

OOPS, WHERE'D WE GO? THE DISAPPEARING BLACK GIRLS IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

by *Racialicious* special correspondent [Latoya Peterson](#)



Back in the day, there was Jessi Ramsey and Rainbow Jordan.

Jessi, the only black member of the Babysitters Club, was one of my girl idols back when I was a nerdy tween who had yet to blossom into full teenagehood. I remember avidly the adventures of all the girls in the BSC - but Jessie most of all. She was a dancer and had a cute boyfriend named Quentin. Her life was full of baby-sitting, her friends, and getting into Julliard.

On the opposite end of the spectrum was Rainbow Jordan. A tough kid from the inner city, she navigated the maze of foster care, wrestled with a sex-crazed boyfriend, and watched her friends succumb to the pull of the

streets.

Growing up in suburbia, both Jessie and Rainbow Jordan held some truth for me. I related to Jessi's struggles just to be a normal girl in a lily-white reality, with a white dominated hobby. (She did manage to find a black boyfriend, interestingly enough). Rainbow Jordan helped me to relate to experiences that were not my own...but not too far away either.

As I grew older, I read about Jessi Ramsey and Rainbow Jordan, kept some company with the kids from Walter Dean Myers' [18 Pine St. Series](#) and filled the rest of my time with mainstream teen fare - the Baby-sitters Club, Nancy Drew, Sweet Valley High, the Alice Series. Still, I always thought when I was older, my younger siblings and cousins would have a whole shelf full of progressive (or at the very least, mainstream) books to read that featured black characters.

Unfortunately, my younger sister spent her teen years reading [Gossip Girl](#), supermarket mysteries, and sneaking into my room to steal my adult oriented books. I have to admit, I was thrown for a loop to see my younger sister relating to [Flyy Girl](#).

My boyfriend's younger sisters, born 5 years behind my sister, are beginning to exhibit the same traits. They eschew traditionally popular Young Adult (YA) lit and instead snatch up novels like [Ghetto Girls](#) and the latest street lit by Chunichi.

Personally, I am stumped by this development. Behind the circulation desk, clerking it at the library, I see this same scenario play out with dozens of young black girls every Saturday and Sunday. Why don't

they relate to the young adult material that was specifically written for them? Why do they continue to grab the most racy adult material that they can find? Even in this day and age, I highly doubt that most girls are having sex at 11 and 12.

I decided to go through the most popular YA lit to figure out what is going on. After engrossing myself in the worlds of *The Clique*, *Gossip Girl*, *The It Girl*, the *A-List*, and checking out a few other standouts (*Pretties*, *Uglies*, *Speak*, among other novels), I can see where we have an issue.

In the new YA lit arena, people of color are non-existent.

Now, I am sure that there have to be books written by and for young women of color circulating around the library. However, I solely checked the top requested books in the YA category. Nary a person of color to be found. (Do not be fooled by *Gossip Girl*'s multi-culti covers - people of color are passing references and side characters, if they appear at all.) For the first 3 books for the *A-List*, the only people of color were Latina, in the role of...well, care to hazard a guess? (At least no one is illegal.) This finally changed with the introduction of a new character, Eduardo, heir to one of the richest families in Latin America - and linked with the one "chunky thigh[ed]," "pear shaped" kid in the *Hollywood Crew*. *The Clique* appears to have one Latina - however, I am not sure how her character develops as I am still on the waiting list to complete that series.

As it stands, most of the characters in YA Lit are white (predominantly female) protagonists.

However, things in the book world are changing. New series like *Drama High* and the [Kimani Tru](#) line of novels are challenging the chokehold that white girl reality has on teen fiction.

And more and more teens are getting into manga, finding their truths in other cultures or penning their own manga stories to reflect their reality.

Still, I can't help but worry a little, concerned big sister I am. I am not a huge fan of the [street-lit boom](#), and I cringe a little when street lit dominates the African-American sections of libraries and bookstores. It worries me even further knowing that young girls are coming up grasping on to those shallow views of African-American life. As an aspiring librarian, I believe whole heartedly that people have the right to write and read whatever they wish, free from judgement. However, the prevalence of street lit makes me wonder if young girls reach for it because that lifestyle is what they wish to attain. Perhaps the popularity of ghetto literature is simply that adult street lit is easy to identify, easier to procure, and actually features a predominantly black cast of characters.

I recently asked my boyfriend to return my copy of [Good Hair](#) written by Benilde Little. Described as "a black comedy of manners," it follows the protagonist as she wades through issues involved in changing social classes within the black community. I asked him where my copy was, and he replied that it was currently in the possession of one of his sisters. I felt a small wave of relief, even though the book handles heavy subject matter and has more than a few sex scenes.

Good lit can be hard to find, and while I am still a bit concerned about the racier subject matter in the book, I am glad this young sister voluntarily chose to expose herself to something a little different. The protagonist in the novel is successful, career-oriented black woman around the age of 30 with marriage ambitions, forced to choose between the culturally concious mortgage banker of her past and the upper class neurosurgeon of her present. All the main characters in the novel are African-American. Talk about something to aspire towards. Despite what street lit says, we all aren't trying to strip our way into a baller's good graces.

Still, as I head back to the library this weekend, I have to wonder: if there are this many issues with young black girls and young adult literature, then what is going on in other communities?