

Interview from The YA YA YAS' Winter Blog Blast Tour-- Nov. 2007

Paul Volponi is a hard hitting writer who doesn't pull any punches when it comes to his stories about teenagers growing up in the city. His protagonists are fraught with difficult decisions that determine the course of their lives. I had an opportunity to interview Mr. Volponi via email. To say the least I am inspired by his words in the interview and in his books. Paul Volponi offers hope through his writing to teens and young adult who find themselves in difficult situations. Definitely keep your eye out for Paul Volponi's upcoming books: *Hurricane Song* and *The Hand You're Dealt*. His books will change your perspective on life and the way that you look at people and situations.

Your author biography mentioned that you worked at Rikers Island, how did you start working there? What did you learn from that experience?

I started working on Rikers Island because I lived so close to the jail. It was a time when there were many budget cuts in the NYC school system, and as a new teacher I kept getting laid off. A job popped open in the jail and nobody really wanted it. But I'd lived close to the jail all my life. People in cars would pull up to me on the street as I walked with a basketball tucked under my arm and ask, "How do I get to Rikers Island?" That could happen four or five times a week. It happened to most of my friends, too, because the jail is almost hidden off of an obscure avenue. None of us liked to be approached like that, so I came up with a smart mouthed answer. How do you get to Rikers?-Rob a bank! My friends would howl at that. But I could never use it on the people who really asked. They all seemed sad, embarrassed and lost. They were visiting someone they loved in jail and had to ask a stranger for directions. It never hit me that most of those people were black and Hispanic. But when I got a job teaching inside, and saw that 99% of the inmates were black and Hispanic, I couldn't believe how unfair the justice system was to minorities. That became the basis for my novel *Black and White*.

What else did I learn there? I learned that the best teachers worry more about the students than themselves. And it takes some time getting used to the place that others can be your first concern. It was certainly one of the best experiences of my life and provided me with the strength to do certain things and write about what I've witnessed.

Your characters deal with serious situations, what advice do you have for young adults and teens in regards to dealing with a tough situation?

My advice to teens in tough situations is straightforward-Use your passion to motivate and inspire you, but don't let your passion take away from your reasoning and self-control.

Your characters seem to keep secrets to their own detriment, is there a message you have about integrity? Peer pressure?

I don't have any real messages for readers. I'm just a reporter writing down what I've witnessed. But I do think integrity is very special, and the characters I love and which you're probably rooting for in my work have lots of it.

Your characters break down racial boundaries by having common interests like Marcus and Eddie in *Black and White* and Mackey and J.R. in *Rucker Park Setup*. Do you have any insight as to how to ease racial tensions in schools?

I'm not smart enough to have solutions to big problems like that. But I feel that my honest reporting will inspire others to tackle these problems which I spotlight in my work.

Which of your characters do you identify with most?

I suppose I most identify with Mackey, aka. Hold the Mustard from *Rucker Park Setup* because so many of his moments on the basketball court were written out of my own street basketball experiences.

Part of the appeal of your books is the realistic dialog. When writing do you consult with young adults and teens to make your characters' conversations sound more authentic?

No. I actually live it. At 47, I still play hard-nosed street ball twice a week, and their dialogue is actually mine as well. Also, my work with teens in different programs keeps my ear sharp. But I grew up in the streets and never really left, so it's very natural for me. And I'm quite proud of the rap songs, *I Flow like a River* and *It's Time for Cochran*, which I wrote for *Rucker Park Setup*.

Could you describe your writing process? *Rucker Park Setup* changed perspectives rapidly, how did you get those layers in there?

The layers come from trying to mimic stray thoughts in our minds, that stream of consciousness that changes so fast but seems to have sprung from the same root. As a process, I try to write every day. Because so many scenes are merely sketches waiting to be fleshed out when I write them, I wonder how tied they are to the moment. And if I missed working today, would I have come up with the same guts for the scene tomorrow?

Do you have any books in progress?

Next year I'll have two books out. *Hurricane Song* (Viking) is a novel about a teen and his jazz musician father who spend two hellish nights in the Superdome riding out Hurricane Katrina, before they make their way through the flooded streets and looters to see what's become of their home. *The Hand You're Dealt* (Athenaeum) is about a high school teen who takes on his unscrupulous math teacher in a local poker tournament in an attempt to avenge a dishonor to his recently deceased father. The novel uses poker to examine life's bigger losses.

Who are your favorite authors? Any book recommendations for teens?

I like Mark Twain, John Steinbeck, and Flannery O'Connor as authors, and Paul Simon, Neil Young, Tom Waits, Tom T. Hall and Towns Van Zandt as songwriters. I Think Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Simon's *The Boxer* are my two favorite works.

As a young adult librarian I go to schools and talk about books to middle and high school age students, if I could convey a message from you to them, what would that be?

I think my message to teens is that what they write is very important because it's real and from the source. I value what teens write. It doesn't matter to me if there are mistakes in it. I don't want to give it a grade. I wish kids would value there own writing and thoughts more than anyone's on radio, TV, or a library shelf. We're all part of the chain, and the things teens say and write are very important and worthy.

Thanks Paul!