

How *The Street Life Series* Contributes to the landscape of Hip-Hop Literature

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Abstract

This critical essay explores the literary landscape of Hip-Hop Literature and how a fiction book series called *The Street Life Series* contributes to the evolution of this genre. Research from professors, literary book reviewers and news reporters is included in order to provide a balanced view. This literary piece outlines how *The Street Life Series* moves away from the hard-core grain of the genre while embracing urban culture as part of a worldwide experience. In addition, this essay includes an account of how *The Street Life Series* is positioned to leave an historical mark in 21st Century Hip-Hop Literature.

Author Bio

Kevin M. Weeks is an African American writer and philanthropist. In 2006, he released a fiction book series called *The Street Life Series*®. For his works, Weeks received a 2008 London Book Festival award, 2007 New York Book Festival award, and YOUunity Guild of America Best New Urban Author award.

Because Weeks was born on the rough side of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, he understands the challenges of “at-risk” youth. Therefore, book proceeds benefit the *Stay Off The Streets Fund*, which is a charitable fund to aid “at risk” teenagers who age out of foster care without a strong support structure. (stayoffthestreets.org)

How *The Street Life Series* Contributes to the Landscape of Hip-Hop Literature

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “It’s a brave thing to have courage to be an individual . . .” (Roosevelt 114) Not conforming to the norm is one attribute of hip-hop writers and authors because of their tenacity to continue to write about urban culture despite criticism from many literary experts. Even when the publishing industry cannot decide whether to call the genre hip-hop fiction, street fiction or urban fiction, the fan base continues to grow. Nielson BookScan states that 82,000 copies of urban fiction books sold in 2007, which made up 4% of the adult fiction market. This was up from 4,000 copies sold in 2004. (Jones 1) Yet, if you conduct a *Google* search or analyze publishing industry reports, you will not be able to find a single source that can certify the total number of published urban fiction authors in the United States. However, litanies of articles exist in regards to the pioneers of hip-hop fiction. Therefore, this essay will highlight an emerging author, Kevin M. Weeks, whose unique style sets him apart as a mentor, socially conscious writer, and bridge-builder.

Outlining this segment of the market, the publishing industry and literary enthusiasts define Hip-Hop Literature differently. If you search the Book Industry Standards and Communications (BISAC) subject codes, there is no reference to the terms “hip-hop fiction, street fiction, or urban fiction.” The major subject heading is simply fiction. The publishing industry uses the BISAC subject codes to categorize books for sale at brick and mortar as well as online bookstores. (BISG 1) If these hip-

hop literary terms are not formally a part of the industry subject codes, what constitutes a genre?

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word *genre* as a "literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content." From a reader or literary enthusiast's perspective, Hip-Hop Literature is both fiction and nonfiction works which cover topics centered on the culture. In addition, "street culture is a traveler, whether it's a ubiquitous global force such as hip-hop or a small phenomenon endemic to a particular region, such as South Africa's tricked-out tombstones for those who die young." (Gastman, Neelon, Smyrski 29) Hip-Hop authors aim to document their view of the world through their fictional characters' everyday urban existence, regardless if the genre is dubbed hip-hop fiction, street-fiction, urban fiction or ghetto-fiction.

These authors understand that the roots of urbanization are grounded in appreciating the customary beliefs and lifestyles of diverse people. One such author is Kevin M. Weeks. In 2006, he released the first novel, *Is It Suicide or Murder?*, in a collection of self-published fiction novels titled *The Street Life Series*. The book series chronicles the life of main character Teco Jackson, who leaves the street life and travels across the globe. Readers witness how Teco responds as crime happens all around him. From a world-wide perspective, New York Book Festival Award-Winning Author, Kevin M. Weeks' sophomore novel, *Is It Passion or Revenge?*, received a 2008 London Book Festival award for Weeks' story-telling ability and the potential of the work to win wider recognition from the international publishing community. (London Book Festival 1) Thus, the reach of Hip-Hop Literature is boundless.

In a *Colorlines* magazine article, Kevin M. Weeks states, “As in Shakespeare’s plays, universal elements of love, sex, jealousy, betrayal, murder and revenge make for compelling storytelling in urban fiction.” (Rice 2) Though these key literary themes date back to sixteenth century Shakespeare, the landscape of Hip-Hop Literature in twentieth century vernacular began with writers such as Donald Goines, Iceberg Slim and Sister Soulja. The point Weeks attempts to make is that mainstream readers might understand and embrace Hip-Hop Literature more readily if parallels are drawn to sixteenth century Shakespeare.

However, some literary experts are quick to criticize Hip-Hop Literature because of its gangster stereotypes, hard-core themes, inner city dialect as well as unconventional writing style. No one expressed the outrage clearer than New York Times Bestselling Author Terry McMillan in an October 2007 commentary, which detailed the negative aspects of the genre. (Alexander 1) Then Mark Anthony Neal, professor at Duke University Department of African and African American Studies, said, “It’s time to raise the bar.” (Solomon 3)

In response, Kevin M. Weeks believes that literary mentors can be a part of the solution to these concerns. As an example, Weeks cites in the Special Acknowledgements of his sophomore novel that he had a writing mentor from PEN American Center; and he mentors others. (Weeks, “Passion”) His commitment to mentoring appears to have made an impact with one of his writing protégé’s, Yolanda Diamond, whose work is featured as part of the Anne Frank Prison Diary Program. (Anne Frank 7) Weeks’ premise is that if more people mentored versus complained, then the portfolio of African-American Literature will benefit as a whole.

To be socially conscious is an individual decision. In September 2006, Kevin M. Weeks announced that he omits the n-word and h-word from *The Street Life Series* literary work. Librarian and Founder of StreetFiction.org, Daniel Marcou said, "Mr. Weeks has delicately balanced some of the most authentic street language ever written without ever using the N-word!" (Marcou 1)

Months later, Weeks found himself in the middle of a national controversy. This was during a period in history when there was a public uproar because Comedian Michael Richards used the n-word and Radio Personality Don Imus used the "h-word." Shortly thereafter, music and fashion mogul Russell Simmons led an effort to eliminate the "n-word, h-word, and b-word" from hip-hop and rap music. This was evidence that both Hip-Hop music and Hip-Hop Literature were both potentially impacted because of this national controversy. (Weeks, "PR Web" 1)

"As more teenagers fall under the spell of street lit novels, some adults worry about how the content is influencing teenagers." (Jones 1) On the other side of the equation, there are several urban fiction proponents who state that one of the primary benefits of the genre is the promotion of literacy. However, Weeks decided to take a stand by including a parental advisory statement in each of his novels. (See Figure 1.) For parents and librarians, this provides a warning similar to that of the explicit content labels on music CD covers.

Author's Notes

Urban Adult Fiction

*Parental Advisory: Contains Adult Situations, Explicit Language,
Drug Use, and Strong Sexual Content*

Figure 1. Parental Advisory Statement in *The Street Life Series* novel.

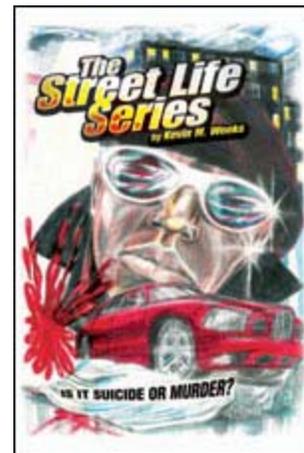
(Weeks "Suicide")

For these efforts, Daniel Marcou said, "[Weeks] includes a parental advisory at the beginning of the book - an interesting idea, but it might be more of a draw for teens than a discouragement. Regardless, it's the first time I have ever seen it on a street fiction book." (Marcou 1) Another measure Weeks takes is for main character Teco Jackson to leave the "street life" in *The Street Life Series*. Readers witness Teco starting out as a petty car thief; however, Teco ultimately becomes a positive male figure.

When Nick Chiles published an article titled "Their Eyes Were Reading Smut," he outlined his disdain for the ". . . lurid book jackets displaying all forms of brown flesh, usually half-naked and in some erotic pose . . ." on display in major bookstores. (Chiles 1) This article was released eight months before Kevin M. Weeks announced that his book covers would include artwork to depict the key elements of the story versus the traditional sexy models.

As an example: For Book Cover 1 (*Is It Suicide or Murder?*), the colors are opaque because the main character, Teco Jackson, is faced with many life altering decisions. Where he wants to go next is unclear. This book cover by design does not

glamorize the “street life.” For Book Cover 2 (*Is It Passion or Revenge?*), the colors are more vibrant because Teco can better see which path he wants to take in life. Founder of YOUNity Guild of America, Heather Covington said, “[Weeks] animated book cover...has defied changing trends for sexy models on covers and returned urban street lit to its beautiful elements of creative and artistic expression...” (Covington 1)



Book 1: Is It Suicide or Murder?

Ultimately, Weeks art concept might end up having mass appeal. Amongst readers, *The Street Life Series* is likened to the *American Guide Series*, which originated during the Great Depression era as part of the Federal Writers' Project between 1935 and 1943. Each *American Guide Series* book characterizes the culture, geography and history of 48 states to include Washington, D.C. (Senate 1) Here is how the two series are being compared.

First and foremost, similar to each volume of the *American Guide Series*, Weeks' book cover design features works of art for a particular location. For instance, the artwork depicts the major city where main character Teco Jackson travels as crime happens all around him. Unintentional by Weeks, some readers suggest that the 2008 book cover for *Is It Passion or Revenge?* was prophetic throughout an historic election year.



Book 2: Is It Passion or Revenge?

Second, the non-fiction *American Guide Series* was published in the Depression era, while the crime fiction *Street Life Series* gains popularity during current 21st

Century economic woes. However, unlike the *American Guide Series'* federally funded project, *The Street Life Series'* supporters are private citizens. In addition, *The Street Life Series'* book proceeds benefit the *Stay Off The Streets Fund*, a youth charitable fund, as part of the American Endowment Foundation, to aid "at-risk" teenagers who age out of foster care without a strong support structure. (stayoffthestreets.org)

Third, the *American Guide Series* captured various cultures and reached a broad audience, which is also a goal for *The Street Life Series*. In February 2008, Weeks' sophomore novel, *Is it Passion or Revenge?*, was featured in the first Library Journal column named "The Word on the Street." Library Journal Book Reviewer Rollie Welch states, "Weeks' second entry in his self-published '*Street Life*' series (after *Is It Suicide or Murder?*) mixes gritty street-lit action with hints of a police procedural that will appeal to both urban fiction fans and readers of African American mysteries." (Welch 3) Weeks views this book review as the first validation that he is on the right track of bridging the gap between urban fiction and crime fiction readers. In addition, Co-Founder of The African American Pavilion at BookExpo America (BEA) and CEO of Amber Communications Group, Tony Rose said, "We like the direction *The Street Life Series* is going." (Weeks, "ChristianNewsWire" 1) Having the courage to be an individual just might result in Kevin M. Weeks leaving a historical mark in Hip-Hop and African-American Literature. (See Figure 2.)

In conclusion, the publishers in this genre range from Print-On-Demand (POD), self-publishing, small press, independent, and major publishing houses. Everyone who invests the time and energy in capturing the essence of the hip hop culture plays a major roll. Kevin M. Weeks decided that his contribution to the landscape of Hip-Hop

Literature is in mentoring, providing a distinctive voice, and bridging the gap between urban and crime fiction readers. However, until there are annual statistics about all hip-hop writers and authors, the world may never know the positive impact Hip-Hop Literature actually makes on the overall landscape of American Literature.

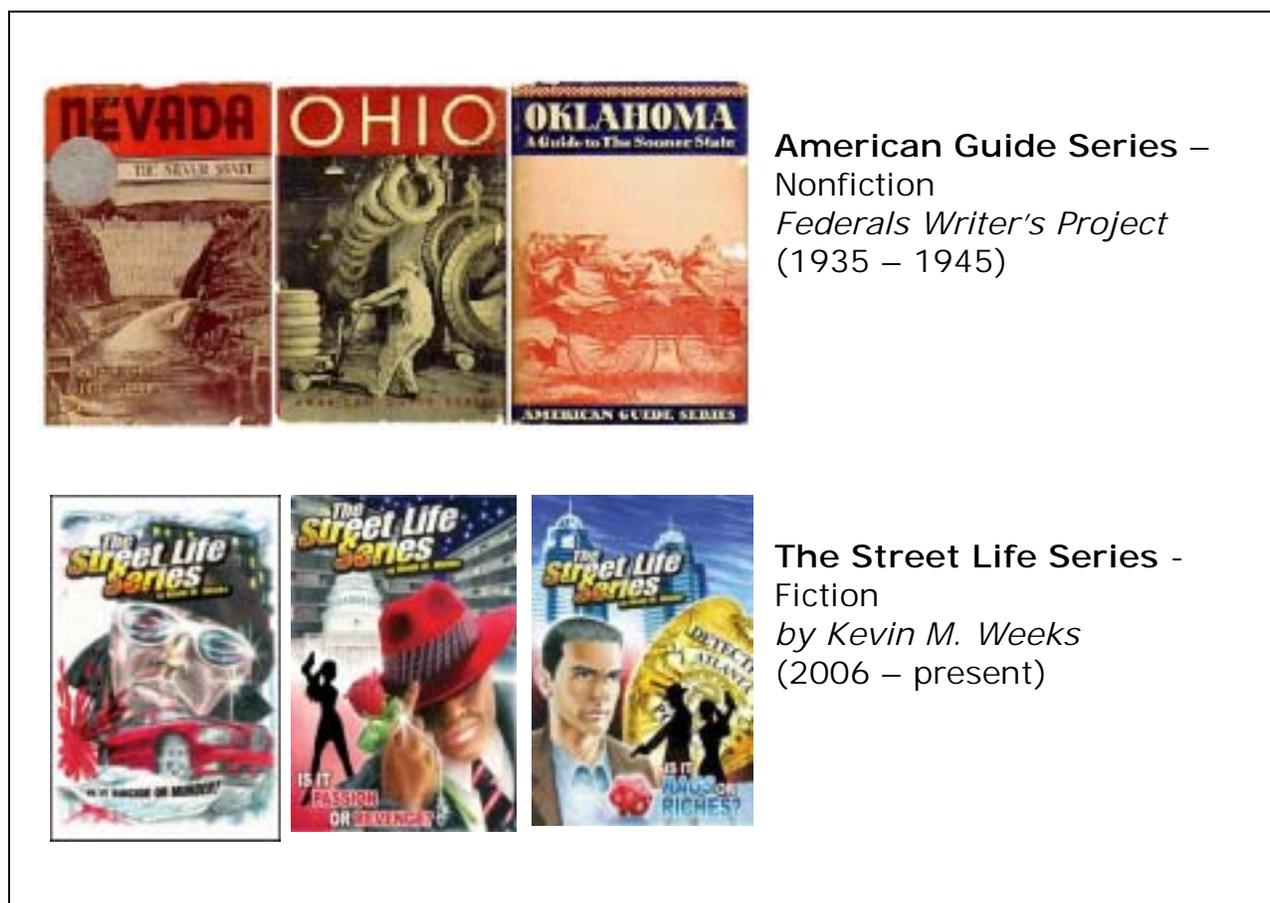


Figure 2. Book Covers for the *American Guide Series* and *The Street Life Series*
(Weeks "Website"; GMU 1)

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