

Getting Up to Speed in Urban Fiction

By Jessica Zellers

What is Urban Fiction?

Urban fiction -- formally known as urban literature, sometimes called Hip-Hop Lit -- is a relatively young genre, but it is extraordinarily popular, thanks to page-turning storylines, contemporary urban settings, realistic characters (usually African-Americans), and straightforward prose styles. Almost all urban fiction titles fall into one or more of the three main subgenres: Street Lit, with a focus on violence, drugs, and street life; Drama Lit, with a focus on human relationships; and Urban Erotica, with a focus on sex.

What happens in Urban Fiction?

Though storylines will vary widely depending on subgenre, urban fiction books reliably examine contemporary lifestyles, particularly African-American lifestyles. In many ways the examination is celebratory: African-American music, culture, art, and politics feature prominently, and of course, African-Americans are the primary characters. Unlike any genre outside the tradition of African-American literature, urban fiction consistently features black characters; the working assumption that the main characters are black is, in itself, an unspoken celebration of African-American culture.

But urban fiction books consider the bad along with the good. Positive aspects of African-American culture get their due, but so too do the ugly realities of many African-American lifestyles. For instance, books in the Street fiction subgenre usually offer a morality tale, in which the dazzling allure of drugs, casual sex, materialism, and macho street violence is revealed as dangerous by the end of the story.

These gritty elements are often -- though not always -- absent in Drama Lit and Urban Erotica. In Drama Lit, stories are driven by the complicated interactions between human beings, be they spouses, siblings, best friends, enemies, lovers, colleagues, or parents and children.

In Urban Erotica, stories are driven by a very specific type of interaction between human beings. Explicitly-described sexual encounters between two (or more!) people constitute the main appeal of the story. Usually the encounters are heterosexual, though recent years have seen an explosion in the number of books featuring same-sex erotica. Romance may or may not play a role, but sexual intimacy always will.

What do people like Urban Fiction?

Urban fiction books unabashedly feature African-Americans -- not as token sidekicks, not as well-developed secondary characters, but as the chief players: the heroes, the villains, and everyone in

between (though others races can and do crop up). Through hundreds of years of African-American literature black characters have figured prominently in books, but never before have those books been so very accessible. Canonical authors such as Richard Wright and Toni Morrison feature black characters, but their books are deliberately written to make the reader struggle, pause, reflect, and ponder.

Urban fiction books, on the other hand, are written to pull the reader in and not let go. They are fast-paced, driven by high-octane plots and liberally sprinkled with dialogue. And, in a distinct departure from the long-established norms of African-American Literary Fiction, urban fiction writers do not employ lofty prose or difficult language constructions.

Instead, urban fiction revels in its authentic prose style. The accessible language of urban fiction is meant to reflect the way that real people think and speak: convoluted sentence structures are out, straightforward speech is in. Realistic phrases -- including slang, idioms, and swear words -- occur not only in conversational exchanges, but in the main narrative texts.

The realistic language constitutes just one part of a broader appeal of urban fiction, realism in general. Even the most outrageous scenes of the most outlandish urban Erotica (who knew you could fit so many people in a hot tub?) could conceivably happen. Urban fiction unashamedly depicts the way life really is, from the emotional interpersonal exchanges of Drama lit that every reader can identify with, to the gritty life-and-death realism of drugs and violence in Street Lit that most readers observe from a safe distance. Vivid descriptions of sex, violence, and coarse dialogue lend to this realistic appeal.

Five key titles:

- If you only read one Street Lit title, make sure its Sister Souljah's groundbreaking work, *The Coldest Winter Ever*. This is the book that ushered in urban fiction as we know it. Follow the fortunes of Winter Santiago, a young woman accustomed to living the high life, thanks to her father's drug empire -- but when he gets sent to prison, Winter begins to question the ethics of drug dealing.
- Along with Sister Souljah, Teri Woods helped jumpstart the current urban fiction craze with *True to the Game*. Violent and gritty, this is a cautionary tale of drugs, death, mistakes, and consequences. Woods is careful to depict the grim realities of street life alongside the more glamorous aspects.
- While behind bars, Vickie Stringer decided to try her hand at writing with *Let That Be the Reason*. The autobiographical influence behind the novel is clear: Carmen hustles drugs to support her son, but in the high-stakes game of the streets, prison -- or worse -- is only one unlucky step away.
- For a great introduction to Urban Erotica, try *The Sex Chronicles: Shattering the Myth*. In short stories collected in three sections -- Wild, Wilder, and Off Da Damn Hook -- Zane smartly shatters the myth that African-American women lead tame sex lives. Of all of Zane's books, this is arguably the sexiest, and since each piece is short, readers don't have to wait long to get the, ahem, bang for their buck.

- Looking for someone who writes like Zane? Turn to Mary B. Morrison for high drama and steamy, steamy, steamy sex. (Really steamy.) In *Soul Mates Dissipate*, the first book in the Soul Mates Dissipate series, meet Jada and Wellington, who are absolutely devoted to one another -- or so they think, until Melanie enters the picture.

Five key authors:

- Don't overlook **Donald Goines**. Though he wrote several decades prior to the current urban fiction craze, his many novels -- made authentic by his drug addiction and time in prison -- are still popular for their gritty, grim depiction of street life. His first is *Dopefiend*, a frightening cautionary tale about the dangers of heroin.
- **K'Wan** writes graphic, violent, eerily realistic Street Lit books, filled with high-octane action and memorable heroes, many of whom will do whatever it takes to get out of the ghetto. Start with his first novel, *Gangsta*, about an assassin who struggles to leave the street life behind.
- **Noire** delivers a bit of everything: sometimes you get a Street flavor, sometimes more of a Drama flavor, but always, always you get a healthy dose of erotica. For a wild mix of sex, drugs, sex, stripping, sex, violence, sex, murder, and a little more sex, try starting with *G-Spot: An Urban Erotic Tale*.
- **Carl Weber** writes Drama Lit at its finest. A master of both male and female characters, he presents multi-layered plots filled with complicated relationships; readers are compelled to race through the pages to finally discover how the characters finally disentangle themselves from their problems at the very end. Perhaps begin with *Baby Momma Drama*, a zany mix of high-jinks, melodrama, and frequent, fabulous sexual episodes.
- Everyone knows that **Zane** writes Urban Erotica novels -- but she also writes erotic short stories and nonfiction, along with Drama Lit novels. She may be the hottest thing going in urban fiction; she's definitely the sexiest thing going, that's for sure. For a satisfying blend of drama and sex, read about the exploits of three sisters in *Shame On it All!*; or, for an honest discussion of sex, read *Dear G-Spot: Straight Talk about Sex and Love*, featuring Zane's answers to letters her fans have sent her.

What do I help Urban Fiction Fans?

- As with any genre, urban fiction readers are sometimes vague about describing exactly what they want. This is especially true with urban fiction, where many of the appeals can be embarrassing to discuss. Some folks are uncomfortable explaining a desire to read books with black characters (and others may not realize that their preferred genre has a name, asking instead for African-American books, a much broader category). Try to tease out whether your reader wants books that include, or avoid, explicit sex, violence, and/or language.
- Be clear on terminology. The various ways to identify genres and subgenres (urban fiction, Hip-Hop Lit, Drama Lit, Urban Erotica, and Street Lit, a.k.a. Gangsta Lit) mean different

things to different people. Find out whether or not your reader prefers a focus on street life, relationships, or sexual encounters.

- Be aware that many readers of urban fiction will be new to the library -- and if they discover that there is no separate section for urban fiction books (most libraries don't have one), they may be frustrated or unwilling to return. Take the time to show readers how to use the catalog, whether to find additional print and electronic resources, and how to find favorite authors on the shelves.
- Don't forget to promote short stories, novellas, nonfiction, and biographies and memoirs. Because most urban fiction books are novels, readers may not be aware of alternative formats.

A few more tips:

- Search your catalog by publisher, not just by author or title. Searching by author can be frustrating, because many urban fiction authors have written only one or two books. Searching by a publisher dedicated to urban fiction will yield greater results; try Triple Crown, Strebtor Books, Urban Books, and Q-Boro books. Don't forget to show your readers this trick!
- A quick-n-dirty trick to finding urban fiction is to go by cover art. While not the most nuanced approach to readers' advisory, it works in a pinch (especially when all your first choices are checked out, as they so often are). Familiarize yourself with the style of (most) Urban covers, and look for those characteristics, including graffiti-like typefaces and stylishly-dressed African-American cover models.
- Keep a list of urban fiction authors on hand. Update it frequently, and distribute it to your readers: keep one at the desk, and stuff it in popular urban fiction books. It will be invaluable for those times when all of the best-known authors are checked out.

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