

NEW LIFE FOR AN URBAN STORYTELLER

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Author: JEFF GERRITT, Free Press editorial writer

In the four years before he was shot to death at his home in 1974, Detroit writer Donald Goines, even through a haze of heroin, managed to write 16 books of **urban** pulp fiction. His street stories are raw and real, with hard-edged titles like "Dopefiend," "Daddy Cool," "Inner City Hoodlum," "Whoreson," "Black Girl Lost" and "White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief." The books, to date, have sold more than 5 million copies.

One of the best-selling African-American writers ever, Goines pioneered the **new** genre of **urban** fiction, and his books continue to sell more than 200,000 copies a year. Still, literary critics, academics and most mainstream readers have, until recently, ignored him. Even today, many well-read, college-educated people have never heard of Goines. He's as unfamiliar to them as the people he wrote about.

Eddie B. Allen Jr., a 34-year-old Detroit writer, editor and former newspaper reporter, is trying to bring Goines' **life** and work to a wider audience. His well-reviewed 2004 biography, "Low Road: The **Life** and Legacy of Donald Goines," with a foreword by rapper DMX, goes paperback this summer and could turn into a movie by late next year. The project has attracted the interest of actor Michael Ealy and some independent producers.

"Donald Goines made **an** otherwise tragic **life** into something still worth remembering," Allen told me last week. "Through his missteps and struggles, he - I think very consciously - left lessons and, in a sense, direction **for** the generations behind him."

Goines wasn't James Baldwin or William Shakespeare, but he could make even the most brutal characters human, like Daddy Cool, a knife-wielding hit man who sacrifices his **life for** his daughter.

"He wasn't a great writer, but he was a phenomenal **storyteller**," Allen said. "You get the sense that this guy was right there. After the first 10 or 15 pages, you're captivated."

A drug addict and small-time pimp, hustler and thief, Goines, who died at 37, knew his material well. He spent more than six years in prison **for** attempted armed robbery, larceny and bootlegging and is today the best-read writer in prison.

He's also large in hip-hop, where his name surfaces in the lyrics of Tupac Shakur and Ludacris. "Black Girl Lost" by Nas takes its title from Goines' 1973 novel about a teenager forced to steal and sell drugs to support herself. DMX coproduced and starred in a movie adopted from Goines' 1974 book, "Never Die Alone," about a ruthless drug dealer who, before he dies, leaves his diaries to a reporter. The book's protagonist, King David, is named after a well-known figure of the Detroit underworld.

Like many of the hip-hop artists who revere him, Goines has taken some shots **for** glorifying thug **life** . But Allen sees Goines' novels as cautionary tales. "In every book he's trying to steer the reader from the path he traveled," Allen said. "When he writes about street **life** and violence, he paints a picture in which there's nothing glorious."

Goines could have led a different **life** . His parents, solidly middle class, owned a successful laundry business. But he dropped out of Pershing High School in the ninth grade, lied about his age and joined the Air Force. Back home, he stayed on the grind, legally and illegally, to support a heroin addiction, sometimes doing factory work or driving trucks. Goines started writing in prison. During his last bit at Jackson in 1969, he discovered the writings of pimp-turned-author Iceberg Slim.

Detroit's streets and landmarks punctuate Goines' prose. "Over and over, you see Detroit in his work," Allen said. "Today, every rapper has to say where he's from. Goines was doing that more than 30 years ago. He was from Detroit and clearly proud of it."

Goines died broke, still trying to turn the corner and never living to see the wealth and fame his books would have brought him. Like his stories, his **life** did not end happily. But if you look hard enough, you'll find in them hope, redemption and a gritty determination. In that sense, they're pure Detroit.

It's time the rest of the world got to know him.

Find out more

Eddie B. Allen will be among the speakers **for** the Demystifying **Urban** Fiction workshop at the main branch of the Detroit Public Library, 5201 Woodward, from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. on Monday, April 16. **For** information and registration, go to www.mla.lib.mi.us

JEFF GERRITT is a Free Press editorial writer. Contact him at gerritt@freepress.com or 313-222-6585.

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Eddie B. Allen Jr., 34, of Detroit, sits in his living room where he wrote his book, "Low Road," about the **life** of **urban** fiction writer Donald Goines.

CAPTIONWRITER: Donald Goines

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