ForeWord Reviews

JUVENILE FICTION

Chess Rumble
G. Neri
Joshua Watson, illustrator
Lee and Low Books
978-1-58430-279-7
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Chess Rumble opens with the illustration of a boy extending his hand towards the viewer. In perspective, the fist looks life-size if the reader is eight to twelve—the ages recommended by the publisher—and invites engagement. “Peace!” as is often said in this reviewer’s home.

It is certainly not the same fist that’s found a few pages later, when protagonist Marcus is smacking his nemesis Latrell for teasing him in public. Marcus, of course, ends up in the principal’s office. Little threat there, however, as he knows Mrs. Tate feels sorry for him since his sister died. No, she won’t kick him out of school, but she will send him to the library. “Maybe you can use that anger to break down barriers instead of creating new ones,” she says. In response, Marcus thinks: *I wanna say I’m not an angry guy, that I’m not the one she gotta worry ’bout. But I can see in the way she look at me that she don’t believe I will turn it around.*

But isn’t a child who speaks like this going to have trouble in a library? And, why would a publisher encourage the use of slang? Says author G. Neri, “For reluctant readers, specifically inner city boys who may have never read a work of fiction, *Chess Rumble* provides an urban voice they probably haven’t seen in books before.

I see *Chess Rumble* as a gateway book, something that represents the language and rhythms of the street, something that may intrigue young men who have no voice in literature enough to get them reading.” Bakari Kitwani, author of *the Hip Hop Generation* (Civitas), believes that lyrics are the key to engaging and communicating with urban youth. As quoted recently in the *New York Times*, he says, “That’s far more powerful than any negative influence the music may be having.” Publisher Lee & Low specializes in children’s books with multicultural themes, and has more than 200 titles in print. “When we started the company, there was a lot of interest in multicultural books,” cofounder Tom Low says, “but most of the titles were folktales about exotic people from distant lands. We felt strongly that it was important to have books with a contemporary setting that reflect how we live today.”

This particular book was test-driven during its creation on a classroom of middle grade

readers. Says Senior Editor Jennifer Fox, “The feedback we gathered through a questionnaire and the teacher’s discussions with the kids was not only useful but also engaging, touching, and even entertaining.” As Marcus says, “In my ‘hood / battles is fought every day. / Some on the street corner. / some in the park. / Warriors fall. / Kings is made.” Hopefully some readers will be made as well.