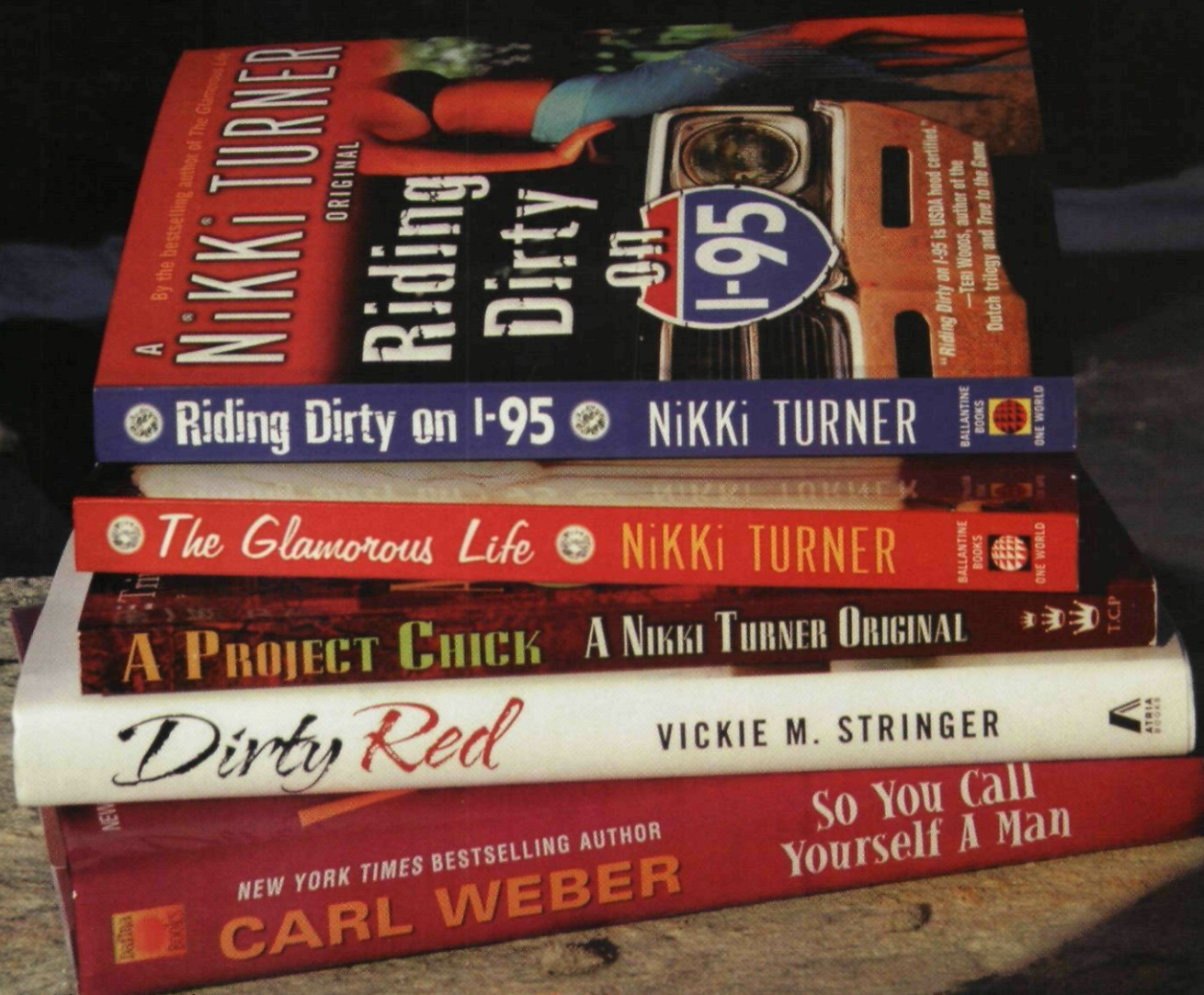


# Urban Lit Goes Legit

AUTHORS HEADLINE NEW VENTURES TO BRING STREET CRED INTO THE WORLD OF CORPORATE PUBLISHING.

By Earni Young





**W**ith a multiple book deal and her own imprint under One World/Ballantine Books, Nikki Turner, one of the queens of street lit, is working her way through a pile of raw manuscripts—some of them handwritten—submitted by writers who hope to have their first Nikki Turner Presents novel published next spring.

The deal calls for Turner to produce two or three novels a year featuring the work of new and seasoned writers of street fiction. Turner says a screener at One World/Ballantine goes through the slush pile of about 75 manuscripts a week to separate them into three categories—hot, warm and cold. Only the “hot” manuscripts are sent to Turner for perusal. She says she was finding good prospects, but no deals had been confirmed at *BIBR*’s presstime.

The writer of *A Hustler’s Wife* (Triple Crown, 2003), *A Project Chick* (Triple Crown, 2003) and *Riding Dirty on I-95* (One World/Ballantine, April 2006) works from her home in Richmond, Virginia. “I’m looking for great stories and original voices... stories that don’t march to the same beat as other street lit,” Turner says, struggling to define the criteria for her new imprint. “I want them to have some kind of a different twist to them. There is more to street life than selling drugs.”

### Thugs Wear Prada, Too

Some would say not. The boom in urban literature, often called street lit, or more derisively gangsta lit, has risen from the streets to dominate the African American literature sections in bookstores across America. Now urban books have taken a decided turn, moving up into the world of mainstream publishing, with authors like Turner capturing big deals from major houses.

**“African American fiction is an expanding category and has been for five years, and we have a green light to keep expanding it.”**

These books emphasize erotic and violent street life. Everyone wears Prada, drips bling-bling and is armed and dangerous. The lurid covers bear titles like *Nasty Girls* by Erick S. Gray (St. Martin’s Griffin, May 2006), *Bitch* by Deja King (Triple Crown, February 2006) and *Thug-a-licious* by Noire (One World/Ballantine, August 2006); and they are literally flying off the shelves and into the hands of African American women and men ranging in age from 15 to 90, according to bookstore owners. (See “It’s Urban, It’s Real, But Is This Literature?” *Black Issues Book Review*, September/October 2004).

Substitute the black faces on the covers with white ones and swap the guns for swords, and you pretty much have the bodice ripper covers that sold millions of historical romances in the late ’80s and early ’90s. Or the pulp fiction detective stories that titillated earlier generations from the ’30s to the ’50s.

Carl Weber, author and founder of Urban Books, says street lit accounts for close to half of the \$2 million in annual sales accrued by his seven Urban Knowledge Bookstores, which are located in Baltimore and Laurel, Maryland; Newark, New Jersey; Long Island, New York; and Memphis, Tennessee.

On a more micro level, Hakim Hopkins, owner of two Black & Noble Bookstores in black neighborhoods in Philadelphia and Camden, New Jersey, speculates that urban-lit titles will represent 75 percent of the estimated 24,000 books he hopes to sell this year.

### Getting Paid

Major publishing houses are listening up. If more blacks are reading books, publishers want those books to bear their brand.

Turner signed a six-figure, two-book deal with One World/Ballantine in 2004, after a bidding war between seven publishers. Her contract for Nikki Turner Presents makes her one of three African American writers-turned-publishers who have book lines distributed by major publishers. The other two are erotica writer/publisher Zane, whose Strebor Books is distributed by Simon & Schuster, and Weber, whose line is distributed by Kensington Publishing.

In May 2006, Turner became the first author rapper 50 Cent tapped to write for his G-Unit Books, a division of Pocket/MTV Books. That untitled book is due out in 2007, with a possible movie deal to follow.

Melody Guy, senior editor at One World/Ballantine, says Turner was brought to her notice by an agent following the writer’s success at Triple Crown. “We acquired Nikki because she came to us with a track record. ... And in talking with her you get the impression she really knows her market and her readers,” Guy says. But the clincher, she adds, was Turner’s ability to “tell good stories.”

Almost all of the big names in street lit have signed deals with major publishers, including Weber and Vickie M. Stringer, who have their own publishing companies, Urban Books and Triple Crown Publications, respectively. Relentless Aaron has a four-book deal with St. Martin’s Press, which will also reprint 10 of his self-published novels. *Vibe* magazine entered into a joint partnership

with Kensington Publishing to copublish a line of books, *Vibe Street Lit*, beginning in January 2007.

Also joining the urban-lit bandwagon is Akashic Books, a Brooklyn-based independent publisher, which will launch its “urban noire” imprint to be called The Armory, in 2007. Novelist Kenji Jasper, whose latest book is *The House on Childress Street: A Memoir* (Harlem Moon/Broadway, January 2006), will curate the series, soliciting appropriate titles and playing a role in the packaging and marketing of the books.

### A Hard-Working Sister

Since signing with OneWorld/Ballantine, Turner has written two novels, *The Glamorous Life* (2005) and *Riding Dirty on I-95* (April 2006). She also edited a collection of short stories, *Street Chronicles: Tales From Da Hood* (January 2006), and is working on a second, *Street Chronicles: Girls in the Game*, which is scheduled to be published in spring 2007, around the time that the first novel in the Nikki Turner Presents line will appear.

Guy says Turner is her “hardest-working author.” Turner, a





Street-lit author and publisher Nikki Turner

**"It isn't so much about acquiring street lit as it is about acquiring good writers."**

are not yet at the point where we are saying if we buy more of commercial fiction, that it means we buy less of literary works. In other words, we have plenty of room to expand."

### A Call for Balance

Some critics of the genre that Turner prefers to call "urban lit" seem to believe her books and those of her fellow writers are as dangerous as the drugs often peddled on their pages.

One of the more vocal critics, author Nick Chiles, went so far as to write a *New York Times* Op-Ed decrying the impact of so much "smut" on the minds of black youth. Chiles also blasted publishers for not promoting "good literature" by writers like him. Chiles has written several books with his wife, Denene Millner, including *In Love and War* (NAL Trade, 2004) and *Love Don't Live Here Anymore* (NAL Trade, 2003).

"I realize that publishing is a business, but publishers also have a responsibility to balance street lit with more quality writing," Chiles wrote.

Turner says Chiles was even more aggressive when he confronted her during a panel at BookExpo America in Washington, D.C., this past May.

"He showed up with the guns and the torpedoes blazing. He was really angry and upset," Turner says. "You would have thought he was the street fiction writer."

Chiles isn't alone in expressing concern about the potentially negative psychological and financial impact of street lit.

Author and radio commentator Juan Williams, whose latest book is *Enough: The Phony Leaders, Dead-End Movements, and Culture of Failure That Are Undermining Black America—and What We Can Do About It* (Crown, August 2006), accused street-lit writers of corrupting the image of African Americans by "selling negative messages and saying this is what it means to be authentically black." Williams made his remarks during a Harlem Book Fair panel on black media stereotypes in July.

Turner says that black intellectuals who knock urban literature are peeved because their works aren't selling as well. She disputes allegations that her books make heroes of pimps and drug dealers.

"I don't think that I glorify bad behavior," she says. "People go to jail. People die in my books. Their acts have consequences in my books."

Bentley says Borders doesn't judge whether one book has more worth than another. "The readers are determining what it is they want to read. We make no judgments on what they read," he says.

Guy believes critics of street lit are missing the point. The overwhelming majority of street-lit titles continue to be self-published, Guy says, so she fails to see how they threaten those authors signed with major publishers who print a variety of books.

"You can't force them to read James Baldwin," she says. "There is a reason why people are choosing these stories and maybe we should look at what is causing this hunger."

Mainstream publishers focus on offering a variety of books, she adds. Turner's new novel is one of five released by One World/Ballantine this summer. Only three or four of the 25 titles to be published by the Random House division this year qualify as street lit, she says.

middle-class, suburban girl from Richmond who studied pharmacology at North Carolina Central University but dropped out, hardly seems typical of the street-lit genre, where some of the writers have authentic street credentials. "I haven't killed anybody, but I have struggled," says Turner, the single mother of two children, ages 9 and 13.

She declines to discuss the financial particulars of her latest three-year deal with One World/Ballantine. "Let's just say I won't miss any meals," she says coyly.

Turner is not the only street-lit writer Guy has rounded up for her publisher. Authors Y. Blak Moore and Treasure E. Blue also write for One World/Ballantine.

Turner's new line will help the publisher separate other good storytellers from the herd of street lit wannabes, Guy says. "It isn't so much about acquiring street lit as it is about acquiring good writers," she says.

Sean Bentley, who buys African American fiction for Borders Books, believes street lit has "staying power."

"Even before Sister Souljah wrote *The Coldest Winter Ever*, (Pocket Library, 2000), there were authors like Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim who were writing similar books in a different voice," Bentley says.

Now rappers 50 Cent and Snoop Dogg have entered the publishing world, and the people who listen to their music will likely read their books, Bentley says.

Joe Holtzman, Border's manager for fiction and reference, says the bookseller is expanding its African American literature selections and has plenty of room to grow. "We're experiencing a lot of growth in African American fiction overall," Holtzman says. "We

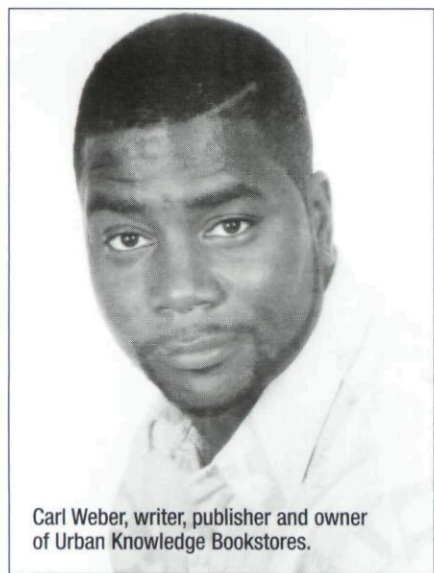


"No good business person puts all their eggs in one basket. That's not good business sense," Guy says.

## Don't Knock It

Weber, who has an MBA in marketing from the University of Virginia, writes, publishes and sells urban books. Weber says the genre is in a "shakeout period" that some won't survive. "We as writers don't decide what gets published, the readers do. People who hold people's interest are going to be around. Those who don't will lose their jobs."

Street-lit author Vickie M. Stringer, founder and CEO of Triple Crown Publications in Columbus, Ohio, says Turner would do better starting her own publishing house rather than accepting the imprint deal with One World/Ballantine. "Imprints are about ego, not dollars," Stringer says.



Carl Weber, writer, publisher and owner of Urban Knowledge Bookstores.

Stringer founded Triple Crown in 2002 to publish her first book *Let That Be the Reason*, which has become a street-lit classic. Triple Crown branched out to publish other street-lit writers, but Stringer eventually signed a book deal with Simon & Schuster for her work. Stringer's latest, *Dirty Red* (Atria Books, July 2006) is her last book with Simon & Schuster and that Triple Crown will publish her next book.

She contends the street lit writers—herself included—don't do as well with the big publishers as they do on their own or with small publishers like Triple Crown. Turner compares the genre to the hip-hop



Vickie M. Stringer, founder and CEO of Triple Crown Publications

cultural phenomenon, which has spread worldwide.

"It was here long before I sat down and started to write, and it will be here long after I'm gone," Turner says. "I see urban fiction becoming as huge as hip-hop music and spreading to writers from other nationalities."

Street lit has already gone global—at least as far as Japan—where Triple Crown is selling *Let That Be the Reason* and nine other street-lit titles in Japanese. Triple Crown is also in the process of translating those 10 titles into German and Spanish.

"It's already very big in Japan and Asia," Stringer says of urban fiction. "They're fascinated with the urban culture, and they love hip-hop music and clothing."

Meanwhile, urban lit has become the savior for African American bookstores, a market segment that was dangling on the edge of extinction four years ago.

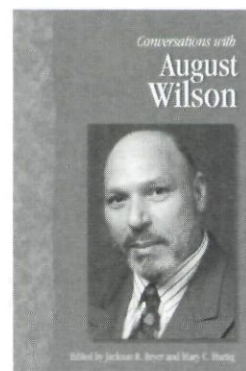
Hopkins opened his first retail bookstore a year ago, after spending 18 months selling books on a street corner in North Philadelphia. Now he has two stores, one in North Philly and the other across the Delaware River in Camden, New Jersey. He owes it all to the readers who buy and read street lit, he says.

"I didn't start out to sell these kinds of books, but this is what the people want. So I sell them the urban lit and then try to steer them towards other writers," Hopkins says, pointing to the more traditional black literature at the rear of his tiny North Philly store.

"People are reading and that's a plus," Hopkins says. "That's what we've got to encourage. Sometimes you have to come to people at their level just to make them understand. I would never say, 'This is trash.'"

*Earni Young is a freelance writer and a columnist for The Philadelphia Daily News.*

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