

Title of Program: *Urban Lit: The Hot New Genre*

Presenter: Carol M. Mackey, Editor-in-Chief, BlackExpressions.com and Andrew P. Jackson (Sekou Molefi Baako) Executive Director of the Langston Hughes Community Library and Cultural Center, Queens Borough Public Library and Michelle M. McFarland, Library Assistant, Hartford Public Library, Albany Branch

Reporter: Debra Williams and Phara Bayonne

BCALA-CT sponsored a lively topic covering the hot new genre of Urban Literature. Urban fiction also called “street lit,” “ghetto lit,” “gangsta lit,” or “hip-hop fiction” is the current trend that has seen an explosion of readership among African Americans, especially with teenagers. Moderator, Michelle McFarland, started things off quickly in posing the question that we all wanted to know the answer to: what is this urban lit and why is it so popular? Guests Andrew P. Jackson (Sekou Molefi Baako), Executive Director of the Langston Hughes Community Library and Cultural Center, Queens Borough Public Library and Carol M. Mackey, Editor in Chief of BlackExpressions.com tackled this challenging question. The audience was engaged and asked many questions of the panelists, from how to market urban lit to how to select quality materials from this genre.

Love it or hate it, urban lit has gotten a new audience of young adults excited about reading. Despite the provocative book covers, the titles of these books pretty much say it all. “Thong on Fire,” “A Thug’s Life,” “A Hustler’s Wife,” or “Bad Girlz,” are just a few of titles that force the mind to either visualize, be captivated or shy away. Young adults are relating to these stories depicting brutal accounts of sex, drugs and drama on the streets. However, according to Mr. Jackson, this fanfare about urban lit isn’t anything new; urban lit today is “piggybacking on an old concept.” Authors such as Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim, from the 60’s and 70’s, were also writing gritty depictions of street life. The stories today have just been repackaged for a new generation. Ms. Mackey also weighed in acknowledging the popularity of the genre, but she is seeing the trend slowing down. For her readership at BlackExpressions.com, she’s not selecting that much urban fiction anymore only the ‘marquee’ authors that sell such as Nikki Turner, Vicki Stringer, K’wan, and Relentless Aaron, etc. She also went on to share that among her colleagues in the book industry, there are two trains of thought about this issue in the black community: first, these books are awful and second, young adults are reading.

Mr. Jackson also expressed that young adults, especially girls are gravitating to today’s urban lit. Librarians should engage these readers and guide them towards other authors such as Tonya Bolden, Jacqueline Woodson, Sharon Flake and Christopher Paul Curtis. Ms. McFarland shared a story about how one elderly patron at her branch who often asks for these “nasty books” as the patron called them.

Ms. McFarland also stressed that it’s not only the young adults but also mature audiences are reading these books. As librarians, we may or may not like these books but we’re here to provide a space and place for all patrons, so they may read whatever they like. Another question posed to the panelists was “will urban lit’s growing reputation as being racey mean that all African American fiction be looked upon as urban literature?” The panelists responded that there is a noticeable difference in writing styles in urban lit as there are in other forms of African American fiction. The reading audiences have come to know authors’ genre. Some may say Eric Jerome Dickey’s recent books meet the requirements for urban lit, while others would not.

Attendees received a bibliography and a variety of recommended titles that fall within this genre as well as suggested alternative authors for young adult reading material. If you would like a copy of this bibliography please visit the www.bcala-ct.org website. For now, the urban lit books are fulfilling a niche in the African-American community. The outcome of urban lit’s effect on our society good or bad remains to be seen.