

From “The Pen” To The Pen By: Michelle Cuttino

Urban fiction has taken the literary industry by storm, bringing tales of drugs, fast money, loose women, fancy cars and myriad tragedies into the mainstream. Following in the footsteps of street lit legends like Shannon Holmes, Kiki Swinson and Vickie M. Stringer, many new authors are turning their negative prison experiences into a positive and profitable future in literature. Foregoing the old-school route of sending queries to literary agents in hopes of snagging a publishing deal with a major house, urban lit has produced a stable of self-published authors, who used their own means to turn their lifestyles and life stories into a lucrative business.

The best books come from authors who write what they know, so it comes as no surprise that most urban fiction often mirrors the mindset, way of life and upbringing of its authors. The fact that many have served time in jail or prison seems to go hand-in-hand with the expectations of their fans. Experience is the best teacher, and many street lit authors are using their incarceration and time served to not only spin entertaining tales, but to also teach by example. As witnessed by the nine authors featured here, no matter what the storyline, the outcome remains the same – there are consequences to every action and every action brings forth a reaction.

Eyone Williams was born and raised in Washington DC. He spent a total of seventeen years on lockdown at Lorton, Colorado, Leavenworth, Sussex, Memphis, Petersburg, Lee County, Gilmer and several other correctional institutions. Being an avid reader of urban fiction, he decided to try his hand at writing. His first release *Fast Lane* under his publishing company Fast Lane Entertainment was well received, so he followed up with titles such as *Hell Razor Honeys 1 & 2* (The Cartel Publications) and *Lorton Legends* and *The Cross* (DC Bookdiva Publications). Eyone says, “The message in most of my stories is that when you live life a certain way that there are few people that you can trust. One must pick their friends wisely. I write about street life and in the streets things rarely turn out good. My stories aren’t to glorify the game, they are to paint a picture of what’s going on out here and at the same time give my readers something that will keep their attention.” Simply put, Eyone adds, “Life is what we make it!”

Michael “Mike O” Williamson was born in Winston-Salem, NC and served time in both Forsyth County Detention Center and Camden County Detention Center. Mike spent twelve years in and out of the system fighting thirty different charges, but it wasn’t until the birth of his son that he decided to write a story about his life. Already on the right path with a field engineering job with Clark

Construction, Mike self-published his debut novel, *1000 Grams*, which outlines the destructive path of drug dealing, as well as his newest title, *Til' Death Rips Us Apart*. Mike says, "My books are designed to make people think before they make split decisions that can cost you your life. Ain't nothing sweet about the streets, and I make sure you see how grimy the game really is. No glorifying that life from me." With a son to raise and faith in the Almighty, Mike O is determined to be a success and spread his message that "you can walk away from the game and still make it."

Natoka "Mack Mama" Williams was born in Brooklyn, NY and lost her mother to Aids when she was sixteen. The loss made her rebellious and the result was a total of thirteen years in prison, serving time at Rikers Island, Bedford Hills, Taconic and Albion. Under her StarStatus Publishing Company, Mack has released her debut novel, *Daisy Jones*, her autobiography, *Tales Of An Original Bad Girl*, and her upcoming *Lessons From An Original Bad Girl*. Each a personal testament intended to deter people from following the wrong path. As a poet, author and lyricist, Mack communicates her messages through her novels, her seven CD's and her motivational speaking engagements for at-risk youths. Mack says, "When I speak, they listen intently. They know I am one of them and I made it through." Determined to be a role model for her eleven-year-old daughter, Mack is convinced that "it is my responsibility to reach back and help others make it too."

L. "June" Miller hails from Brooklyn, NY and spent a total of eighteen months at Polk Correctional, Kenansville Correctional and Martin County Correctional Institute. After the death of his best friend, his passion for writing was restored and he penned his self-published title, *The Game Has No Loyalty*. Under his Four Shadough Publishing umbrella are also his other releases, *This Game Has No Loyalty II - Hustle for Life* and *This Game Has No Loyalty III - Love is Pain*. All three reach the reader subliminally; showing the only result from a life of crime is either prison or death. June's literary message is simple: "I just want readers to know that I'm sincere in what I've written and honestly want to see a change in my community so that my young brothers have a fair chance at a successful life."

Shawn "Bundy" Taylor is from Jamaica Queens, NY. He served more than sixteen years at Rikers Island, Ulster County, Sing Sing, Butler, Greene, Oneida, Clinton and myriad other detention centers. While incarcerated, Bundy found writing to be therapeutic and decided to cultivate the skill. He released *Stickin' & Movin'* under his Behind The Pen Publishing, LLC imprint. Bundy says, "I am trying to give young and still impressionable minds a total view of the lifestyle that is out there... I highlight the negativity of the game, the disloyalty of the game and a lot of the pitfalls that come with that lifestyle." He hopes to deter others from following his path. "I want them to know that there is a way out... It

is very difficult to transition from one lifestyle to the other. It is about discipline and what you really want for yourself at the end of the day. Your first and only priority should be to love yourself enough to give yourself a better chance.”

Kim “K.L. Davis” was born in Alexandria, VA. She served thirteen months in jail and six months in rehab. The writing bug hit her when she was trying to help a fifteen-year-old girl who was strung out on crack cocaine and died while Kim was serving time. Under her publishing company, Parks and Davis Publications, she released *A Girl Called Nikki*, which is the coming of age story of three young girls whose lives are engrossed in sex and drugs. Kim wants her readers to know that she is “someone who is caring, understanding and willing to learn. I am open to suggestions and helping others.” When it comes to being incarcerated, she warns others, “That the price was too high. There is nothing like freedom.”

James “Shaka Senghor” White was born and raised in Detroit, MI. He has served nineteen years at Michigan Reformatory, Oaks Correctional, Standish Max, Gus Harrison and a few other correctional facilities. The novels of Donald Goines and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* piqued his interest in writing. Shaka is the founder of the “Live In Peace Literary and Digital Arts” project, and also self-published his first title, *Crack: Volume I* under his Drop A Gem Publishing Company. The book takes the reader on a journey of the drug trade through the eyes of a homicide detective and a ruthless dealer. “The messages I convey in my books are that there is no limit to human redemption. No matter how we start, we can always do something to turn things around for the better if we believe in ourselves. I also emphasize the importance of family, love and loyalty.” To those who are choosing to follow the wrong path, Shaka says, “I would encourage them to step back for a minute and ask themselves why they don't love themselves enough to follow a different path... I would encourage them to really think about who they are and what all they are truly capable of. When you know yourself it is easier to really love yourself.”

Terry L. Wroten is from Los Angeles, CA. He has spent over ten years at Tehachapi, Pelican Bay, New Folsom, High Desert and Delano State Prisons. At age 16, while serving five years in “The Hole,” Terry penned five manuscripts. By the time he was finally released, the total rose to twelve. Black Dawn Inc., the publishing house of author K’wan Foye, released Terry’s debut novel about gang banging entitled *Natural Born Killaz*. Terry says, “The message of this story was to expose the raw truth to kids and parents about gangs, and to let kids know everything that glitters ain’t gold.” Terry is now self-publishing under his very own No Brakes Publishing house, which has five authors on its roster. To those aspiring authors trying to make it through the struggle, Terry says, “Never give up. When the going gets hard, keep on pushing and keep on writing. Consistency pays off.”

Cynthia Miller is also from Detroit, MI. She is a recovering heroin addict of twenty-three years, and has spent about thirteen of those years locked up in Sybil Brand, Riverside County, Chowchilla and Stockton. Cynthia used to write poetry for her children, she wrote for a very popular magazine and she also went to school for script supervising. She found her passion for writing again in 2009 while in The Riverside Substance Abuse Treatment Program. *In Rare Form* is her first release under a vanity press and is a behind the scenes look at the impact drugs and crime has on one family. Cynthia says, "I want this story to save lives. I want the mother that reads this story to peek in on her babies one more time tonight. I want the addict that reads this story to find their way out of the darkness. And to those of you who have never had to wake up inside a tunnel to reach out to those who do." With a new outlook on life and a greater faith in God, Cynthia's message is clear, "No one wakes up and decides to be an addict. It is a process. It is also a process not to be one. A long process in and out. Why waste the time? Find your gift, and expand on it. Make your dreams a goal. And you are closer to reaching them than you ever imagined. Because if you can find them you are already a step closer to getting there."

The move from prison to publishing isn't an easy one, and its purpose is not only for proceeds, it's also for progress. It's not about glorifying "the life," it's more about preventing others from following in the wrong footsteps. Street lit has become the *Scared Straight!* Documentary for the decade, but this time it's being played out on paper.