

# Pushed Over the Line: An Interview with Paul Volponi

From the ALAN Review Winter 2007

Interview conducted by Shelbie White

There are no shades of grey with Paul Volponi, young adult author of *Rikers*, *Black and White* and his latest book, *Rooftop*. Volponi worked for several years with incarcerated adolescents on Rikers Island, and he continues to work with at-risk adolescents in a variety of capacities. Volponi writes the stories as he has come to understand them: through the eyes and experiences of young adolescents struggling to make it in the heart of New York. To hear Paul tell it is like hearing it straight from the kids themselves. Gut-wrenching, brutally honest, and so a matter-of-fact are Volponi's characters, that an educator can't help but hope that every person interested in the future of young adults reads his thought-provoking testimony to the very real existence of inequity within the criminal justice system.

The following interview was conducted through email during August of 2006.

SW: In your novel *Black and White*, and your latest novel *Rooftop*, you examine discrimination and the racial inequities of the criminal justice system. How did you become interested in the topic?

PV: I grew up several blocks from Rikers Island, and as I wandered the streets with a basketball in my hands, many cars pulled up to ask, "Hey, kid, How do I get to Rikers Island?" (It's on a difficult avenue to find). That happened to most people in my neighborhood, so much so, that we already knew what the people were going to ask before the words left their mouth. So I thought up a smart-mouth response that had my friends howling- How do you get to Rikers Island? Rob a bank! But when I looked into the eyes of the people asking, how they were lost, and had to admit to a stranger that they were going to visit somebody they loved in jail, I could never pull the trigger on that punch line, I also began to notice how everyone asking was either Black or Hispanic. Many years later, I took a job teaching on Rikers, mostly because it was one of the few teaching jobs open, and so close to my house. That's when the past and the present sort of blended together for me, and I formally began my jail education-a very interesting look into the heart of yourself and others.

SW: While researching the facts of adolescent incarceration, I found that since 1972, the disproportionate confinement of minorities, primarily African-American and Hispanic males, has risen astronomically, with more than 30% of African-American males between the ages of 18 to 25 being incarcerated. As a teacher in a suburban area, it is

difficult to get my head around that number. How can this be? How are we losing an entire generation of African-American males?

PV: Not losing, branded-maybe, but I hope not. I encourage all my students to never hide the fact that they've been to jail-to turn it around and say, maybe I fell into some traps that were set for me, maybe I made some mistakes of my own, too, but I'm not down with that anymore. I learned something from it, and I'm stronger now, and can offer something to a college or a job through those experiences I had.

If society's going to try and bury you under a wave for your past, learn how to ride that wave, and take it as far as you can.

SW: *Black and White* examines this issue head-on, with one reason being that those who can afford the best lawyer are afforded the best of circumstances, a very large issue to tackle and a difficult concept for adolescents to understand. Did your experience with at-risk students give you more insight to this situation?

PV: Kids understand the social and economic reasons why almost every face on Rikers is Black or Hispanic, but I know that deep down they start to look at each other, and begin to think-maybe there's something wrong with us. That's a harsh thing for teens who are already on the bottom (in jail) to wrestle with and overcome.

SW: You have had tremendous experience working with at-risk students through your work at Rikers Island. Many adolescents seemed resigned to the notion that their lives have already been decided, destined for a lifetime of crime. Many adolescents, like some of the students at Daytop (an outpatient drug treatment facility), have lost hope. As a writer, how difficult is it for you to show the realities of the choices adolescents make to follow the wrong path?

PV: As a writer it's not hard at all, because I'm basically a reporter on what I see.

SW: In your latest novel *Rooftop*, Clay is driven to intervene in Darrell's illegal activity in hopes of saving him from the same fate as Addison, perhaps as a way to quiet his guilt of not telling the entire truth of the events from the rooftop. Did you feel it was important to show Clay redeeming himself in the end?

PV: Clay doesn't need to be redeemed, he needs to break free and he does, standing up to the dog. I'm proud to say Darrell's father does an equal amount of the hard work, because he loves him best and sees he has already lost one son to the streets.

SW: I was intrigued by the fact that Clay seemed to do more for Darrell than many of the adults in the book, many of whom turned a blind eye towards Darrell's illegal activities. Would you care to share your thoughts on the family structure in the novel and its impact on the characters?

PV: All the characters are strong-sometimes they look out for themselves first, and other times their family. I think that's how it goes in life. But I think they are bound together by love. I don't think there's any real blame on their part-just the way life goes in NYC. And if it didn't, I couldn't write it that way.

SW: To make your characters so realistic, do you base them on people you've known?

PV: Black and White has basis in real events. When I was an assistant coach for a NYC high school basketball team (Aviation), we went to LIC (Long Island City High School) to play a game, but there was still a gym class going on, and we couldn't walk through the gym. We knocked at a side door and a few kids from the LIC team met us there, shaking our hands and taking us around back to our lockers. Several weeks later, I saw one of those kids on the six o'clock news. The LIC team had gone upstate to play in a tournament. There was a lot of racial stuff coming out of the stands. Then the whole gym went zoo. The news had a white spotlight on that kid as the guy from the stands ripped a chair leg off and stabbed him through the back with it, killing him on the court. I pushed that aside like any other New Yorker who'd seen too much tragedy and had nearly become immune to it. But when I started working on the book, that all came back to me, and I made the youngster who got killed a character in Black and White and someone for Eddie and Marcus to judge their own circumstances against. Also the scene on the subway train in which the homeless man ("Shit Drawers") tries to stir up racial tensions among the passengers is almost word-for-word out of a train ride I took from Brooklyn to Queens while I was in the middle of writing Black and White. I described that homeless man exactly the way he looked and acted on the real train, just putting Marcus, Eddie, and their teammates along for the ride.

SW: I was impressed to find some of your pieces in a publication about thoroughbreds, The Blood-Horse, a much different style and genre of writing. How would you compare your correspondent work to the work of creating young adult novels?

PV: Again, in the novels, I never thought I was making much up. If it wasn't true, or at least true from a perception of a whole group of people on either side, it couldn't work. But I enjoy pushing the buttons that a writer can, if he does his job right, for the reader in both a fiction and non-fiction setting. There's nothing purer than a thoroughbred running at full speed, giving his all. Someone has to speak for him.

SW: What is your writing process like?

PV: I like to write every day, several times a day, with lots of breaks in between-getting my daughter off to school, walking the dogs, family dinner, shooting baskets, jogging and hitting a heavy bag. A lot of the scenes I'm most proud of occurred more or less unplanned, while I was writing, so I'm intrigued by this thought-If I don't sit down to write today, will what I come up with tomorrow be the same? That keeps me going when I'm tired or not in the mood to write. I don't want to miss out on what may have been coming my way only today.

SW: You obviously have a gift for working with adolescents and helping them understand life's challenges. How do you explain these challenges to your daughter?

PV: Sabrina's only eight, but we live just a few blocks from Rikers, so she sees the traffic there. My wife, April (who is an English teacher and assistant principal in a Queens high school), and I basically just answer her questions. But she's heard me give a few book speeches and usually has more questions after that.

SW: What's next for you? Do you have other social topics you are interesting in exploring?

PV: Next year, *Rucker Park Set Up* (Viking 2007) will be out. I think it's a super book about friendship put to the ultimate test in the famed Rucker Park basketball tournament, where the pros have traditionally battled legendary street players. Two teens, who grew up across the street from the park, get their chance to play for the championship, but plenty goes wrong, including the murder of one of them. Then, the following year, *Hurricane Song* (Viking 2008), where I put a teen protagonist and his jazz musician father inside the Superdome during those nights of hell brought about by Hurricane Katrina. I'm extremely proud of that one, as well.