

Author for teens looks at 'Black and White' divide

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By Elizabeth Clark

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In his award-winning novel "Black and White," author Paul Volponi lets each character tell his story from chapter to chapter as the morally ambiguous troubles of the teen basketball buddies known by their friends simply as "Black" and "White" unfold.

As the voices in the book change, so does the typeface. This variation alludes to the divide implied by the title -- one that's extremely vivid to the white author, who worked with incarcerated teens at Rikers Island from 1992 to 1998 and grew up a mile and a half from the infamous New York jail.

Volponi, who will be visiting youths from the Kalamazoo County Juvenile Home this week and talking at the Kalamazoo Public Library on Tuesday night, said "Black and White" (Viking, 2005) speaks in voices he developed in those Rikers classrooms.

"I always felt that being a street basketball player and then becoming a teacher and then going there gave me a big upper hand," Volponi said. "You brought street credibility in with you. ... Kids looked at me and kind of thought it was cool being in school with me. I could go into a jail dormitory and get them to follow me into class."

"Black and White," named a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association in 2006, tells what might happen if two basketball-star buddies -- known for being as inseparable as the black and white stripes on referees' shirts -- hit some major wrong notes with their illegal activities.

The story hits some touchy buttons, suggesting serious inequality in the justice system and attempting to answer a question posed to Volponi by so many of his Rikers Island charges, nearly all black or Puerto Rican: "Where are all the white people?"

The young offenders know that white people also commit crimes, yet they don't appear at Rikers. This disparity struck Volponi even in his childhood, when he was such an avid basketball player that he'd play the game in his own ethnically mixed neighborhood and also jog to neighborhoods in which most of the population was black.

"If you play enough, you become part of the scenery," he said. "I would be in other neighborhoods, and people would forget I was white. You would start to experience people in a different way."

Several other aspects of "Black and White" come from real life, either from Volponi's own experiences or from newspaper headlines, such as the racially motivated murder of a young basketball player on the court at a high school game.

When the youths in the book are asked by passing motorists, "How do I get to Rikers?" it crosses the characters' minds to say, "Rob a bank," but they can never muster the moxie for that response.

"My friends and myself had come up with that as a response," Volponi said. "(But) when you look in the eyes of someone who's asking you that question and know that someone they love is in there and they're lost, you can never pull off that punch line."

Also inspired by headlines is Volponi's follow-up work "Rooftop," a Junior Library Guild selection that's a fictionalization of the rooftop shooting of an unarmed black teen by a New York City police officer. The officer was later exonerated by a grand jury composed largely of Hispanics and African-Americans.

"Rucker Park Setup," Volponi's latest novel, revisits his passion for basketball, a sport he plans to play with young people from the Kalamazoo County Juvenile Home during his visit here.

Volponi's upcoming works include "Hurricane Song," which tells the story of a young man and his jazz-musician father who spend two nights in the Superdome after Hurricane Katrina and then return to their neighborhood and see the devastation.

"I'm really proud of that book," he said. "We think it's the first novel, certainly the first young-adult novel, based on (the Hurricane Katrina aftermath)."

Volponi also is working on another culled-from-the-headlines story about a "response hate crime" in which three young black men are beaten with a baseball bat by three white Howard Beach, N.Y., teens 20 years after four white people were chased through the same neighborhood and one was run into traffic and killed.

The author said he's thrilled that many who might not otherwise read much have expressed a passionate interest in his books.

He said he was especially touched to get a letter from a mother in Cleveland whose son was reading the book in school. The school had only a certain number of copies and wouldn't let the students take them home. The student talked his mother into taking him shopping two townships over, because the book was sold out in local bookstores.

"She thought they were going to buy sneakers," Volponi said. "He walked out of the bookstore with 'Black and White.'"