Despite the heated debate over street literature – also known as “street lit,” “urban fiction,” “black fiction” and “hip-hop fiction” – the genre continues to offer immense appeal to adolescent readers. One popular and consistently argued point of contention is that street literature fails to provide quality texts for teen and young adult readers, although no research exists to concretely define quality in young adult texts. Using two sets of criteria that seek to characterize quality within the scope of young adult texts (as developed by experts and researchers in the study of young adult literature), this study presents evidence of demonstrated quality in eighteen popular street literature novels and discusses the vital need for the genre to be validated as a legitimate and worthwhile reading choice for adolescents.
URBAN FICTION AS “QUALITY” YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE:  
A CONTENT ANALYSIS

by

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Introduction

The current swell of young adult audiences enjoying street literature has caused quite a stir within the literary, library and educational communities. Some are concerned that the topics explored in urban fiction are too mature for teens and that the books influence readers in negative ways. Individuals may not feel comfortable recommending or teaching books that feature a plethora of drug references and/or explicit sex scenes because it “clashes” with their personal values, or because their administrators won’t allow such books to be collected (Pattee, 2008; Emlen, et al., 2009). Others hesitate to endorse the genre because of the frequency of racy covers, poor grammar and improper punctuation. They might also tell you that these books are too realistic and graphic – or not realistic enough because they show African American and minority communities in a negative and stereotypical light (Honig, 2008). But, above all, the most frequently taken position among critics of the genre is that these books lack quality and they should not be made readily available to teens. Does the whole genre really lack quality, though? We can define explicit content and point out erroneous grammar but how do we define something as subjective as quality within the scope of young adult literature? What qualities do “good” young adult books possess that make them ideal for teens and is street literature really the antithesis of quality teen reading?
Literature Review

Before we can begin to examine urban fiction through the lens of quality young adult literature, we must first define street literature, young adult literature and how others have perceived quality in young adult literature.

Urban Fiction

Sometimes it’s called “street literature,” or “street lit.” Other times, it’s known as “urban fiction,” “hip-hop lit,” “ghetto fiction,” or even more loosely: “African American fiction.” Typically, this genre deals with the grittiness of life on the streets, boasting fast-paced plot lines focused primarily on minorities dealing with drugs, sex, crime, violence and the acquisition of money in an urban setting. Gritty first-person narratives highlighting street life were first popularized by Claude Brown’s Manchild in the Promised Land (1965) and The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1966) (Morris, et al., 2006). A few years later, Iceberg Slim and Donald Groines rose to success with titles like Mama Black Widow (1969) and Never Die Alone (1974), respectively (Pattee, 2008). More recently, Omar Tyree’s Flyy Girl (1996) and Sista Souljah’s The Coldest Winter Ever (1999) reignited the street lit craze, with the latter title creating enough buzz to created a “marked increase in the popularity of the genre” (Morris, et al., 2006).

Usually focused on a protagonist between the ages of sixteen and twenty-three (Morris, et al., 2006), plot lines revolve around “drama,” whether it’s the protagonist versus another person or society as a whole (p. 19). Females tend to be preoccupied with
wearing the latest fashions and falling in love (usually with “the wrong kind of man”) while male characters are concerned with achieving status and power within their communities (Morris et al, 2006, p. 19). Both genders use their sexual prowess as a means to achieve wealth or prominence. Rooted in urban neighborhoods, street lit features events that many urban residents face, such as violence and poverty. Characters usually face some kind of inner moral struggle over balancing their dreams with survival (Morris et al., 2006, p. 19). In many cases, the survival of the main character is deeply tied to their loyalties to their family, their set (neighborhood or gang) and their friends. Street lit books for adults generally take place on the streets, while those written expressly for young adults are usually centered on or take place in a school setting.

Although it is not the case for all urban fiction, many of the stories told are cautionary and most include some kind of moral or warning. Readers of K’wan’s Gangsta: An Urban Tragedy (2003), for example, will find that the gripping, violent tale is prefaced with a piece of heartfelt advice.

[I]f I can help somebody by putting my thoughts to paper, then I’ve accomplished something. [...] To those who feel misunderstood or unwanted, walk with me, and know that you’re not alone. To those who feel that life has only given one option, there’s light at the end of every tunnel. I don’t knock nobodies hustle cause survival is rule number one. But you gotta understand that we do have options, all we gotta do is look. (p. 1)

Stringer’s semi-autobiographical Let That Be The Reason (2002) also contains a powerful afterword that encourages readers to grow and learn from her experiences. She also includes an apology.
The events that have transpired in my life are very personal. I’ve exposed myself with the prayer that my life can be used as an example to warn others of the awful dangers of the drug Game. [...] Please realize there is no fair exchange for your freedom. Consciously choose Freedom for your life from the beginning. I implore you to become aware of the laws governing your actions and the actions of those you love. [...] To the addict, my family and my community: forgive me because I knew not the extent to what I did... To you, nor myself. (p. 243-244)

Similarly, Teri Woods adds “Just A Little Note” to the end of True to the Game (1994), advocating for readers to “give yourself time to grow and open your minds to education because it is a key to the way out. [...] All your consequences in life are dependent upon your behavior” (p. 209).

While the genre has been historically published by independent houses like Triple Crown Publications, Macavelli Press and The Cartel Publications, major publishers like Simon & Schuster, Ballantine and Random House have capitalized on the market by creating imprints specifically for the genre (Pattee, 2008). Sales are strong in urban areas and “stores that sell it sell hundreds of copies,” allowing independent bookstores to “pay [their] rent and lights” while also helping to achieve “double-digit growth in the category” in chain stores like Barnes & Noble, with room for future expansion (Rosen, 2004). Many independent bookstore owners have reconsidered their stance on stocking the genre, due to consumer demand. “There are books I have tried not to carry, but people want them. As a retailer we’re not going to say, I don’t want to see 100 copies of this,” admits Jame Fugale, co-owner of an independent Los Angeles
bookstore (Rosen, 2004).

For some, the success of street lit has meant more than selling books. Triple Crown Publications founder Vickie Stringer was able to pursue her dream of becoming an author while completing a seven-year prison sentence for selling cocaine by penning Let That Be the Reason (2002) during her term (Vernon, 2008; Hoenig, 2008; Peach, 2011). After being released from prison, Stringer chose to publish the book herself and sell copies from the back of her car after being unable to find a publisher. Thanks to the book’s success and her business savvy, Stringer “transformed herself into a highly successful author and publisher” (Peach, 2011). Within a 16-month period, Triple Crown Publications had sold 300,000 trade paperbacks (Peach, 2001, p. 17). Similarly, former gang member Y. Blak Moore “traded drugs for a word processor” and was able to use the phenomenon of street literature as an opportunity to become an author and turn his life around (Rosen, 2004). Moore’s new street nickname is “Random House” after the publishing house that gave him a book deal (Rosen, 2004, p. 34).

Similar to the discourse surrounding hip-hop, street literature is heavily criticized for its glamorization of material wealth and impulsive violence and unsurprisingly, street literature borrows heavily from hip-hop culture, as books contain references to hip-hop lyrics either in their chapters or in their titles. Keisha Irvin’s Me and My Boyfriend (2004), is an allusion to the chorus in Jay-Z and Beyoncé’s hit song, “’03 Bonnie and Clyde” (Carter, et al., 2002). Nikki Turner’s Riding Dirty on I-95 (2006) is a reference to the Chamillionaire song “Ridin’” featuring Krayzie Bone (Seriki, et al., 2006). Authors also use popular lyrics to frame chapters in their stories. Paula Chase uses a lyric from Brooke Valentine’s song, “Girlfight” featuring Lil’ Jon and Big Boi (D. Johnson, et al.,
2005), to prepare readers for a chapter full of passive-aggressive dialogue between the protagonist and a peer, while L. Divine borrows a quote from Aaliyah’s “At Your Best (You Are Love)” (Isley, et al., 1994) to highlight to the angst the protagonist experiences as she reflects on her attempts to communicate with an ex-boyfriend. Hip-hop artists have also taken roles in bolstering the status of the genre, too. In 2007, 50 Cent co-wrote Death Before Dishonor with popular urban fiction writer, Nikki Turner, author of the Hustler’s Wife series.

Although urban fiction was initially published for adult audiences, young adult audiences can’t get enough of it (Morris, et al., 2006; Pattee, 2008). Urban publishing houses like Triple Crown Productions responded to the demand for young adult street literature by publishing young adult-friendly titles, like Nikki Turner’s A Project Chick (2003). These books skip the explicit sexual content and graphic violence, but still contain the same hip-hop and cultural references while dealing with similar issues that urban teens face like growing up, friend drama and family issues. Even Scholastic offers its brand of urban fiction with the “Bluford High” series, but it may be considered too tame for experienced street lit enthusiasts (Pattee, 2008).

Denene Millner, co-author of street fiction series Hotlana, argues that street lit fills a need for books that appeal to young adult African American audiences. The lack of books available for the demographic “means 15-year-old black girls from Harlem; Detroit; Compton, Calif.; and Atlanta are stuck reading Gossip Girls [sic] books (about rich, vodka-swilling, prescription drug-downing, Upper East Side white girls) or, you guessed it, adult fiction. Specifically, urban fiction” (Millner, 2008).

The genre is so popular that it is frequently stolen from libraries (Pattee, 2008).
Bookstore owners have moved displays from the front to the back of their locations in order to better monitor customers and inventory (Rosen, 2004). Some libraries have adjusted their checkout policies to address the “high nonreturn rate” of the genre (Morris et al., 2006). The issue was recently highlighted in an informal survey of librarians about street lit and libraries, which reported that “many” librarians are hesitant to “waste” money on books that may disappear before they reach the checkout desk for the first time (Emlen, et al., 2009). However, 92.5% of respondents offer the genre to their communities, and according to the results of the survey, urban literature is “bringing nonreading teens into the public library” (Emlen, et al., 2009).

Teens who read street lit are also eager to discuss what they’ve read (Morris, et al., 2006), including themes such as “violence, hustling, rape, negative images of women and unsavory images of the community” (p. 20). Of the “nonreading” teens that urban fiction has been able to bring into bookstores and the libraries, the most significant demographic is that of young African American males, a group that has been historically difficult to reach. “Up until now there wasn’t anything that spoke to them,” says publishing agent Manie Barron (Rosen, 2004).

Street lit puts the spotlight on taboo topics in realistic, explicit and unapologetic ways, and like hip-hop, it “walks a fine line between social criticism and profanity” (Pattee, 2008). Critics believe that by including such mature content, the genre promotes and glorifies “immoral behavior and unhealthy life choices” like illegal drug use, gang life, crime, violence and casual sex (Hill, et al., 2008). In the informal survey about street lit and libraries (Emlen, et al., 2009), one librarian from a rural Ohio town wrote that her library director would not allow the genre into the library’s collection because he felt it
was “inappropriate” for the town. Other participants from urban areas claimed that urban literature contained too many “negative stereotypes,” and that the genre was “too controversial” to purchase for their communities (Emlen, et al., 2009). Linton Weeks, a vocal critic against the genre, argues that the genre “is a mixture of foul language, flying bullets, fast cars, a flood of drugs, fallen angels and high-priced frippery. It venerates grams over grammar, sin over syntax, excess over success” (Hill, et al., 2008). The genre has been so saturated with controversy that a documentary, *Behind Those Books*, was filmed to defend the genre against its naysayers (Patrick, 2011). Filmmakers Kaven Brown and Mills Miller – both prior street lit publishers, authors and marketers – wanted to show viewers how urban fiction can serve as “a stepping stone” to teens that have never picked up a book before (p. 8).

**Young Adult Literature**

In and of itself, young adult literature is difficult to define. Former YALSA President Michael Cart noted in an article titled “Rescuing Young Adult Literature” (Campbell, 1997) that "the borders of the land of young adult have always been ill-defined and subject to negotiation.” Young adult literature is not strictly defined by an age group and can include children’s and adult titles, depending on the level of interest from the young adult population. In the same article, Campbell (1997) discusses the influence that libraries, bookstores, teens and publishers have all cast on the genre, including the placement and collection of young adult literature in libraries during the 1960s, the first major appearance of young adult literature on bookstore shelves ten years later and the increasing growth and purchasing power of the teen market, with the latter
resulting in a huge impact on the marketing and publishing of young adult literature, most notably marked by the swift surge of series fiction in the 1980s.

One year later, in 1998, Chris Crowe, English and English Education professor and former editor of The English Journal, made a similar suggestion in “Young Adult Literature: What Is Young Adult Literature?” that the fairly new genre is in a state of flux due to the large variance in perspectives. Crowe saw that teachers, parents, librarians and readers stumbled to gauge the boundaries that mark off the nebulous YA-territory: does young adult literature include Gulliver’s Travels? A Separate Peace? The Animorphs series? (p. 120) Even today, some thirteen years after Crowe’s article, the New York Times Best Sellers list fails to delineate between bestselling children’s and young adult literature. Nilsen and Donelson define it simply as the literature that adolescents select on their own, while others argue that young adult literature is, in fact, literature that is specifically targeted at and marketed to young adults (Hayn & Bach, 2011). Hayn & Bach (2011) go on to point out that even scholars find the term “young adult” speculatory because it could include ages 12 to 18 or, as Michael Cart (2001) writes, ages 18 to 25.

**Defining Quality Young Adult Literature**

With a breed so elastic and amorphous, it comes as no surprise that there is a lack of criteria available for evaluating quality works within the genre. In 2006, a benchmark study was published in the journal English in Education by Rosemary Hopper, a lecturer at Exeter University who attempted to describe what quality looks like in young adult fiction according to 21 teachers, 3 school librarians and a teaching assistant. The study looked at the perceptions of teachers and teaching staff with regard to
quality young adult literature because although she believed that the role these individuals “play[ed] both in mediating between conceptions of quality in children's reading and as gatekeepers between pupils and what is required of them in the curriculum,” she was concerned that their perceptions may have hindered the use of young adult literature in the classroom (p. 59). Ultimately, the study did not result in “absolute criteria” indicating quality within young adult fiction, but instead, found “consistent patterns” demonstrating quality from the perspective of a teacher (p. 67). These markers included:

- A well-structured and imaginatively structured plot which may well move beyond simple chronological narrative to include time shifts or differing perspectives;
- A text with pace and a sense of secrecy, surprise and tension which engages attention and encourages the reader through narrative hooks and excitement;
- Characters who in some way reflect the experience of the teenage reader - this often means a teenage hero or heroine and increasingly a strong female protagonist;
- Characters who allow the teenage reader to experiment or empathise with roles outside immediate experience thus allowing the reader to learn and develop in their own life through the fictional experiences of the characters;
- Language which is imaginative, lively and varied in vocabulary, correct in grammatical and sentence structure, yet which is accessible and neither patronises through over simplicity nor confuses through lexical density or complexity;
- Themes which inform truthfully about the wider world and allow the reader to engage with difficult and challenging issues relating to their immediate interests
or global concerns;

- Allowing the possibility of personal growth through the inclusion and challenge of engaging with pertinent issues;

- Providing the challenge which will lead to development of reading skills (p. 67-68).

After the publication of the study in 2006, Nilsen and Donelson decided to develop a similar list of characteristics to analyze their Honor List of young adult literature – a list of the “best young adult literature” they had produced for their textbook, Literature for Today’s Young Adults. These findings were then published in the eighth edition of the text, published in 2009. Their approach differed from the Exeter University study because while the “Exeter study set out to find the characteristics of ‘good’ YA literature... [Nilsen and Donelson] started with YA literature judged by many people to be ‘good’,” essentially working backwards to create a set of characteristics from a list of books, instead of a list of books from a set of characteristics (Nilsen and Donelson, 2009, p. 19). Although the teachers and teaching staff in the Exeter Study appeared to be somewhat familiar with young adult literature, they were unable to name books that contained the “desired qualities” of quality young adult literature (Hooper, 2006, p. 19). Nilsen and Donelson sought to flesh out the list of quality young adult literature that would be deemed worthy for curricular use. The characteristics that Nilsen and Donelson felt characterized the best young adult literature are as follows:

- Young adult authors write from the viewpoint of young people;

- “Please, Mother, I want the credit!” The young person can receive credit for their accomplishments because the parents or guardians are mainly absent;
• Young adult literature is fast paced;
• Young adult literature includes a variety of genres and subjects;
• The body of work includes stories about characters from many different ethnic and cultural groups;
• Young adult books are basically optimistic, with characters making worthy accomplishments;
• Successful young adult novels deal with emotions that are important to young adults (Nilsen and Donelson, p. 20-35).

Although similar to the Exeter study characteristics, these traits are more broad and can apply to non-fiction texts as well as fiction.
Problem Statement

Presently, there is no body of literature that examines what exemplifies a quality street literature text. There exists no research defining the qualities of street literature that make it so appealing to young adults, aside from anecdotal mentions of the subjects that the genre frequently depicts, like sex, drugs and violence. A handful of articles, including Malcolm Venable, Yvette Ingo and Tayannah McQuillar’s “It’s Urban, It’s Real, But Is This Literature?” (2004) interview street literature authors, fans and critics about their opinion of whether urban fiction counts as quality literature, but does not give any indication of what quality or “real” literature is. In the article, a bookstore-owner states that his store doesn't “even trouble customers with the real literature any more,” while another states that “Not everybody is going to read a Zadie Smith or Colson Whitehead,” noting that the “proliferation [of street literature] means a decline in craftsmanship” (Venable, et al., 2004). Speaking to this lack of craftsmanship, Hill, Pérez, and Irby (2008) point out that looking through the lens of English education, one of the most consistently used arguments against using street literature in the classroom is the “poor quality of writing,” citing “poor grammar, weak sentence structures, and improper word usage” to be common among the genre, but also making note that “rushed production schedules and inadequate publishing resources are key contributors to many of the errors” (p. 78, as cited in Jones, 2006). Nick Chiles argues that the texts lack “literary ambition and substance,” thereby implying that “good” literature possesses both qualities (p. 78).
Pattee (2008) also makes note of the “uneven quality of its content,” mentioning that “some of its stories read more like first drafts than polished manuscripts” (p. 28).

Because of the lack of research available to examine whether street literature does or does not contain the same characteristics that is found in quality young adult literature, this study seeks to examine popular street literature texts through the lens used to define quality in young adult literature.
Methodology

The titles found on Emlen, et al.’s “Street Lit Canon” list that appeared in a post to the School Library Journal blog titled “What Librarians Say About Street Lit” (2009) in conjunction with the titles found on Amy Pattee’s “Urban Lit: A Core Collection” in the School Library Journal article “Street Fight” (2008) formed the study sample. The eighteen books included on these two lists are as follows:

1. True to the Game (1994) by Teri Woods
2. Flyy Girl (1996) by Omar Tyree
5. Let That Be the Reason (2001) by Vickie Stringer
9. The Hoopster (2005) by Alan Lawrence Sitomer

16. Tyrell (2007) by Coe Booth


The contents of each title were analyzed using characteristics from the Exeter study (Hopper, 2006) and Nilsen and Donelson’s “Literature for Young Adults” (2009). While reading each title, I highlighted and made marginal notations for passages and quotes that I believed to embody one or more of the fifteen “quality” characteristics.

Zane’s Sex Chronicles (2008) appeared on the Street Canon list (Pattee, 2008), but because the book is purely erotica, I felt it unnecessary to include it in this study. Although most of the eighteen books include sexual content that can be graphic, the sexual content is not the sole focus of the story.
Results

Each of the fifteen characteristics of “quality” young adult literature is examined within the context of the titles included in the study. Quotes, passages and information from the novels serve as evidence to support the texts’ satisfaction of criteria. Due to personal preference and regardless of their intended meaning, racial epithets appearing in quotes or passages have been substituted with asterisks.

Exeter Quality 1: “A well-structured and imaginatively structured plot which may well move beyond simple chronological narrative to include time shifts or differing perspectives”

Each of the eighteen books had a “well-structured” plot, albeit most of the storylines were linear and fairly predictable (Hooper, 2006). Of these eighteen, I found four novels to be “imaginatively structured” (p. 67). Two of the titles, Let That Be the Reason (Stringer, 2001) and Push (Sapphire, 1996) employed flashbacks to add depth to their stories and meaning to the actions of the characters. The remaining two books, Paula Chase’s So Not the Drama (2007) and Omar Tyree’s Flyy Girl (1996) handled multiple sub-plots in a way that lent meaning to the primary story line while also successfully fleshing out the motivations and private thoughts of the characters.

Vickie Stringer’s semi-autobiographical Let That Be the Reason uses flashbacks that focus on the protagonist, Pam, and her then-boyfriend, Chino, to clue readers on the volatile relationship that Pam so desperately misses.

“Out? Please Chino, don’t leave, you just came home.” I ran to block his exit. He
began to push me aside.

Giving me a grimacing look he spoke, “Every time I look at you I think you and
Erik. Of all the n***** in the city, why did you need him for a friend while I was
doing my bid?” (Stringer, p. 45)

During the course of the plot, Pam transforms into an alter ego named Carmen, becoming
a powerful and decisive businesswoman, first running her own escort service and then
selling and transporting bricks of cocaine to support her son. As she becomes a greater
force in the drug trade, she continues to reminisce about her ill-fated relationship with
Chino. The flashbacks become increasingly violent, ultimately resulting in Pam vividly
recalling when she shot Chino in self-defense.

Fearing the worst, I pointed the nozzle of my gun underneath the pillow at Chino
and aimed. “Tatt!” He didn’t know what hit him as feathers flew from the ripped
pillow. But as the warm hollow point became heated, he responded, “Pooh, where
did you get a gun from?” (p. 192)

These flashbacks are interwoven with Chino’s own perspective, breaking several
times from the first-person narrative of Carmen. Stringer weaves in the change in
perspective during the rising action of the novel, flipping between Chino’s perspective,
Carmen’s narrative and flashbacks of their relationship. Shortly before this violent crux
of flashbacks, Chino asks Carmen for help transporting cocaine and she agrees, wanting
to “do something for him that he would know was from [her] heart” as a way of saying
thank you for all he had taught her about hustling (p. 167). After she fulfills her self-
imposed duty to Chino, the FBI arrests her, along with several other drug leaders in the
area. Among them is Chino. In an act of ultimate betrayal, he tattles on her to receive a
lower bail bond, steals $200,000 of her money and then disappears. The book ends as she awaits her federal trial. Although *Let That Be the Reason* (2001) follows the tragic but predictable rise and fall of a hustler, Stringer’s approach is creative enough to make the plot feel new and exciting. Her use of multiple perspectives around the apex of the novel’s action and the tense flashbacks that explode in between the narrative keep readers captivated.

Alternating chapters flip between the perspectives of twins Lauren and Sydney Duke in Denene Millner and Mitzi Miller’s *Hotlanta* (2008). Although the book isn’t written in the first person, the third-person narrator is omniscient, allowing readers to listen to the featured twin’s thoughts and follow them through their separate but eventually diverging plot lines. Starting off as what seems to be a typical young adult romance novel, Lauren and Sydney must deal with their share of boy drama, on top of getting along as sisters and sharing cars. But, it isn’t until the final third of the book that readers are surprised to see the book turn suspenseful as the twins find out their stepfather’s true identity. As the brother of Lauren’s boyfriend is murdered and he is made the prime suspect, the loyalties of the girls are called into question when they realize that the real perpetrator was their beloved stepfather. This added plot twist ties the majority of the characters together, regardless of the twin they’re connected to and adds another layer of excitement unseen in some of the other books. The alternating perspective also lends itself to the engagement of the reader.

Mariah Mooney – also known as Mina – is a freshman at Del Rio Bay High School in *So Not the Drama* (2007) by Paula Chase. Starting anew as a lowly freshman, she tries to catapult herself to popularity by winning an invitation to the café, an
exclusive outdoor portion of the high school where the “Uppers” spend lunch. In Mina’s sociology class, she is partnered with Jessica – her arch nemesis and second-in-command of the “Uppers” – and three other unfamiliar female students in a project designed to help students either “embrace or eliminate” prejudice from their lives by examining their perceptions of their peers (Chase, p. 67). The group decides to hold a sleepover at each member’s home each weekend to get to know one another and then write about what they’ve discovered and how they’ve interpreted those discoveries. The reflections of each character are included in a journal entry at the end of each sleepover, allowing readers to see each girl’s assignment. Because the narration is told in third-person omniscient, readers are also able to listen to the thoughts of each character, including those involved in the subplots. The imposition of the sociology assignment puts the characters in an uncomfortable spotlight that gives the book an engaging plot that is well structured and creative. With the inclusion of the journal assignments, readers can get an extra look at what the characters have to say for themselves and readers can get a better feel for what drives each character.

One book was able to use the changing of perspectives particularly well, as each perspective featured in the book had a plot line that framed, mirrored and expanded on the growth of the main character, Tracy Ellison. Omar Tyree’s Flyy Girl (1996) uses the device to highlight the vast differences between Tracy and her next-door neighbor, Raheema, who serves as Tracy’s foil. Because they are starkly different from one another, Tyree is able to show the variance in maturity, decision-making and critical thinking skills that Tracy and Raheema display. In doing so, readers are able to measure the reasoning and background of one character against the other. This shift in perspective
also creates opportunities for subplots and Tyree takes advantage by portraying Mercedes, who serves not only as Raheema’s defiant and quick-to-mature older sister, but also as Tracy’s role model. As Tracy makes her way through clothes, money and men, readers can trace the evolvement of Raheema’s independence and Mercedes rise and fall from using men to using drugs.

Tyree features two other important perspectives in Flyy Girl – that of Tracy’s parents, Patti and Dave Ellison. Dave is mostly absent, working long hours as a pharmacist and his relationship with Patti is mostly in a state of self-induced flux. Readers are frequently treated to the two’s innermost thoughts about one another, as the plot between them frames Tracy’s attitudes toward men and expands on her struggle to establish meaningful relationships with the men she pursues. Tyree makes it known that Tracy sees men as conquests and uses them to fulfill the hole that her father left behind as she thinks to herself early on in the book that “if she couldn’t have her dad, then she’d find a substitute” (Ellison, p. 95). Using strong subplots that build on and expand the main storyline, in addition to the use of varied perspectives, Tyree’s Flyy Girl rightfully claims itself to be an “urban classic novel.”

Push by Sapphire (1996) is focused on Precious’ first-person narrative, and includes a “well-structured” and imaginative plot as well as flashbacks to traumatic times in Precious’ past. During the narrative, Precious slips into remembering the vivid details of being raped repeatedly by her father, abused by her mother while carrying her father’s child at twelve years of age and having her father’s child - the first time.

I wake up remembering the last time I pushed. It was two whole days before they brought the baby to me, and I git to see what “a little trouble breathing” mean. I
try to hold out my arms but I’m tired, more tired than I ever been in my life. Nurse Butter and this little black nurse is standing there by my bed. The black nurse holding the baby. Nurse Butter reach under the covers and take my hands. I ball ‘em in fist. She rub her hands over my fist till I open them. (Sapphire, p. 17)

After being expelled from her public school, Precious enrolls at an alternative school to learn how to read and write. There, she gains confidence in her identity as a learner and navigates her independence, moving from the oppressive apartment she shares with her demanding, sexually-abusive mother to a halfway house and progresses from self-hatred to self-love, finally boasting a positive outlook with hopes for her future. The reader watches her blossom through her growing literacy skills and even though she finds out that she is HIV-positive – transmitted to her by her father – she continues to “push,” winning a citywide literacy award and attending incest and rape support groups.

Precious’ unique narrative and well-crafted plot is poignant and Sapphire’s effective use of flashback to capture the most violent times in Precious’ past adds an emotional punch to an already engaging plot because readers can experience Precious’ vulnerability alongside her.

Exeter Quality 2: “A text with pace and a sense of secrecy, surprise and tension which engages attention and encourages the reader through narrative Hooks and excitement” / Nilsen and Donelson Quality Characteristic 3: “Young adult literature is fast paced”

I felt that these two qualities were very closely related, and decided to combine their results. For many of the eighteen texts, secrecy, tension and surprise were key elements. Unsurprisingly, the stories most heavily rooted in gang culture tended to contain the most occurrences of these traits, as stories were generally about hustling,
drama, loyalty and violence.

Within the first ten pages of Teri Woods’ *True to the Game* (1994) a drive-by shooting rings out as Gena, the protagonist, waits in line at the drive-thru of a fast-food restaurant.

All of a sudden and out of nowhere, thunderous gunfire jolted Gena out of her reverie and continued to echo through her body. The bullets sent a screeching sound through her body as the gunman met his target aimed for the four guys in the MPV. [...] Wondering if he should drop her ass, too, he pointed the Uzi straight at her head and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened (p. 11).

And, later, her best friend Sahira is caught in a drive-by and readers aren’t aware that she’s been shot until it is too late.

She felt funny, kind of dizzy and light-headed, *prob’ly just from being scared*, she thought. [...] Putting her hand to her chest, she could feel the ripples of blood-drenched flesh as Winston realized she’d taken a hit too. (p. 62).

Multiple drive-by shootings and a kidnapping occur in the book, including a handful of tense scenes between Quadir, Gena’s fiancé, Gena and his former flame. All of these culminate in the sudden murder of Quadir on New Years’ Eve.

Girls were hopping into rides and cars were riding back and forth as people scattered about the sidewalks, pairing off for the night.

“Shit,” Rik said, as he pulled up behind his back. “Yo, Quadir baby,” he hollered, seeing Ran’s face in the crowd.

“Yo! Go this way,” [Rik] said, pushing Lita trying to move them out of Ran’s range. Quadir saw Rik had his gun pulled. Panic struck him and he grabbed Gena.
“Quadir!” she screamed, as she saw a guy pull a gun and aim straight at them. […] He pointed the gun at her and fired as the seconds lapsed between one another, Gena’s heart pounded like waves against the seashore as Quadir threw her body to the ground like a protective shield. […] “Quadir, come on. They’re gone,” said Gena, realizing something was very wrong.” (p.223-225)

But even after his shocking murder, Gena is surprised by his mother’s impromptu visit to their once happy home in the suburbs. From seemingly out of nowhere, his mother “reached in her pocketbook and pulled out a sheaf of paperwork which she shoved in Gena’s face. “As you see, his house is in my name. I own this house, dear, and I have plans for this property,” threatening a mourning Gena with imminent homelessness (p. 234).

Three of the books, Sister Souljah’s The Coldest Winter Ever (1999), K’wan’s Gangsta (2002) and 50 Cent and Nikki Turner’s Death Before Dishonor (2007) feature a surprising twist as their plot climaxes. The protagonists in the latter two novels are seemingly untouchable – not by the cops or enemy fire – and tension runs high as they navigate the drug games and gang scenes they run.

The first thing O’Leary saw when he stepped in the house was his wife sitting on the couch with her hands tied.

“What the hell!” O’Leary shouted. His eyes bulged wide with fear and confusion. O’Leary was attempting to pull his gun out but his partner Billy was a little quicker. The young detective raised his 38 and fired two shots over O’Leary’s shoulder. The first one went wild and stuck the wall above Snake Eye’s head. The
second one struck him in the leg and folded him. (K’wan, 2002, p. 31)

“Freeze!” The sheriff drew his gun and stuck his hand inside the car.

Stunned, Trill slowly eased back into the driver’s seat until he felt the tip of the sheriff’s revolver at his temple.

“I was going for my registration, man,” Trill said slowly. “Don’t most people keep their registration in the glove box?”

“You trying to get fresh with me, n*****?” The sheriff cocked his gun. (50 Cent and Woods, 2007, p. 17)

Unexpectedly, both characters meet their end thanks to the women who gave birth to their children. In Death Before Dishonor (50 Cent and Turner, 2007), Precious gives up the location of the father of her child, Trill, to a rival gang leader in a misguided attempt to bring her closer to Trill, while in Gangsta (K’wan, 2002), Martina sells the location of Lou-Loc to a rival drug boss in exchange for ten thousand dollars. Both decisions end tragically, as the main male protagonist is murdered out of the blue. But, the surprise doesn’t end there: in the final pages of both books, the love interests of the deceased hunt down the scorned women to seek revenge for the betrayal.

In The Coldest Winter Ever (1999), Winter Santiaga is left homeless and broke after her father is arrested, leaving her to fend for herself in New York City. After finding a halfway house to stay in, she convinces her pregnant friend, Simone, to steal clothing for her to mark up and resell to her roommates. Tensions run high when Simone gets caught and needs Winter to bail her out of jail.

“I got knocked.”
“What?”

“I’m **locked down**. I been here all weekend long. I’m cold, I’m hungry, and I’m dying to get the fuck out.”

“What happened?”

“What happened? That stupid-ass pink dress happened, that’s what. That shit was so fly they had security guards just to *watch it*! Anyway, I need fifteen hundred to make bail. […]

”Alright, Simone, who do you want me to see about the money?” Who do I need to talk to?”

“Stop fucking around, Winter. This shit ain’t funny. Just put the loot up and we’ll make it back as soon as I walk out this dump.”

“What about your money? Where were you keeping that stashed?”

“You mean the baby’s money? I can’t touch it, Winter. It’s for the baby. Come on, just do me this one solid. I’ll hit you right back soon as you bail me out. *You know how we do!*” p. 145

In the second half of the book, Winter stays with Sister Souljah, harboring secret plans to find the whereabouts of her crush, Midnight, knowing that the two are close. She begins to steal money from a doctor in the building. Thinking that she’s put one over on everyone, she takes off with the stolen money, her belongings and Midnight’s file from Souljah’s bedroom. When she opens it, “the first thing that fell out were old newspaper clippings. The first article I picked up had a picture of my father and our house in Long Island. The second paragraph mentioned me by name as well as my mother” (p. 221). This comes as a shock not only to Winter but to readers as well.
The biggest surprise in the book comes in the final chapter, as Winter saddles up with Bullet, a dissenting member of the gang that her father used to lead. The two move in together and life goes smoothly until, eventually, Winter’s shady past finds her.

I didn’t even have time to turn my head a little bit. A brick came crashing through the window of the passenger side of the rental.

“You stupid fucking bitch. You had the nerve to bring your ass back around here.” The car door swung open, Simone charged in. With her heavy hands around my neck, her weight was holding me down on the front seat. I started throwing mad punches. […]

[Bullet] sat me down in the car. For seconds, he just kept saying, damn, damn, damn. Then whoop, whoop, police sirens. I could see the red lights bouncing in the rearview mirror as the police cars ripped down the street. Bullet closed the passenger door and ran around to drive the car. Suckers in the crowd pointed our car out to the police.

That wasn’t as shocking as me watching Bullet walk, pass the driver’s side, pass the car, onto the sidewalk, and down the street like he had nothing to do with it. I opened my door on my side and tried to get out, but the cops was up on me. (p. 276-7)

Once the police arrive, Winter is arrested and charged with being a conspirator to Bullet’s crimes, although Bullet walks away scot-free.

Sure, I rented a car that was being used to transport guns and cocaine. But they wasn’t my drugs. They wasn’t my guns. But since I was sitting in the car I rented, with the stuff concealed inside the teddy bears in the backseat, they
considered me guilty. I’m a conspirator for renting the apartment me and Bullet lived in. I’m a conspirator ‘cause guns discovered had bodies on them. […]

That n***** Bullet had it all figured out. His name wasn’t on nothing. (p. 281)

Surprise was also a source of drama and unwanted attention or scrutiny throughout the books. In Push, Precious’ mother makes an unwelcomed visit to her daughter to break some bad news.

She look down say, ‘Your daddy dead.’ She come out the house to tell me that!

So what! I’m glad the n***** ‘s dead. No, I don’t mean that, but so what. Mama quiet. Mama say, “Carl had the AIDS virus.”

You know, so what, why you telling me. Then oh! No! Oh no, I get all squozen inside. Carl fuck me I could be done have it. Abdul could be—oh no, I can’t even say nuffin’. (Sapphire, p. 85)

In Hotlanta, Lauren is shocked to find her usually cool-headed stepfather “telling somebody off,” “in the hood straight looking like a gangsta all up in some old man’s face” in a bar in the West End, a rough Atlanta neighborhood (Millner and Miller, p.177).

She and readers quickly find out that he “is the biggest gangsta in the West End,” and that his squeaky-clean reputation as a car dealer is a cover-up for his illegal activity (p. 179). Similarly, in Katina King’s Ride Wit’ Me (2006), Mercedes is told the truth by her boyfriend Dalvin about her father, explaining the feud between their families.

My father runs half the streets of Chicago and just about every other part of Illinois. He’s into everything, from weapons, narcotics, money laundering… you name it, he’s got his hands in it. And the half my father don’t run, your father does,” Dalvin stated point blank.
“My dad is a criminal?” I asked, sounding more hurt than surprised. (King, p. 47)

Darcy Willis also makes a discovery about her absent father in Anne Schraff’s *Lost and Found*.

“Yes. Who is that man? What does he want? He’s been at my school and everywhere I’ve been. Why is he stalking me?” Darcy asked with increasing agitation.

“He claims to be your father, miss,” the officer calmly repeated.

Darcy’s heart pounded wildly. She gasped as if she were choking. “My father? No, it can’t be! My father has been in New York for years!” (p.68)

**Exeter Quality 3: “Characters who in some way reflect the experience of the teenage reader - this often means a teenage hero or heroine and increasingly a strong female protagonist” / Nilsen and Donelson Quality Characteristic 1: “Young adult authors write from the viewpoint of young people”**

Because these two characteristics share similar qualities, I’ve opted to include them together. A handful of the books in this study were written from the first-person perspective. These books included *Push* (Sapphire, 1996), *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1999), *Let that Be the Reason* (Stringer, 2001), *Dymond in the Rough: A Platinum Teen Book* (Precious, 2005), *Drama High: The Fight* (Divine, 2006), *Ride Wit’ Me* (King, 2006), *The Sista Hood: On the Mic* (E-Fierce, 2006), *Tyrell* (Booth, 2007) and *Myself and I* (Sewell, 2010). With the exception of *Let That Be the Reason* (Stringer, 2001), which was written from the perspective of a twenty-six year old, eight of these are written from the point of view of a young adult (ages 14-24). The remainder of the books are written in the third-person omniscient, and five of those titles focus on young adults:
Flyy Girl (Tyree, 1996), Lost and Found (Schraff, 2007), The Hoopster (Sitomer, 2005), So Not the Drama (Chase, 2007) and Hotlanta (Millner and Miller, 2008).

Both perspectives enabled readers to hear the private thoughts and feelings of the protagonists and those around them, but the first-person narrations were more in-depth and focused on the main characters thought process and motivations. In The Sista Hood: On the Mic (E-Fierce, 2006), Mariposa considers her sexuality after kissing Sadie, another girl.

I woke up at Sadie’s and she was still sleeping soundly next to me. And all I could feel was panic. Trying to understand how I’d ever let things between us go this far. Did this mean I’m a lesbian? I never really thought I liked girls. I admit, I’ve appreciated another girl’s body or good looks from time to time. I’ll even be the first to say I love me some Mystic or Missy Elliott ‘cause they’re smart and not hooched out. But does that make me gay?

I felt like I wanted to puke. Why me? Why did Sadie decide to kiss me of all people? Do I look gay? I rushed over to Sadie’s mirror. And I just stood there doing an inspection. I got beautiful, long curly hair. Not gay. I’m pretty, definitely not gay. I’m in shape. Well, could go either way. I love hip-hop. Gay. I’m strong. Gay. Well, it’s a split, two to two with one either way. Does this make me bisexual? Hell no. I don’t get freaky like that (p. 129-30).

Having the luxury of Mariposa’s thoughts helps readers follow her train of thought as she discusses her sexuality with herself and gives added insight into her behavior as she copes with the difficult identity struggle.

However, books with the third-person narration were also able to give added
The narrator relays Kelly Lopez’s thoughts in *So Not the Drama* (Chase, 2007) as she considers how to tell her group partners about her life and family.

She wondered how you told three strangers that you’d never had a true friend, had no bond with your mother, and cried at least once a week because you still missed the only father you’d ever known (p. 184).

In *Flyy Girl* (1996), Raheema laments her traditional and conventional approach to life and love, feeling guilty despite being nearly date-raped by a fast boy in the neighborhood.

She could never be like Mercedes or Tracy. It was too late to be like them. She felt too tense about sex, or relationships in general. Or maybe Chuck was the wrong person. She could feel new bumps already beginning to form under the makeup. She popped them, no longer caring about the scars they would leave. She washed the makeup off to see how unattractive her beautiful skin had become. Mercedes had not seen a bump on her skin. Life wasn’t fair, but Raheema decided to hold on instead of joining the fast-paced streets” (p. 304)

With the exception of one title, all of the books felt authentic in their depiction of young adult voices. Unfortunately, *Myself and I* (Sewell, 2010) missed the mark as Keysha’s inner dialogue often felt too mature, unnatural and forced and too much like an adult straining to recapture the voice of youth.

At that moment the dismissal bell rang and everyone sprung to their feet and rushed out into the hallway. Kids were shouting and banging on the lockers just to make extra noise. Many started cursing because they knew they could get away with it without having to deal with any consequences. Students were
littering the hallway with paper and other trash. As I pushed my way through all the madness I felt the urge to participate, so I tossed a folder filled with my useless schoolwork in the air. (p. 92)

Although Sewell writes from the viewpoint of Keysha, her voice does not sound like that of a young adult, and the dialogue in the book is bulky. Although it does integrate slang, voices seem like imitations of those heard in the other books.

**Exeter Quality 4:** “Characters who allow the teenage reader to experiment or empathise with roles outside immediate experience thus allowing the reader to learn and develop in their own life through the fictional experiences of the characters”

Each of the books go above and beyond the everyday occurrences of young adult lives, although, those that don’t can offer comfort to readers who feel isolated or alone in their extreme situations. Some of the tamer titles, like *Myself and I* (Sewell, 2010), *So Not the Drama* (Chase, 2007), *Drama High: The Fight* (Divine, 2002), *Lost and Found* (Schraff, 2001), *The Hoopster* (Sitomer, 2005) and *The Sista Hood: On the Mic* (E-Fierce, 2006) were realistic enough to simulate and mirror the everyday lives of urban teens, while creating situations that were uncommon enough to interest readers. The appeal of these books seemed to lie in their situational dilemmas and predictable formats, and it’s unsurprising that they are all titles belonging to a series. However, these books are ideal for building consistent literacy skills for those very same reasons. Characters seem familiar, but not too far-fetched, and plots are just slightly beyond reality.

In the remaining thirteen books, characters face extraordinary predicaments, usually with fatal consequences. These are all high-interest books that seek to grab readers and pull them to different worlds or, at least, worlds with much higher stakes.
Although *Hotlanta* (2008), *Ride Wit’ Me* (2006), *True to the Game* (1994), *Gangsta* (2001), *Death Before Dishonor* (2007) and *A Hustler’s Wife* (2003) seem formulaic, these bloody, ante-upping romances happen to the richest of the rich, in homes laden with wrought-iron gates and in-home security guards, luring readers in with opulent images until they’re faced with questions of morals and loyalties - just like the characters they’re reading about. These questions may help them consider or reconsider their own priorities in real life.

Readers who know queen bees like Jessica from *So Not the Drama* (Chase, 2007) or strait-laced good girls like Raheema from *Flyy Girl* (Tyree, 1996) may be better equipped to understand their perspectives after reading about them and their motivations. Conversely, readers may be less quickly to judge stories in the news about drug dealers like Carmen in *Let That Be Reason* (Stringer, 2001) and conspirators like Winter Santiaga in *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, 1996), or encourage them to consider the mix of causes and circumstances that lead people to commit crimes or pursue relationships with those who do.

**Exeter Quality 5:** “Language which is imaginative, lively and varied in vocabulary, correct in grammatical and sentence structure, yet which is accessible and neither patronises through over simplicity nor confuses through lexical density or complexity”

The large majority of the books in this study use vernacular language that is exclusive to the demographic they portray: those who live “in the streets” and/or in primarily African American communities. Formally known as African American Vernacular English, this dialect brings with it its own set of slang, linguistic nuances and sentence structure. Because of the specificity of the genre, without the appropriate
vernacular, the authenticity of characters’ voices would be lost for readers.

“Realistic language is a cardinal requirement of successful literature for urban minorities, providing a model linkage between the reader’s culture of origin and the majority culture. It is the linchpin that ties the reader to the imaginative world, to share in the experiences of a central character, and it must ring true” (Guild & Hughes-Hassell, 2001, p. 365).

Additionally, the use of this as criteria for judging “quality” seems to imply that only communities speaking Standard English are worthy of depiction and readership. For this reason, this criteria was omitted from the study.

**Exeter Quality 6: “Themes which inform truthfully about the wider world and allow the reader to engage with difficult and challenging issues relating to their immediate interests or global concerns”**

Each of the eighteen books in some way touch upon the harsh realities of living in urban communities or coping with serious family situations. Some of the issues discussed included rape, abuse, incest, sexually transmitted diseases, divorce, adultery, drug addiction, alcoholism, homelessness, poverty, hunger and crime.

The theme of abuse and rape in *Push* (Sapphire, 1999) educates readers about the lifelong effects of these crimes on a victim. Because Precious’ mother also sexually abuses her, the rarely discussed sexual abuse between a mother and daughter is spotlighted, informing readers of its existence and for those who have experienced it, showing them that their struggle can be overcome in positive ways. And, although teens have surely heard of AIDS, the character of Precious may be their only relevant connection to the virus, providing an opportunity for readers to learn more about its
prevalence and its impact, especially to African American communities and its connection to men who are on the “down-low,” or secretly bisexual. Souljah touches on this in *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) as she explains to Winter about the uncertainty of sexual orientations engulfing the performers she meets. “A lot of them are bisexual. They look like men, dress like men, talk like men, are surrounded by women, but they sleep with men also” (p. 213).

The most common issue covered among the eighteen books is the impact of poverty on communities, most notably how it affects the family unit and attracts individuals to illegal behavior like drug dealing and gang violence. In each book poverty appears, and drugs, violence, murder and prison always follow closely behind. Winter tries desperately to avoid poverty, so she relies on drug dealers to reap the superficial benefits of their hustle – her father, Ricky Santiaga, was a drug lord, after all. Stringer’s Carmen (2002), a single mother, is motivated to pursue illegal activities to provide for her son, but as she progresses in the drug game, she finds herself becoming more reliant on the cash flow it brings. *True to the Game, Gangsta, Death Before Dishonor, The Coldest Winter Ever, Hotlanta, Let That Be the Reason, Ride Wit’ Me* and *A Hustler’s Wife* all examine the lives of individuals wrapped up in selling drugs, whether the focus is on the drug lords themselves, or the women who love them.

These titles include harshly realistic descriptions of drug addicts that can hit close to home, regardless of whether readers have seen the destruction of addiction first-hand. Moments before she is arrested, Winter sees her estranged, once-regal mother in a crowd, looking for drugs. After the federal seizure of the family’s assets following her husband’s arrest, her mother was left homeless and poor.
Shame and disgust are the only things that could describe my state of mind when I spotted Momma in the crowd. She was wearing purple hot pants in the winter, a red T-shirt, runover Reeboks, and carrying a dirty yellow crochet bag. She was bumping into people in the crowd, pushing them out of the way the whole time, staring at the ground, looking for loose change or a vial, the way crackheads do.

Tracy suffers the same jolt of surprise when she sees the once-perfect Mercedes now showing the telltale signs of drug abuse and addiction.

Tracy could not believe her eyes. She blinked at the nightmare. The young woman she had known had lost at least fifteen pounds. She was frail and crooked in her stance. Her long hair looked damaged and oily, and her smooth walnut-brown skin had lost its shine. She walked from the stairs, wearing a dingy white leather jacket and turned her head from Tracy. [...]  

“It’s my God-damn life, Tracy. I don’t have to answer to nobody.” (Tyree, 1996, p. 309)

Although Winter’s life takes a turn for the worst after seeing her mother, Tracy sees the moment as a turning point and changes her life around.

Being poverty-stricken makes it difficult for characters to avoid the lure of financial security that can come with drug money. Tyrell (2007) by Coe Booth follows Tyrell, a fourteen-year-old drop-out who has been left homeless along with his mother and seven-year old brother, Troy, after the arrest and imprisonment of his father. After the arrest, Tyrell’s mother lets the family fall into poverty, loses their apartment, refuses to look for work and places the financial burden on young Tyrell, demanding that he sell
drugs to get the family out of a roach-infested motel and out of New York City’s Emergency Assistance Unit.

“…What you doing for this family? Why ain’t you doing something so your mother and brother don’t gotta live like this? […]

“What you want? You want me to go out there and sell weed? That what you want?”

She don’t back down none. “We wouldn’t be at Bennett if you was out there, would we?” (p. 22)

Like Tyrell, when Quadir’s family was in need of money in True to the Game (Woods, 1994), he quit college where he was training to be a dentist to begin hustling. Quadir acknowledges that “it was a vicious game and a vicious circle to be caught in,” but “the money came so easy, and his lifestyle became so large,” even though “the more money he made, the more consequences he faced” (p. 98).

Some characters become involved in gang life and selling drugs to seek revenge. Such is the case with Lou-Loc, who was with his father when they were gunned down by a group of Bloods while Christmas shopping. After seeing his father get shot multiple times in the chest, Lou-Loc vows to seek revenge, eventually joining the Crips, a rival gang.

But, there are still characters who get involved just for the love of money. Yarni pleads with Des in A Hustler’s Wife (2003) to put an end to his hustling ways after she finds out that he’s been involved in a drug scheme that sends drugs to prisons in exchange for cash.

“I am still trying to understand why, Des? Your commissary is stacked. You don’t
want for anything. I just don’t understand why you’d resort to this?” Yarni was truly at a loss.

“Well, Baby Girl, opportunity was there. There is a lot of money to be made in here.” (p.99)

Old habits die hard in street lit, just as they do in reality. Young adults may empathize with Des’ endless hustle for money, while other readers may seek to better understand his motivations.

**Nilsen and Donelson Quality Characteristic 5: The body of work includes stories about characters from many different ethnic and cultural groups**

Given that the genre is mostly African American, of the eighteen books, seven include characters that are not black. The second largest minority portrayed in the selected books are of Latino descent, specifically Puerto Rican, Colombian, Cuban and Nicaraguan. Two central characters of the eighteen books are described as white, and another is half-white and half-black. The race of Winter and the rest of the Santiaga family in *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1996) is unknown, but “Santiaga” is a well-known Spanish surname.

**Exeter Quality 8: Providing the challenge which will lead to development of reading skills**

Of the eighteen books, eleven of them contain either ads for similar books or teasers from sequels to encourage readers to purchase more titles and keep reading. Giving readers the ability to look forward and sneak a peek from the next title in a series may generate extra interest and demand within the reader and play a key role in encouraging continual development of reading skills simply by giving readers the
motivation to read more (Ross, 1995). Four of the eighteen titles also include reading guides and questions for readers to build book clubs around. Asking readers to reflect on what they’ve read can make the reading process more engaging and meaningful. Adding the potential for social interaction and leadership, like creating a book club, especially appeals to young adults as they build their relationships and social circles.

Eleven of the studied books are part of a series, ultimately encouraging readers to continue the characters and storyline in the following titles. Series have proven to be essential for building confidence in literacy skills among readers, as the predictability, consistency and familiarity of the texts, characters and author’s writing style ensure that audiences aren’t overwhelmed with the text. Series are also appealing because they save the reader from navigating bookshelves to find another book they’ll enjoy. This can be especially difficult if texts reflecting the interests and identity of the reader are limited.

The fast-paced action and surprising twists found heavily in street literature also encourage readers by piquing their curiosity. When readers get to the end of chapter 14 of K’wan’s *Gangsta* (2002), they’re met with a cliffhanger that will ultimately decide the fate of the protagonist, Lou-loc.

She was angry and hurt. Her meal ticket had finally run out. She was about to get her revenge though. She needed a way to fix Lou-loc’s ass. Then it hit her like a brick. She dug through the pile of clothes and paint until she found the phone. Within seconds, she had reached the party she was seeking.

“Let me speak to Cisco.” (p. 126)

Cisco is a power-hungry member of Lou-loc’s rival gang and he would do anything to get Lou-loc’s head on a platter to rise up in New York City’s dangerous drug game. Once
readers realize how ruthless Martina is and how precarious Lou-loc’s situation is about to become, they’re going to keep reading. Similarly, after True to the Game’s Gena finds her deceased fiancés hidden cash, she leaves Philadelphia for a new life. The book ends with, “She took a long look at the apartment building before pulling off toward the Ben Franklin Parkway. Her destination, Exit 16, the Lincoln Tunnel, New York City” (Woods, 1994, p. 288). Writers of urban fiction are well aware of how to entice their readers and for reluctant readers, this serve as a subtle encouragement to keep reading.

Because street lit features African American communities in urban settings – a demographic that has been historically underrepresented in literature – these books create opportunities for individuals who seek titles and characters that reflect their own image and situations. The availability of such literature can affect the motivation of a reader in a big way. Research shows that “children tend to prefer and are more likely to engage with literature that reflects their personal experiences” (Hughes-Hassell et al, citing Cianciolo 1989; DeLeón 2002; Heflin and Barksdale-Ladd 2001; Jose and Brewer 1984; McCollin and O’Shea 2005; Purves and Beach 1972). Access to urban fiction encourages nonreaders to read motivated both readers and nonreaders simply by being made available.

Research exists showing the connection between culturally relevant texts and reading comprehension among African Americans. Studies show that African American children with a high cultural knowledge who read at a low reading level score better on reading comprehension tests than other African American children with a high reading level but low cultural knowledge (Hughes-Hassell, et al., citing McCullough, 2008 and Conrad, et al., 2004). Reading isn’t just about the texts – readers bring something to the
table, too – and it’s ultimately their experiences and understandings that make connections from the text to the reader. When books aren’t available to adolescents that reflect what they know, their comprehension, motivation and learning identity suffers.

**Nilsen and Donelson Quality Characteristic 2: “Please, Mother, I want the credit!”**

As Table 1 shows, street literature is no different than the standard gamut of young adult novels when it comes to the presence of parents and guardians, as both are noticeably absent from the majority of titles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Both parents or guardians living at home</th>
<th>Single parent-at-home</th>
<th>One parent incarcerated</th>
<th>Emancipated</th>
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<td>Push</td>
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<td>Gangsta</td>
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<td>So Not the Drama</td>
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<td>Tyrell</td>
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**Table 1. The parental presence in the study sample**
In some cases, this is simply because the action takes place in a school setting like On the Mic (E-Fierce, 2006), while in others, the main characters are emancipated and/or living outside of the familial home, parents are busy working or they are incarcerated. Most of the books focus on action outside of the protagonist’s home, except for So Not the Drama (Chase, 2007), since there are multiple protagonists and the plot is centered on the groups’ sleepovers at each other’s houses.

Without the guidance or the decision-making skills of an adult, the characters in the selected books are free to govern themselves and their bodies like adults. When parents insist on being in charge of decision-making, characters find their way around it. When Mercedes wants to meet with boys in Flyy Girl (1996), but knows her strict father would not allow it, she sneaks out of her house to see them, eventually losing her virginity during one of her secret visits.

Mercedes felt overjoyed about her secret. Keith didn't seem as smart as he used to be. He wasn't as scary either. He thought he had everything uptight, but Mercedes had proved him wrong. (Tyree, p. 50)

When she talks to Tracy about her absent father, she expresses her desire for freedom. “Yup, girl, I wish I had a father like yours. [...] You can do what you what want then” (Tyree, p. 85). Mercedes Clinton in Ride Wit’ Me also finds herself sneaking out to meet with Dalvin, despite her family’s strong wishes against it.

Sometimes the decisions are weightier than being with a boyfriend or girlfriend. In Hotlanta, Sydney is forbidden to see her biological father, but she sneaks around to see him anyway, despite the rigid orders from her mother and stepfather. When she’s confronted about her secret visits, all hell breaks loose.
“Mom, he’s my…” Sydney began as the hot tears started rolling. Lauren stood smugly at the door.

“He’s not shit. You hear me? The man that put a roof over your head for the past twelve years is the only father you have. And I’ll be damned—

“He’s not some monster,” Sydney exclaimed, jumping to her feet. “You just want me to be as evil and coldhearted as you are, but I won’t! He loves me!”

“Do not say another word,” Altimus hissed as he slowly stood. “Not another word. You will not disrespect your mother or this house. I don’t care what you think or what ridiculous lies that man has filled your head with, but your mother told you not to have anything to do with him. And as long as you live here, what we say goes” (p.143)

After a lifetime of deferring to her mother’s decisions, Push’s Precious moves to a halfway house (Sapphire, 1996). When her mother comes to visit, Precious decides to meet with her, but only because “she know better, I think, than to fuck wif me now” since she has asserted her independence and ability to make her own choices (Sapphire, p. 84). In Tyrell (Booth, 2006), Tyrell avoids being around his mother because she pressures him to deal drugs to support the family. When he is outside of the Bennett, the motel his family is staying in, he finds other ways to make money, like swiping Metrocards for a profit, or setting up illegal warehouse parties. His mother wants to control him so that he will do her bidding, but he uses his own decision-making abilities to find less illegal ways to obtain funds for his family.
Nilsen and Donelson Quality Characteristic 4: Young adult literature includes a variety of genres and subjects

Because the books included were of the same genre of fiction that dealt with similar subjects, this characteristic was mostly inapplicable in this study. However, the range of subjects did seem to shift depending on the anticipated audience of the book. Books that were focused on high school students like So Not the Drama (Chase, 2007), Lost and Found (Schraff, 2002), Hotlanta (Millner and Miller, 2008), Flyy Girl (1996) and Dymond in the Rough (Precious, 2004) focused mostly on friendships, family matters and relationships. These books dealt with issues of identity and acceptance. Books that were geared more toward adult audiences, such as Gangsta (K’wan, 2003), True to the Game (1994) and Death Before Dishonor (2007), featured characters that had to learn how to survive by making it to the top and staying there. Ultimately though, these eighteen books all included at least some of the subject matter also discussed in the others, whether it was a mention in passing by a character or a major plot point.

Nilsen and Donelson Quality Characteristic 6: Young adult books are basically optimistic, with characters making worthy accomplishments

Nine of the eighteen books include characters who make “worthy” accomplishments, such as surviving abuse and rape, overcoming parental separation, coming to terms with senseless violence and taking responsibility for their actions.

The character of Tyrell in Tyrell (2006) refuses to succumb to his mother’s relentless pressure to join the streets and deal drugs to save their family in an attempt to transfer the burden of responsibility from her to him. Although the book ends with him throwing an illegal party in an empty bus depot, he does not engage in the drug game.
Booth closes with Tyrell finally feeling a sense of belonging, “…man, I gotta say, it feel good coming back home to the projects. Where I belong” (p. 310).

Despite the odds, Precious in Push (Sapphire, 1996) overcomes her history of sexual abuse and learns how to read and write while transforming her self-image. The book ends with Precious telling readers that she is “alive inside,” that “Mama and Daddy is not win” and later remarks that “in [her son’s] beauty, [she] see[s her] own (p. 136, 139). Similarly, other students in her class at the alternative school end their biographies with lines like, “the end, no the BEGINNING,” and “it’s not over yet!” (Sapphire, n.p.).

Tracy, Raheema and Mercedes in Flyy Girl (Tyree, 1996) all make major accomplishments by the book’s conclusion, as Tracy finishes up her first year of college and has learned to focus on internal wealth instead of material goods. She writes to her father:

"My first year of college is almost over, and I've gotten all As and Bs. […] I guess you know that Mercedes moved back home now. Raheema said she's doing good with her rehabilitation. […] Raheema sent me a letter from Cornell University last week. I was real happy that she got a scholarship to go there. […] And you have to make the best out of what you can. […] I'll be successful at whatever I do. […] So I'll just keep reaching for the sky" (p. 412).

Earlier in the letter to her father, she discusses that she’s waiting patiently for Victor - her high school sweetheart - to complete his jail time and return home, instead of going from man to man like her teenage self. While in jail, Victor has converted to Islam and describes his hopes for a more devoted and spiritual life upon his release. He proposes to Tracy in a letter, solidifying his commitment to her.
Like Tracy, Mariposa in *The Sista Hood: On the Mic* (2006) also learns to find happiness within instead of relying on what Ezekiel, her crush, thinks of her. In the fifth chapter, Mari creates a list titled, “The ten things I must do to win Ezekiel’s love,” but then realizes “why [her] Ten things I must do to win Ezekiel’s love list never felt right. It was the wrong list” (E-Fierce, p. 186). Mari instead creates a new list: “The ten things I must do to become a better friend,” declaring that she “finally felt [she] was learning to love [herself] and not expecting someone else to do it for [her]” (p. 187).

In *Myself and I* (2010), Keysha fends off her thoughts of suicide and learns that an open-ear is more effective than feeding into the gossip and drama. Wesley, her friend, also makes positive leaps during the course of the book, as he finally seeks treatment for his alcoholism in rehab and confronts Keysha about her attempt to manipulate his affections for her to clear her name.

“Think about what you’re saying. You’ve come all this way just to tell me that you want to use me.” I hadn’t thought he’d view it like that.

“But it’s not like that, really,” I said, trying to convince him otherwise.

“Yes it is, Keysha. I’m trying to help myself right now and you’ve got to respect that. I can’t help you with Lori even if I could. […] She’s sneaky and treacherous, and I’m glad that I found the strength to get away from her.”

“But I need you,” I whined.

“I need myself, Keysha. I’m in a rehab facility fighting for my dignity and self-respect. […] I need to be my own warrior right now. (p. 232-3)

Keysha’s story ends as she decides to go for a night swim. “It felt fabulous to spend time with me, myself and I,” she says proudly (p. 245).
As Carmen sits in prison in *Let That Be the Reason* (Stringer, 2001), she comes to terms with the loss of her freedom, including “the lost chance of mothering [her] son” (p. 238). But, still, she proclaims:

No matter what you are going through, you have to keep pushing. I am a survivor, and I knew it gets greater later. One day, I would have a chance at a new life. Everyone gets a chance. I could start over. I had done it before.

I got scared, but then I remembered that God was still with me, and He forgives me, and He was really all I needed, and it is about the right things in your life. I saw the effects of drugs. I was seeing women withdraw from heroin and women in crack comas with tracks all over their bodies. This was up close and personal. I couldn’t believe that I had my hand in contributing to this. Putting this poison in people, especially my people. I was being educated on a whole new level. (p. 238)

And, in a letter to Chino, Carmen discusses her own personal growth by writing, “Chino, you have failed me in love. You have failed me in friendship. But I failed myself, as I need to love myself,” finally accepting responsibility for her dependence on Chino’s validation, albeit his inconsistent and violent treatment of her (p. 236).

Despite the rocky start to Mina’s sociology project in *So Not the Drama* (Chase, 2007), Mina learns that popularity isn’t everything, and that she needs to learn how to control her dramatics. She writes in her final observation:

When I look at myself through my friends, I like what I see: someone who is able to look at a situation and turn it over and over again until all of the possibilities are explored. There aren’t just two sides to every story, for me there are six: JZ, Lizzie, Michael, Cinny, Kelly, and ME. (p. 369)
Lizzie, Kelly, Jacinta and Michael have also blossomed in the story, working to overcome the stereotypes they faced and the people who stood in their way in positive ways. By the conclusion of the book, the Del Rio Bay Clique has grown and all of the members are happy about it. In a similar vein about friendship and defying stereotypes, Darcy Willis learns to overlook gossip and preconceived notions in *Lost and Found* (Schraff, 2007). Darcy chooses to befriend Tarah and Cooper, two unlikely friends, even though her best friend Brisana cautions against it because, according to her, “those two are low-class” (p. 53). But, knowing that Tarah and Cooper are reliable and supportive, Darcy throws her prejudices aside and ends up enjoying a closer friendship with them than she ever knew with Brisana. Darcy also comes to terms with her father returning, after leaving her family for a younger woman.

Watching [her parents], Darcy remembered Tarah’s words, “Sometimes good people do rotten things. Then they realize the mistake they’ve made and turn their lives around… You can’t give up on people… God don’t give up on us, no matter what we do. So where we get off givin’ up on each other?” […] Her sister was safe, and three new loyal friends had come into her life unexpectedly when she needed them most. Walking out into the cold darkness with Cooper, Darcy smiled to herself.

Something new was thundering in her soul—it felt like hope. (p. 133)

After a violent attack by neo-nazis, Andre Anderson learns to triumph over depression and gloom in Alan Lawrence Sitomer’s *The Hoopster* (2005). Following the publication of his first cover story in a local magazine about prejudice and racism, a white power group tries to crush his dream of being a journalist by crushing his hand in a
car door repeatedly. Fortunately, they neglected to realize that Andre was left-handed, leaving him still able to write and play basketball with his dominant hand. But, during his rehabilitation, Andre had to come to terms with the anger that filled him over the senseless attack.

I mean, maybe I could hurt the people who hurt me—if I could even find them—but what would I get from that? Would I feel better?” Andre shook his head. “Naw, I’m the kind of person who would feel worse. Doin’ wrong like that could never make me feel right. [...] I just thank God I didn’t throw away my life trying to pursue it. [...] And I may be naïve, but I still believe in doing the right thing. And I still believe in taking individual responsibility for our actions.[...] But most important, I still believe in me. And they can’t ever take that.” (p. 211)

Despite the circumstances, Andre is able to rise above the negative emotions that follow violence, choosing not to focus on harming others, but on improving himself. Symbolically, the book concludes with Andre reappearing on the basketball court after his absence and sinking a three-point shot effortlessly, saying to his best friend, “Was there ever a doubt?” (p. 218)

**Exeter Quality 7: Allowing the possibility of personal growth through the inclusion and challenge of engaging with pertinent issues / Nilsen and Donelson Quality Characteristic 7: Successful young adult novels deal with emotions that are important to young adults**

Each of the eighteen books acknowledge and deal with issues and emotions that adolescents experience on a daily basis. Eight of the books focused on emotions related to loyalty and fitting in, such as a betrayal, embarrassment, shame and loneliness, while
the remaining eight dealt primarily with identity-negotiation and some books included a combination of the two. Conflicts tended to arise when protagonists felt that their identities were being determined for them, or when they felt left out or stranded by their peers.

When Jacinta realizes that the upcoming weekend is her weekend to host the group sleepover in So Not the Drama (Chase, 2005), she panics. Jacinta lives in the projects and is worried that her “bougee” group members will turn their noses up at her home (p. 259). She doesn’t want others to use where she’s from to define her.

She stared vacantly at the ugly, plain, worn buildings, some covered in graffiti. Some of the vacant homes had windows busted out. The grass surrounding the units was patchy, burned out, barely there. Broken glass and litter were strewn in the areas nearer the trees. She pointed to the shabby areas. ‘I know ya’ll probably look around and think this place is all tore up. And it is. But it’s just home to me. (p. 271)

When asked how he feels about raising a family in the projects by Mina, Jacinta’s father replies with “Most people live in the projects because their circumstances haven’t allowed them to live anywhere else. Right now, I’m one of those people,” providing a practical perspective to readers about living in public housing (p. 253). Also living in a less-than-perfect neighborhood, Darcy Willis reflects on where she lives in Lost and Found (Schraff, 2001).

It was not a terrible neighborhood they lived in; it was just not good. Many front yards were not cared for. Debris-- fast food wrapped, plastic bags, old newspapers-- blew around and piled against fences and curbs.” p4
Gena’s neighborhood in True to the Game (Woods, 1994) is no different, as the narrator describes it as trash “all over the place” (p. 99). Readers who live in environments like Jacinta, Darcy and Gena can feel connected to them because they come from similar places, while those who don’t can imagine the individuals who live there - some not very different from themselves.

In Chase’s So Not the Drama (2007), the secondary plot is the inconsistent friendship between Mina and Lizzie. Lizzie feels betrayed with Mina begins to spend time with other people, while Mina feels left out when Lizzie is invited to hang out with the elite “Uppers.” Lizzie tries to cover up her disappointment in Mina’s interest in her new friends by trying to convince herself “that she was only annoyed at Mina’s zombie answers. But it was really Mina saying Kelly would keep her company. Am I really that easily replaced?” (p. 298). Mariposa in E-Fierce’s The Sista Hood: On the Mic (2006) also experiences the pangs of betrayal when her best friend, Liza, consistently chooses her boyfriend over spending time with her. Mari tells readers, “Liza hurt my feelings, plain and simple. I could take being ignored or being made fun of by anyone else, but not her” (p. 18). When Keysha finds out that her boyfriend’s ex-girlfriend might be pregnant with her baby, she feels embarrassed that others will think that she’s been cheated on, even though she did nothing wrong. Jayd, in L. Divine’s Drama High: The Fight (2006), also feels abandoned when her boyfriend leaves her for another girl after Jayd refuses to have sex with him and embarrassed when she has to return to school and face them both.

True to the Game (Woods, 1994), Gangsta (K’wan, 2003), Let That Be the Reason (Turner, 2001) and Death Before Dishonor (50 Cent and Turner, 2007) each feature situations where close friends or group members abandon or betray the main
character. Carmen loses $250,000 when her partners disappear to Florida, leaving her with a huge debt to repay to her drug supplier. Lou-loc feels betrayed when he finds out that Satin, his love interest, is the sister of archrival, El Diablo, in Gangsta (K’wan, 2000), moments before he is dealt a fatal blow. As teens and young adults progress toward adulthood, they work toward assimilation in order to gain acceptance from their peers. Situations that involve emotions linked to loyalty like embarrassment and betrayal are intriguing to young adults simply because they are afraid of being ostracized, singled out or denounced.

The identity negotiation of characters is typically depicted by characters trying out new identities, whether it means changing or controlling their appearance, manipulating their status at school or among the opposite sex, pursuing a different hobby or interest or being romantically involved with someone who comes from a different upbringing or neighborhood. Flyy Girl’s Tracy always worries about how others will see her, so she spends extra time each night laying out clothing for the following day (Tyree, 1996). Similarly, Winter Santiaga in The Coldest Winter Ever (Souljah, 1999) will spend her last dollar on the latest trends and styles, just to avoid looking dated.

Michael in So Not the Drama (2007) decides to pursue his interest in fashion design, even though he receives some unwanted attention for it. In The Sista Hood: On the Mic (E-Fierce, 2006), Mariposa wrestles with her sexual identity after she kisses another girl. She also joins the school-wide talent show to show others that she’s more than just a shy face in the crowd. Andre in The Hoopster (Sitomer, 2005) works hard not to let his attack define him or his physical limitations and Darcy in Schraff’s Lost and Found (2002) learns to be more open-minded to shake her label of “Ioner” at school.
Lauren and Sydney in *Hotlanta* (Millner and Miller, 2008) and Mercedes in *Ride Wit’ Me* (King, 2006) all refuse to let the pressure of others, including their parents, define who they’re dating.

Each of the characters in these books redefine who they are on their own terms after they realize that they’re being labeled by others. Because identity-negotiation is such a critical task during adolescent years, it is unsurprising that young adults are drawn to literature that reflects their priorities and interests.
Discussion

None of the eighteen books satisfy all fifteen criteria for “quality” young adult literature (see Table 2); however, it is unlikely that any title - YA or otherwise - could. While His Dark Materials (1995) by Phillip Pullman, Skellig (1998) by David Almond and Holes (1998) by Louis Sachar were frequently named in the Exeter study as prime examples of quality” YA literature, the three books only met “many” of the eight criteria published in the study, but not all (Hooper, 2006, p. 68). And, although not all of the books were as engaging or imaginative as some, in the words of library guru Ranganathan: “every reader his book” and “every book his reader.” It’s impossible to predict which book will catch a teenager’s fancy, and although we may not choose to read it ourselves, this does not lessen its potential impact to transform an adolescent into a reader. Some books fared better than others, satisfying a high number of “quality” criteria, like Flyy Girl (Tyree, 1996) and The Coldest Winter Ever (Souljah, 1999), and So Not the Drama (Chase, 2007) but others were more engaging to me as a reader, like Let That Be the Reason (Stringer, 2002), Gangsta (K’wan, 2002) and Ride Wit’ Me (King, 2009).

Certain “quality” criteria seemed to have a greater impact on the readability of the book. For instance, having an authentic young adult voice made Push (Sapphire, 1996) a tremendously captivating read, while the lack thereof made Myself and I (Sewell, 2001) difficult to continue. Books that included optimism and positive thinking despite the odds
felt more satisfying to finish. However, whether a book included “characters from many different ethnic and cultural groups” or “language which is imaginative, lively and varied in vocabulary, correct in grammatical and sentence structure” had little impact on me as a reader (Hooper, 2006). In fact, Sapphire’s Push (1996) was easily the most moving novel in the collection, but it contains neither of those traits. Whether a book racked up criteria or not did not seem to reflect much on its enjoyment factor, and I believe that as long as teens enjoy what they’re reading, they’ll continue to read, despite the books quality rating.

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Table 2: Title/Quality Criteria Matrix
Conclusion

Despite the criticism, street lit sells, and the genre can help an underserved population build fundamental literacy skills - ones that may help readers tackle more sophisticated texts later or, at the very least, help them navigate the world around them in better ways (Venable, et al., 2004). The popularity of the genre has yet to falter and each day, more and more readers are enticed by the genre’s provocative covers and high-speed stories. Librarians and teacher-librarians can use this as bridge to help reach teens they might not be able to otherwise establish a connection with. By acknowledging street lit as a worthwhile reading selection, we can validate our students’ and patrons’ interest in reading while improving how they see themselves as readers and ultimately, learners.

If a young adult selects a title that happens to be urban fiction, their selection should not be discouraged. There is no “right” book or “wrong” book, especially if the young adult who selects the item does not readily identify as a reader. When adults try to repress the interests of adolescents, there is a good chance that either the teen will find another way to access the material or be put off of reading for fear of continuing rejection. Adults should look to encourage reading, not control it, and a teen motivated to read is really a teen motivated to learn.

Talking to teens about sex, drugs and other sensitive subjects is hard enough, but when they select books that deal with similar issues, we can use titles they love and characters they identify with to approach these matters in a relevant and comfortable way.
Young adults are curious about the world around them, and with urban fiction, we can encourage that curiosity in a way that lets teens live vicariously through the books they choose, so that they can see the real-life consequences of making adult decisions. We cannot assume that because a teen will participate in adverse behavior because they read about it in a book; it seems more likely that after reading about the struggle of hustling and gang life in K’wan’s *Gangsta: An Urban Tragedy*, or watching the dehabilitating consequences of living the fast life like Mercedes in Omar Tyree’s *Flyy Girl*, that teens will think twice before they take their first steps down those paths.

Teenagers look to cultural resources like the media to better understand cultural and societal norms, like what is normal and acceptable in their communities. For some teens, the stories they read about in street lit are not so different from their own, or the communities they read about are within walking distance of their homes. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, more than 52 million young adults (ages 14-24) live near urban areas and there are over 5 million African American young adults in the United States. If we cast the genre aside and ignore it during collection development, when planning booktalks and creating resource lists, we are implying that the teens who identify with the genre have lives, families and issues that do not matter; they are anomalies. These books “represent the experiences of many of our nation’s young people, offering them an opportunity to see worlds similar to their own and giving them encouragement to escape their own difficult circumstances” (Pattee, 2008).

It’s not just about the teens who share these experiences, either, because street lit also needs to be accessible for the young adults who have never experienced the kinds of things reflected in the genre. Reading builds empathy and compassion, both skills that are
“not just in the general way making the world a better place by improving interpersonal understanding, but in specific areas such as politics, business, and education” (Flood, 2011). Including street lit may mean a few uncomfortable parents and maybe some push back from the community, but the benefits enable the growth and betterment of the community as a whole.
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