

# Author visit gets troubled teens reading Writer discusses his teen novels with County Juvenile Home book group

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By Stephanie Esters

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Members of the book-discussion group at the Kalamazoo County Juvenile Home were to read through Chapter 5 of Paul Volponi's book "Black and White." But when 16-year-old Richie got the book, he finished it the first day.

"Man, this book is good," the young man said. "(There's no way) I'm not going to read past Chapter 5.' ... I'm reading the whole book, like, this day."

Richie shared his excitement during his book club's meeting Tuesday morning with Volponi, the author of some of Ritchie's favorite new books. Volponi visited Kalamazoo on Tuesday to discuss his work with some of his fans at the Kalamazoo County Juvenile Home and to speak to the public that night at the Eastwood Branch of the Kalamazoo Public Library.

Volponi's books "Black and White" (Viking Books, 2006), "Rooftop" (Viking Books, 2006) and "Rucker Park Setup" (Viking Children's Books, 2007) emphasize urban issues and characters, particularly the race-influenced treatment of people and juvenile justice.

Volponi was invited to Kalamazoo by Allison Baer, assistant professor of literary studies at Western Michigan University, whom he met at a conference in Nashville, Tenn., this past November. Baer and Tamica Frison, detention manager at the Juvenile Home, facilitate the book group as part of the home's diversion program.

Volponi told the dozen young people and others sitting in a circle of chairs how his stories grew out of his years growing up a few blocks from the Rikers Island jail in New York City and the six years he spent working with students at the prison, where he noticed that "99 percent of the population ... was black or Hispanic."

In one of his books, two friends -- one black, one white -- are both talented high school athletes who make decisions that alter their bright futures and highlight some of the ways they are treated differently thereafter.

Volponi, who still lives in New York City, talked to the young men about his writing and character development, all the while encouraging them to write their own stories, even if only for themselves. He held up a copy of the "2006 Writer's Market," a guide to

publications, publishing houses and agents and a possible source for helping them sell their work.

“You guys are powerful in a certain way,” Volponi said. “This story is no more important than the story you have in your head. If you write a story that reflects what you've seen, people will be interested because you've lived it for real. It is you.”

A resident of the Juvenile Home, 16-year-old Corey, wanted to know why Volponi ended “Black and White” the way he did.

“What's the moral of the story?” Corey asked Volponi.

“People have said, ‘How come I leave them there?’” Volponi said. “I just leave it there 'cause the story just did what I wanted it to do. I'm not trying to leave you hanging. I just feel like I'm done.”

The youngsters also discussed Volponi's book “Rooftop,” about an incident on a New York City rooftop that leaves the main character's best friend dead. The character doesn't disclose what happened to his friend.

“You got to read that book -- you just can't stop,” Richie said.

Discussion of that book also led to questions about whether the young men themselves would reveal who had murdered their best friend

“I would have told; I wouldn't have took that long,” Richie said.

Juvenile Home staff members and volunteers like Mary Kars, with the Juvenile Home Foundation, applaud the way Volponi's works draw teens into reading.

“They need to be reading books like this that they can relate to,” Baer said, standing next to a cart stocked with books.

Frison told Volponi that when the Juvenile Home received 15 hard copies of his books, she had to photocopy them because the young people are not allowed to have them for security reasons. When they received some paperback versions, they disappeared almost immediately, as the young people hoarded copies until they could finish reading them and often didn't return them.

“I couldn't keep up with the demand,” Frison told Volponi. “It was something that the kids were really talking about. I was dazzled from that and haven't seen that (before). I want to thank you for that.”