

## VOYA (Voices of Youth Advocates) Article—June 2009.

Shoe: Paul, I'm used to reading books about African-American teens written by African-American authors. What's a white Italian-American doing writing books about race and racial issues? Do you feel you can tell these stories authentically and honestly?

Volponi: My writing, as my life, is simply a small part of the reflection in society's mirror. We all pass by that mirror, contributing to the images and are part of that reflection. There are no lines or fences, because what touches you can touch me. And more likely, what touches you will touch me. My entire life I've walked the streets, rode the busses and pounded the basketball courts, keeping my eyes and ears open. The things you mention in your question—authenticity and truthfulness, were never a question in my mind. My concern as a writer and as a human being is can I move you with the things that have moved me. As a writer, you're never telling someone else's story. In essence, you're always telling your own story, which is always OUR story.

Shoe: So, in *Rucker Park Setup*, you're telling your story, too? You've played serious street ball?

Volponi: I grew up on a basketball court, one of the toughest in New York City. So I started to see people as both competitors and teammates. And in street ball, the sides change every twenty minutes. So I got to know a lot of different people, and played in lots of different neighborhoods, too. I became part of the scenery in some places, and people of different backgrounds talked around me, almost as if I wasn't there. But I was always listening, and was tuned in. It was a good start for a writer. And that love of street ball was the genesis for every sharp elbow and high-five in *Rucker Park Setup*, a novel that examines the limits of friendship and loyalty, and a story that was born out of my own sweat and blood. The basketball action and the senses described on the court all come from a lifetime of my own playing, and what it's like to shove and fight to win a street game. I've played against many street legends and, at 48, still play once a week against some very good competition.

Shoe: How did you become a writer of novels for YAs?

Volponi: Basketball players are groomed in the oral-tradition, telling stories about the park, trash-talking on the court, and describing great moves they've done or seen. Becoming an English teacher and talking for a living refined those skills even more. Language was my life, and it was a short leap to becoming a writer, because of my speaking/story-telling skills.

Getting into YA was a reflection of the places I'd been. I'd seen teens in so many difficult situations, with great stories behind them. I've always lived [in Queens] within a mile or so from the gates of Rikers Island, one of the world's biggest jails. As I walked the streets with a basketball tucked beneath my arm, cars would pull up to me to ask the same question over and over, "Hey, kid, how do I get to Rikers Island?" That happened to everyone in my neighborhood, because the jail is fairly hard to find off the highway. So I thought up a smart-mouthed answer. "How do you get to Rikers Island?" "Rob a bank!" My friends would howl at that response. But I could never say it to the real people asking that question. They always looked sad and hesitant, admitting to a total stranger that they were going to visit someone they loved who was in jail, and that they were lost. Years later, I took a job teaching teens to read and write on Rikers Island. And the second I walked into a classroom, it hit me—in a city (NYC) that was pretty much racially balanced, nearly everyone locked away on Rikers was black and Hispanic. That's part of the shame of our criminal justice system, inequity. During the six years I was teaching there, I might have had fifteen white students, out of a few thousand.

Even if you were colorblind, the students would let you know [that THEY were aware of it], asking, "Hey, mister, where are all the white people at? They do crime, too. We see them. They just get bailed out or let off, and don't come here." That's why I wrote *Black and White*, and created two best friends (Marcus and Eddie) who did the exact same crime at the same time, and yet had different outcomes to their cases. And I'm proud that so many high schools and junior highs across the country are reading it. It's all very real.

**Box:**

**Letter from a non-reader/reader**

**Dear Paul Volponi,**

**I am Tanner Hightower from Nixa High School and I have read your book called Black and White. I love the way you wrote the book and all the details. I love those details when I was reading because I had a little movie in my head and I feel the emotions that the characters were experiencing. I was so over whelmed. This book was the best I have ever read and I hate reading. My teacher said that I need to read a Gateway nominee book, and she handed me your book. When I first looked at it, I was like "This looks like it is going to be a boring book, but I'll try it." And what do you know? I could not put the book down! When I was done reading it, I was so happy that I finally finished a book thanks to you, so thank you.**

**Sincerely,**

## Tanner Wayne Hightower

Shoe: But you could have written about racial matters and social injustice without writing about teens...

Volponi: Teenagers of all races do things out of emotions, sometimes without thinking. They feel and then act. I love writing about teens because they are so real and genuine, even when they're trying to front (act like someone they're not). They react to problems with great passion and emotion. Teens also have less power than adults (in society), but their problems and need for a solution are just as important. That's why teens make very worthy and moving protagonists. And teens deserve to see their problems explored in literature, especially in the junior high and high school English classes.

Shoe: Do you get much feedback from your teen readers?

Volponi: I probably receive close to 150 correspondences a year from students who say that they hate reading. But they were given one of my novels, and read it straight through in just a few days. I hear the same from teachers and parents about their teens, too. Why? I think the subject matter I choose, and style (almost as if I was telling you the story as we walked down the street) has great appeal for teens who have been turned off to reading. As a teen myself, I had nearly zero interest in books, so I'm able to make that connection. I was the ultimate reluctant reader. But never have a low opinion of teens who don't read. They've probably replaced that particular skill set with conversation, TV, music and movies. It's up to teachers and parents to show them books really aren't so foreign. Whenever, I see a teen rapping out loud, I say to myself, "There's a future poetry lover."

### Box:

**A student in Cleveland, who was reading *Black and White* with his class, but not allowed to take the book home, wanted desperately to read ahead. He asked his parent to drive him to a mall 10 miles away. The parent thought they were going to buy sneakers, but the teen came out of a book store with his own copy of *Black and White*. Take that Nike!**

Shoe: The ending of *Black and White* leaves room for a sequel. Any interest?

Volponi: For a long time I was against doing a sequel to *Black and White*. I ended the book the way I did because I wanted the reader to really put themselves into the conflict, and not provide them with any concrete answers. But there's a line in a Tom

Waits song that goes “When you get far enough away, you’ll be on your way back home.” And after writing seven new novels since B&W, a part of me wants to get back to Marcus and Eddie. So I’ll see if that feeling in me continues to mature.

Shoe: How did you come to write *Hurricane Song*, which for the first time, you set outside the NYC area?

Volponi: *Hurricane Song* is important to me because it provides teens with a type of historical fiction they have lived through and can relate to. And the characters put a face on the events for them.

I was inspired by an interview of someone displaced by Hurricane Katrina—a telephone interview on CNN of a working jazz musician during the end of the storm (no one famous, and no face, just a voice). He had escaped the Superdome and made his way through the streets, intent on finding out what had happened to a jazz club where he played regularly. The club was battered and in shambles. But he crawled inside and sat there in the dark crying, just to have the feeling of that club all around him. I was so moved by his account that I began to experiment with voices for *Hurricane Song* that day, having him take along his teen son and trumpet to that club. I read many on-line diaries of people who suffered in the Superdome, and interviewed people to get the story of that horrific storm and the terrible conditions just right. And I was very pleased by the reaction of people from New Orleans about the novel. (See Voices of NOLA website for their review) Also, there are lots of little tributes to Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* implanted in the book.

**Box:**

**Here’s a reader reaction to Hurricane Song— “I actually found myself physically getting nervous as I read about their experiences in the (Super)dome. My heart was racing, my palms were sweating, and I had to put it down and tell myself, ‘You are NOT there! Stop freaking out!’”**

Shoe: You aren’t still teaching on Rikers Island?

Volponi: No. After teaching on Rikers Island, I taught for six years in day drug rehabs where teens were sentenced by a judge, as an alternative to incarceration. One of those programs was called Daytop, and that program became the framework for my novel *Rooftop*. I was taken with how my students, who learned in a one-room schoolhouse setting with me teaching all the subjects, became a close-knit family, supporting each other in their education and rehab. During the time I was there, a teen in NYC was accidentally killed by police on a housing project rooftop. The police, who were headed

to the rooftop, had their guns drawn, even though they were not answering a call, and were just on patrol. The teen and the police met at the rooftop door surprising each other. Then, an officer's gun went off, and the teen was killed. I had some students who lived in that area, and their conversation and heartfelt feelings about the teen's death inspired me to use that incident as the basis of a novel.

Shoe: One of your newest books is about a sixteen-year-old white teen who seems bent on revenge via poker.

Volponi: *The Hand You're Dealt* is about coming to terms with the loss of a loved one, and was written about the passing of my own father. It's wrapped around a poker tournament in which the protagonist, Huck, takes on his evil math teacher, Abbott, to reclaim the watch Huck's deceased father once wore as the prize for being the local poker champion. EVERYTHING for Huck applies to continuing to confront this empty, hard-driven feeling to set things right concerning his father's death. This is not a revenge book. Huck is attempting to set things right in hopes of seeing and feeling things more clearly. This is also not a gambling book, nor does Huck want to become rich or famous. Poker is the vehicle to measure real gains and losses in life (see the book's dedication.) There is also no conscious risk here—Huck is doing what he believes he has to do.

Shoe: Abbott is one nasty guy. As a long-time public school teacher, I don't believe I've ever seen anyone in school with his combination of hubris and apparent hatred and disrespect for students. Have you had some bad experiences with teachers?

Volponi: Abbott's personality traits are based on that of an actual poker player (on the ESPN show), though much exaggerated. There is a little bit of some sour teachers in him that I've had and worked with. I once joked that to be a good teacher in jail you need to be more interesting than a brick wall. In reality, the best teachers are more concerned about their students than themselves. I would say it takes about three years worth of experience to learn to look past the trappings of Rikers, and see students there clearly.

Shoe: What did you take away from your experience teaching at Rikers?

Volponi: I can tell you that adolescents don't like jail. The only ones who believe crime is for them are the ones who have major problems reading and writing. Being a drug dealer is a hard and dangerous job, they'd all like a better way to earn a living. That's why school is so important to incarcerated adolescents. It lets them see there is another way, and can get them on the right track. I try not to make judgments for the reader about whether the criminal justice system is working. I only present what I've seen, and let the reader make their own observations.

Shoe: Are you a big poker player? Or did you have to research this topic?

Volponi: I watched hundreds of hours of the ESPN show, “The World Series of Poker”, to get this one right, and even borrowed a few of the more popular players’ personality traits. When I found out that the seventh and final card dealt in the poker game Texas Hold’em was called The River, the name Huck immediately jumped into my mind. Accordingly, there are lots of little tributes to Twain’s *The Adventure’s of Huckleberry Finn* implanted in the book, including Huck asking about what people might do in heaven all day. This is my first novel without an inner-city setting.

Shoe: Your newest novel, *Response*, returns to the NYC environs, and again, as in *Black and White*, involves black and white teens who are antagonists, not best friends...

Volponi: The people who play these roles in the book were not chosen by me. *Response* was inspired by a real-life New York City hate crime. Three thugs used a baseball bat to chase three African-American teens from their nearly all-white neighborhood. In actuality, the teens were there to steal a car, but the thugs didn’t know that. Ironically, the bat that was used said RESPONSE across it—a brand name. That’s what initially struck home to me, using a bat with that message imprinted on it. I could just imagine Freud rolling over in his grave, screaming “That was no accident. The attackers were drawn to that particular bat.”

The ending was also not chosen by me, but reflects the litigants’ real-life statements in court and to the press. Everything inside these events is my writing—the story-line and interpretation of personal relationships between the characters. Someone at Penguin once referred to what I was doing as “fictional-realism.” This also applies to some extent in *Hurricane Song* and *Rooftop* as well.

Like the real-life victim, the protagonist, Noah, works hard not to fall into the caldron of hatred bubbling around him, and eventually shows us how he and his family, especially his infant child, will be better off for that. Just before I began to write this novel, I saw a special on James Baldwin, who spoke the lyrics of an old spiritual—“God gave Noah the rainbow sign. No more water, the fire next time.” I thought how the real-life victim side-stepped his hatred and escaped the next potential inferno in his life. So I gave our protagonist the name Noah. I also wanted to give the reader a look into the mind of someone who would commit such a hate crime, and I did a lot of groundwork to fashion the inner-monologues and speech of Charlie Scat, the bat wielding thug. Most of it isn’t pleasant. But hearing it, and acknowledging it still exists, is probably the best way to ultimately defeat this kind of backwards thinking.

I think *Response* contains my strongest social commentary— (Noah narrating)

*My whole life, I've never been brave. I've never stared down anything that didn't whip my ass first. That's the way it is with me, always thinking what I should have done after the time to do it was over.*

*That's how it was that night, when those three white kids piled out of that Land Rover screaming, "Nigger thieves, go back to the jungle!" I was running scared before I ever saw the metal baseball bat one of them was swinging.*

*Deep down, I knew they were part right. I was a damn thief. I'd crossed Decatur Avenue into Hillsboro with Bonds and Asa, looking for a Lexus to heist. But I was no "Nigger", not the way they meant it, even if that's what me and my friends called each other all the time.*

Shoe: I know that you've got a day job writing about horse racing, and that this experience figures into your next book. What can you share with me about that?

Volponi: Since 1996, I have been a reporter covering Thoroughbred racing. I am currently the New York correspondent for the national magazine *The Blood-Horse*, which details Thoroughbred racing and breeding world-wide. That means I get many opportunities to be at the racetrack at 6AM when the horses are training, walking, getting shod, or getting baths. And that opened my eyes to the responsibilities of grooms who spend their lives taking care of these incredible equine athletes. There is a huge culture of Mexican grooms whose families for generations have come to the US to care for horses. I took that behind the scenes knowledge and created *Homestretch* (due out in Sept. 2009 Atheneum) a novel about a Texas runaway named Gas. Gas' father had taught him to hate Mexicans all his life, because they'd work for less money and took employment away from poor Americans. Then one day, Gas' mother is killed in a car accident caused by a sheriff's deputy chasing an illegal Mexican. After his hate-ridden father becomes abusive, Gas runs away, finding shelter and work at a racetrack barn. Surrounded by the people he was taught to hate, Gas undergoes many changes and finds a new idea of what family is really all about. The book also deals with the illegal practice of doping racehorses, when the diminutive Gas becomes a jockey for an unscrupulous horse trainer.

I once wrote an article about a famous trainer named PG Johnson. He liked the article so much that he named one of his young horses Volponi, which in Italian means the sly old fox. In 2002, Volponi won the Breeders' Cup Classic, the second biggest race in the US, behind the Kentucky Derby. He later went to stud in Kentucky, and is now at stud in Korea. You can see the replay of his win by going to You Tube and searching "Volponi 2002 Breeders' Cup Classic."

Shoe: How is reporting on horse racing similar to or different from writing fiction? Does it feel like you're using a completely different part of your brain?

Volponi: I use many elements of fiction in my reporting. It's part of being a complete writer. To write a good and interesting feature article, you take the reader on the same type of journey as if they were reading a novel or a short story. All the elements of good writing apply—setting, character, language, imagery. I only know how to write one way—to try and capture and move the reader. Damon Runyon said there are more good stories at a racetrack than anywhere else. He was right. The amazingly powerful and competitive Thoroughbreds—each with its own personality, the risk-taking and highly skilled jockeys (little supermen and women), owners ranging from the incredibly rich to the middle-class, the grooms who care so much for their horses, the potential for glory and for disaster in every second of every race, and the beautiful settings—that's plenty for a writer to try and capture.

Shoe: What book will be next?

Volponi: My first work of fiction was originally released as an adult book by a small company in 2002 under the title "Rikers." I reacquired the rights and retooled it as a pure YA novel we're calling *Rikers High* which is scheduled to be released spring 2010 by Viking.

This is an up close look at what a jail school is like. It has all the positives, such as teens striving to learn with the weight of their impending cases hanging over their heads, and how school can be a return to normalcy, even behind bars. It shows all the negatives, including teen-on-teen violence, and the sometimes unprovoked violence of corrections officers on teens. It is 100% truthful and detailed, and was part of my teaching life. *Rikers High* is the story of Martin Stokes, who can not make bail and is being held for "steering," telling an undercover cop where he can buy drugs in his neighborhood. While on Rikers, Martin gets sliced across the face with a razor when he accidentally gets caught up in a gang attack on another inmate. The book deals with his building anger over that incident and his growth beyond that while attending classes on Rikers.

Shoe: You have a great ear for family dynamics, especially for the conversations your teen characters have with their parents, often under very trying circumstances. How do you make them so authentic?

Volponi: While working on Rikers Island and at various day-drug treatment centers, I have participated in many of these family dialogues. I draw on that bank of touching



personal experiences regularly. For example, in *Rooftop*, Addison turns to Clay and says that his younger brother wants to deal crack, and how can he tell him not to when his brother has seen the money Addison made as a dealer? That was an actual conversation between a student and me. In *Response*, Noah's father tells him (after the death of Noah's grandmother) "It's not till both your parents are gone and leave you here all alone on this earth that you really know what it is (to become a man)." That was a speech I heard given by an older man on Rikers to a group of younger men.

Shoe: Do you have any concerns about the fact that the use of obscenities in your books may restrict their use in some school libraries?

Volponi: I use the language that people use in the real-life situations. I never allow my characters to curse just to get your attention or make some kind of a splash with the reader. It's real language in real situations. I don't see how you can accurately portray a hate crime (*Response*), or an armed robbery (*The Hand You're Dealt*), or a gang of thugs trying to extort people in the Superdome during Katrina (*Hurricane Song*), without using hard language.

I think the greatest scene in American literature is when Huck uses the N-word (in his mind) when he renders his apology to Jim after playing a terrible trick on him. At the time, it painted a stunning and truthful picture of where we were as a society.

Shoe: Can you tell me anything about what you're working on now?

Volponi: Right now I'm working on a novel for Viking called *Crossing Lines*. It is inspired by a teen who decided he needed to begin dressing as a woman, and going to school that way. The story is told in the first-person by Adonis, a varsity football player, whose sister is a close friend of the teen, Alan. Adonis isn't happy about being anywhere near Alan, who besides coming to his house to hang out with his sister, is also in two of Adonis' classes. And the stage is set for some tense learning experiences. I've written about three-quarters of the novel, and I feel that it is by far my best work. And I don't need to do much research for *Crossing Lines*. I know exactly how a jock is going to react to another boy in a dress.

Shoe: Thanks, Paul. I'll look forward to that book and whatever lines you decide to cross next.