiction tends to be very popular with reluctant readers because of the fast-paced action-driven plots. Urban fiction also gives a voice to the impoverished youth fending for their lives as the often forgotten children of urban culture. Providing these stories to our patrons helps acknowledge these youth. Many urban youth will identify with these stories because street life has touched their lives in some way. It is important for our patrons to read fiction where they are featured, and where they can recognize themselves in the characters for validation and self-acceptance (Morris, 2011). As for the youth who are not directly affected by the hardships of street life, providing them with a different perspective then they are used to helps to acknowledge the people and the stories of youth street life in our society that are so frequently ignored.

Due to the mature themes of urban fiction it is not surprising that it has become a controversial genre, particularly with regards to young adults and library collections. There are the conservative opinions that would attempt to censor themes such as violence and sex from teens. In truth, these stories for the most part are not romanticizing street life, but rather are relaying the brutal realities faced by so many youth. In response to this controversy, mainstream printing presses in

the US started publishing street lit aimed specifically at young adults. These tamed-down versions attempted to keep sex and violence at arm’s length, using different writing techniques such as recounting events rather than telling them in real time. This “safer” teen street lit is found to be babyish or inauthentic by teens that are true fans of the genre.

The segregation between adult street lit and a softer young adult urban fiction does not seem to exist in Canada. There are many titles with youth protagonists about youth culture that seemingly appeal to young adults but are often marketed or shelved as adult. That is, there is very little Canadian urban fiction being branded to young adults. Shelving the urban fiction in the adult section of public libraries will not reduce the appeal of these books to teens and should not be left off any readers’ advisory lists. The fact is, teens like urban fiction, and teens should have access to books they want to read.

**Canadian urban fiction titles**

O’Neill, Heather. (2006). *Lullabies for little criminals*. Toronto: HarperCollins.



Heather O’Neill’s novel *Lullabies for little criminals* was the winner of 2007 Canada Reads competition. The young protagonist named Baby lives with her heroin-addict

father, with whom she has a loving but complicated relationship. Due to his

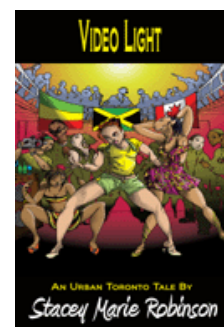
addiction and absence, she must learn to navigate the tough streets of Montreal and fend for herself at an early age. Eventually Baby falls in with a pimp who takes her virginity and forces her into prostitution and heroin use. Reading this book is like watching a car crash in slow motion. Life just kind of carries Baby along as she falls deeper and deeper into bad situations. Be prepared for a tough read, but this great Canadian urban fiction novel is very much worth it. This story is not romanticized, embellished, or contrived in any way, as it relays the hard truths of life on the streets. This difficult and mature subject matter is all too real and relevant for many urban teens.

Little, Ashley. (2013). *Anatomy of a girl gang*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.

Author of YA novel, *The new normal*, Ashley Little’s most recent work, *Anatomy of a girl gang*, is a masterful novel told in six voices of the young girls in the Vancouver gang called the Black Roses. This is an honest account of urban girl culture; injected with violence, drugs, and theft, relaying the hard lives of youth on the street.

Robinson, Stacey Marie. (2008). *Video light: An Urban Toronto tale*. Toronto: Kya Publishing.

*Video Light* is a Romeo and Juliet story set against the background of urban Toronto. Social conventions and opposing



upbringings fight to keep Delia Chinn and Ryan Wright apart, yet they are willing to defy everything they know to stay with each other. The portrayal of challenging social norms is saddening but poignant.

**Other Titles:**

Bourne, D.A. (2007). *Crazy drama*. UK: Xlibris.

Robinson, Stacey Marie. (2008). *Eighteen*. Toronto: Kya Publishing.

Robinson, Stacey Marie. (2008). *First year*. Toronto: Kya Publishing.

Robinson, Stacey Marie. (2008). *Friends with benefits*. Toronto: Kya Publishing.

Robinson, Stacey Marie. (2009). *Request to rewind*. Toronto: Kya Publishing.

Robinson, Stacey Marie. (2012). *I wish I never met him*. Toronto: Kya Publishing.

With, Cathleen. (2006). *Skids*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.

**Resources:**

Hernandez, Melanie. (2008). Teen Urban Fiction Pathfinder. Retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/site/teenurbanfiction/Home>

Kya Publishing Website (2013). Retrieved from: <http://www.kyapublishing.com/>

Kya Publishing was founded by author, Stacey Marie Robinson in 2007, and is the only Canadian publishing company dedicated entirely to urban fiction.

**Cited:**

Kya Publishing. (2012, February 12). Defining Canadian urban fiction: A panel discussion at Toronto Public Library. [Video file]. Retrieved from: <http://youtu.be/xr7F9w-RqRY>

Morris, Vanessa Irvin. (2011). *The Street Lit Author and the Inner-City Teen Reader*. Young Adult Library Services, 10(1), 21-24.

Morris, Vanessa Irvin. (2012). *The readers' advisory guide to street literature*. American Library Association.