All About Teen Urban Fiction
By Autumn Winters

Here’s What Teen Urban Fiction is:

Teen Urban Fiction is melodramatic, page-turning fiction about diverse characters growing up in contemporary urban America. Characters often find themselves in adult situations or making tough decisions. While influenced by popular adult urban fiction themes and tropes, teen urban fiction stays within the bounds of propriety established in the teen market.

Here’s What Happens in a Teen Urban Fiction Novel:

Protagonists are streetwise teens whose lives are equally filled with drama and dreams. They may struggle with poverty, drugs or violence, but they remain proud and upbeat throughout. Authors often tell the story of a group of friends, sometimes contrasting the responsible one with less mature peers. Family ties are important but they may be troubled. Glamour, crime and shocking behavior are often present in large doses.

Why Teens Might Like Reading Teen Urban Fiction:

- It is fast-paced, unpredictable, exciting and up-to-date.
- Readers may see the world as they know it reflected in these books in a way that is not present in most mainstream media.
- Reading about characters who make extreme choices and suffer extreme consequences can help teens consider their own decisions in life.

Here are Key Teen Urban Fiction Titles to Read:

- *Fast Life* by Cassandra Carter: Glamour girl Kyra leaves her drug-funded lifestyle behind when she trades Chicago for the Caribbean. Unfortunately, trouble follows her all the way to paradise.
• *At The Crossroads* by Travis Hunter: Hurricane Katrina survivor Franky Bourgeois struggles to become the man his late father wanted him to be while living a rootless life in Atlanta.

• *Keysha’s Drama* by Earl Sewell: Keysha needs to drop her street attitude for a chance to live with her father’s prosperous, stable family. Will she continue to be her own worst enemy?

• *Snitch* by Allison Van Diepen: Readers looking for a realistic and detailed look at gang life will enjoy this tale penned by a former Brooklyn teacher.

**Here are Key Authors to Know:**

• **Babygirl Daniels:** Writes hard-edged tales of young women caught up in the gangster lifestyle. She uses alternating points-of-view to wring every drop of drama out of the crimes, tragedies, and betrayals that befall her characters.

• **L. Divine:** Her pioneering Drama High series features heroine Jayd Jackson, who comes from a long line of “Louisiana conjure women,” which makes her wise beyond her years. Her friends lack her innate wisdom and are embroiled in drama. Divine has created a delectable combination of Compton street smarts and vodoun spirituality.

• **Darrien Lee:** Author of the Denim Diaries series, fast-moving, plot-centered books that focus on the exploits of Denim Mitchell, whose life is relatively stable, and her friends, who face everything from teen pregnancy to drug-addicted parents.

• **Kelli London:** Writes drama-filled romances with a self-empowerment angle. Focusing on relationships between girls and boys, London, a protégé of author Ni Ni Simone, finds fertile ground to explore themes of identity, aspirations and goal-setting.

• **Ni Ni Simone:** Writes books with lots of drama, lots of humor, a touch of romance and upbeat endings with sympathetic protagonists in glamorous, aspirational settings like the hip-hop industry or HBCU sororities. Simone owns the lighter side of teen urban fiction, without skimping on the exciting plots.

**Crossover with Other Genres:**

**African-American Teen Fiction:**
The line between Teen Urban Fiction and conventional African American teen fiction is thin and permeable. Still, many readers will recognize the difference and reject more traditional literary titles out of hand, especially if characters are saddened or defeated by poverty.

- Baby Girl by Lenora Adams
- Kendra by Coe Booth
- Tyrell by Coe Booth

**Urban Christian Fiction:**
Readers attracted to the relatively benign moral universe of teen urban fiction may also enjoy urban Christian fiction’s combination of exciting melodrama with conventional values.

- On Bended Knee by Brittany Holmes
- The Pledge by Chandra Sparks Taylor

**Crossover with Nonfiction:**

**Memoir:**
Readers who love gritty realism will also enjoy biographies and memoirs, especially those concerning young people growing up in adverse conditions.

- A Piece of Cake by Cupcake Brown
- Life Is Not a Fairy Tale by Fantasia
- Grace After Midnight by Felicia Pearson
- Blue Rage, Black Redemption by Stanley “Tookie” Williams

**Self-Empowerment and Self Help:**
Readers looking to urban fiction for models of success may also enjoy more conventional books about achievement.

- Letters to a Young Brother and Letters to a Young Sister by Hill Harper

**Graphic Novels:**
Reluctant readers who appreciate the fast pace and manageable length of some teen urban fiction will enjoy realistic fiction in this similarly approachable format.

- Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty by G.Neri
- Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun by Geoffrey Canada

**Crossover with Adult Authors:**

Many teen urban fiction readers are eager to get their hands on the harder-edged material in adult urban fiction. Also, many adult authors write about protagonists in their teens and early twenties. A thorough examination of adult urban fiction is not possible...
within the scope of this article. However, here are two classics, one newer title and one graphic novel to offer older readers.

- **The Coldest Winter Ever** by Sister Souljah: Souljah’s debut novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever*, kicked off the urban fiction genre with the riches to rags tale of Winter Santiaga. Teens love to read about Winter’s wicked ways, as she grows up in the drug trade, rejects all opportunities to go straight and ends up in prison with all her friends from the block.

- **Flyy Girl** by Omar Tyree: This soapy tale of a boy-crazy teen coming of age in the 80s still pleases readers almost 20 years after publication. Bratty beauty Tracy Ellison grows up fast, using her looks for material gain and sensual thrills. Tyree’s irrepressible heroine and snappy dialogue will hook teens looking for a fun, sexy read.

- **Diary of a Street Diva** by Ashley and JaQuavis: Ashley and JaQuavis represent a new era in adult urban fiction. In their second novel, drug dealer Cease reads the diary of his late wife, Remy, after he has been accused of her murder. Teens will enjoy this intricately plotted novel that uses a clever framing device to set up a shocking twist ending.

- **Blokhedz: Genesis** by Mark Davis: In this graphic novel, young rapper Blak grows into his power as a performer and a healer, despite the curse that lies on his city. Fresh art, current slang and lots of action will appeal to readers who love traditional comics as well as to those looking for urban themes.

**Here’s How to Talk with Teen Urban Fiction Fans:**

- If your teens are asking for ‘drama books,’ be assured that they are probably not looking for Shakespeare. Drama is shorthand for urban fiction.

- Younger teens may mention the Bluford series or Sharon Draper’s Hazelwood High trilogy. Older teens may mention well-known adult urban authors like Zane or Nikki Turner. They may even ask for publishers by name, especially Triple Crown Publications or Urban Books.

- Find out if your customer is open to reading teen urban fiction by offering up Ni Ni Simone or the Drama High series. If the reader rejects these, (s)he may have already moved on to adult urban fiction. Avoid mentioning books by more traditionally lauded African American authors such as Walter Dean Myers, Angela Johnson or Jacqueline Woodson.
• A list of all the urban fiction authors stocked by your library may come in handy, since these books are often checked out or missing from the shelves. Make sure your customers know how to place holds to get the titles they want.

• If you aren’t familiar with the genre, read a few titles that appeal to you and get up to speed. Genuine enthusiasm for a few books or authors will be apparent to your readers and will help you build credibility.

• Treat requests for urban fiction with enthusiasm and candor. Acknowledging the fact that these books are exciting, fun and possibly a little naughty helps break down barriers between readers and librarians.

Autumn Winters is a teen librarian at Durham County Library in Durham, North Carolina.