
March 19, 2006

NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN; The Strand of Street Lit

By **JENNIFER BLEYER**

A MAN stood at the bottom of a small canyon of books, pulpy tales of the criminal, the carnal and the calamitous stacked all around him.

"You got 'The Return of Scarface,' Danny?" he asked.

"No, we're out," answered Danny Gonzalez, an energetic young man in a baseball cap, as he continued stocking shelves.

"All right," the customer said, and asked for two copies of another book.

The setting was A & B Book Distributors, home to the city's biggest trove of street lit, the genre of urban fiction liberally spiced with sex, crime and violence.

A & B, which occupies a book-crammed storefront on Duffield Street in Downtown Brooklyn and calls itself "the largest African-American book warehouse in the world," supplies major chains like Borders and independent bookstores nationwide.

But A & B has another staple clientele, about 200 vendors who fan out through the city each day to hawk these urban dramas. Although these street-lit peddlers are familiar sights on streets and subways, far less familiar are A & B and the handful of other smaller book wholesalers where these vendors buy their goods.

When A & B was founded in 1989, it specialized in African-American historical nonfiction and still carries such books, along with Bibles, children's books and a smattering of Maya Angelou.

But demand for street lit has been increasing, a result, said, Kevon Thomas, the company's sales director, of the ever-growing popularity of rap.

"The thuggish lifestyle is considered cool, and the books pretty much reflect what's in the music," he said. "The Coldest Winter Ever," for example, a successful street-lit book by the rapper and activist Sister Souljah, tells the story of a Brooklyn drug kingpin and the young woman who is his daughter.

As street lit has grown in popularity, A & B has shifted its focus, and the genre now makes up about 35 percent of its 12,000 titles. So far this year, Mr. Thomas said, the company has been selling an impressive 3,000 copies a month of a sequel to the underground blockbuster "Wifey" and can barely keep in stock "Married to the Game" and "Hood Rich."

The promise of success lures many novice authors to A & B. "People come in here pretty much straight out of prison with 10, 15, 20 books they wrote," Mr. Thomas said. And vendors in turn can make a pretty good living from their creations.

One such vendor is Glenn Brabham, who went to A & B one recent morning to replenish his supply, as he does several times a week. Mr. Brabham said he sold about 200 books a week at the corner of 86th Street and Lexington Avenue, charging double the average \$7 wholesale price.

At A & B, Mr. Brabham filled a cardboard box with books including "Wifey," "Harlem Girl Lost" and "The Game Chose Me." After settling his bill, he pulled down his ski cap and headed into the frigid morning.

"You ever seen George Washington on a dollar bill with a coat on?" he asked as the sun glinted off his gold-rimmed glasses. "Money don't get cold." **JENNIFER BLEYER**

