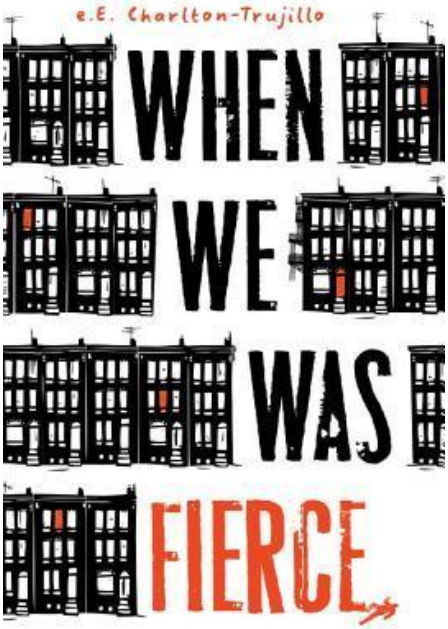

When We Was Fierce

E.E. Charlton-Trujillo

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When We Was Fierce E.E. Charlton-Trujillo
In an endless cycle of street violence and retribution, is there any escape? A powerful verse novel by e.E. Charlton-Trujillo.

We wasn't up to nothin'
new really.
Me and Jimmy, Catch and Yo-Yo.
We just comin' down the street keepin' cool.
We was good at stayin' low
Especially around the Wooden Spoon.
Guys hang around there, they got teeth on 'em
Sharper than broken glass.
Words that slit ya'from chin to belly. And that's just *their words.*

Fifteen-year-old Theo isn't looking for trouble, but when he and his friends witness a brutal attack on Ricky-Ricky, an innocent boy who doesn't know better than to walk right up to the most vicious gang leader around, he's in trouble for real. And in this neighborhood, everything is at stake. In a poignant, unflinching novel of survival told largely in street dialect, e.E. Charlton-Trujillo enters the lives of teenagers coming of age in the face of spiraling violence among gangs, by police, and at home.

When We Was Fierce Details

Date	:	
ISBN	:	
Author	:	E.E. Charlton-Trujillo
Format	:	
Genre	:	Young Adult, Realistic Fiction

From Reader Review When We Was Fierce for online ebook

Jenny Paulsen says

review copy courtesy of author and publisher I didn't read this book so much as I FELT it: the blistering heat, the paralysis of helplessness, the E D G E of rage and fear and grief. I grew so attached to Theodore and Monica, I finished the book in one intense sitting: craving the staccato street poetry and lyrical feats of beautiful language, crushed by the senseless violence spiraling out from one standup act of mercy. There are echoes of influence from all that has come before--from The Outsiders to West Side Story to Boyz 'N the Hood, even to LeRoi Jones' Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note--but this feels new, fresh, even as it haunts with all-too familiar stories of dreams deferred. This book has high H E A T, and my heart is in flames.

Edi says

I originally wrote this review on my blog:
https://campbele.wordpress.com/2016/0...

When We Was Fierce has been a much anticipated book from e. E. Charlton-Trujillo. While writing the book she delivered many oral readings from this novel in verse, building excitement for its release. It was met with positive reviews from Teenreads, Kirkus (starred), Booklist (starred), Publishers Weekly (starred) and Library Journal.

When We Was Fierce is the story of Theodore, aka T, a young African American teen who is struggling with the choices in his life. He chooses to try to help Ricky-Ricky, a young boy from the neighborhood who has a developmental disability and is beaten to death. Crossing the territorial line to help this boy puts T in the crosshairs of the leader of the gang that dominates the community, the Jive. T is somewhat of a pariah among his friends, not wanting to join a gang, spending time reading books and wanting to cross the line to help Ricky-Ricky. Because of the danger he put himself in by helping Ricky-Ricky, most seem to think T needs to leave in order to make something of himself. Indeed, he seems to have choices to make.

Every major reviewer who embraced this book was impressed by the language Charlton-Trujillo made up for the contemporary characters in the book. The author states

“Right from the jump, I could hear the music of T’s world that hadn’t existed in YA before. Slang can become dated quick, so I had a unique opportunity to incorporate some slang along with a new vernacular.” source http://www.booklistonline.com/Product...

It was this same made up language that made the book so problematic for me. Who makes up language when portraying real people living in a contemporary society? Just how entitled is that?

This same language that mimicked black vernacular made the story a problematic read for me. Typically, when I read black vernacular, I can hear it in my head as spoken by someone in my life and it resonates as a home to me. It is a language with a pattern in how nouns and verbs relate, tense is express and how verbs are conjugated. The language in this book jolted me, caused me to pause, re-read and wonder what meaning was being conveyed. The slang of contemporary African American teens evolves from and relates very much to

phrases that were used back in my day and I can understand exactly what thoughts the characters are communicating. Not so much with this made up language. And, that leads me to wonder for whom this books is written.

When reading books from Latinx authors, we've come to understand there will be no definition in text and no glossary at the end of the book because it is written for Latinx readers. The authors do not want to ruin the reader's experience for Latinxs by provided definitions for others. But Charlton-Trujillo provides neither definition nor context clues for the vocabulary she's created. Struggling readers aren't going to spend time figuring out this language that is not their own. For whom is this book written? Who is meant to understand? I do not believe it's meant for African American teens. Perhaps it was written for the reviewers who so eagerly embraced the book and its language.

As you will find from this review, this is a fault filled novel. I intended to simply walk you through the first chapter of the book, look at the issues in those few pages that have prevent most people I know from continuing to read the book, but there are deeper issues throughout.

As previously mentioned, the book begins with the brutal beating of Ricky Ricky, a young man with disabilities, including stuttering. Charlton-Trujillo uses this character and his disabilities to quickly create a character, build empathy for him and then destroy him. His disability allows him to be easily victimized.

e.E. Charlton-Trujillo presents a monolithic urban African American neighborhood where everyone is low income and everyone is broken or damaged. Single homes, abusive parents, criminal records combine with neighbors who have little more than bad history between them. Money Mike, the leader of the Jive and the person who beat Ricky Ricky, is actually T's brother. This relationship is explored only enough to let us know that there is bad history between the two brothers. While this relationship could have been developed to bring some depth to the story, it is not. These histories depict a violent and toxic community. But, to save the day we have Smokey, the story's Magical Negro.

Smokey is a war veteran who has killed so many people in Iraq that he cannot stand the thought of more killing at home, in his own community. He's the ultra cool, mack daddy that everyone respects. Smokey is the only one who sees the brilliant goodness in T, his ability to overcome the horrors of The Split, move out and actually make something of himself because, from the book's perspective, there is nothing but violence and violent people in The Split.

Charlton-Trujillo says she wrote the book in response to the Trayvon Martin shooting. I think I expected a different response to Trayvon in a book written for teens. Here, she clearly defines the Split, the black community, as dysfunctional and completely responsible for its own problems.

Smokey takes T to a "speak out" in the local church where community members come together to decide what to do about the murder of Ricky Ricky. (Why do churches always appear in African American movies and in this book? Can you say stereotype?) The first person narrative voice of T states it was "jammed up packed in there". My brain read 'jam packed up in there.' Before speaking, T recounts being counseled by his deceased father that the "po-lice" were not bad yet, none of the adults in the church care for the Pigs. (I'm not sure why she chose to capitalize that.) Smokey empowers T to speak his truth to the church crowd and their combined message is "violence is not our answer." But, an old man, Charley, (an odd name for Black Man) responds with "we gotta take back what's ours". (p. 104) The adults in the church embrace the violence and detest the Pigs.

So, how does this relate to the murder of the Trayvon Martin? Is it that the black community is so violent

that the ‘po-lice must act accordingly? That they’re justified in reacting violently to young black men?

While Smokey is the Magical Negro, women in the story fit the Jezebel stereotype.

The Jezebel images which defame African women may be viewed in two broad categories: pathetic others and exotic others. Pathetic others include those depictions of African women as physically unattractive, unintelligent, and uncivilized. These images suggest that African women in particular and black women in general possess aberrant physical, social, and cultural traits. source: http://ferris.edu/jimcrow/jezebel.htm

She is oversexed, loud, often pregnant, unintelligent and unattractive.

She is

“the natural disaster know as Hilda A. Clark stood in a doorway, ready to go ten rounds in a six-round fight.” T’s mother. (p. 34)
Monica, T’s sister. “Her belly swole up tight and somebody else’s baby big-bouncing at her hip.” (p. 50)
“Your sister is better beast” say Catch. (p106)
a female patient in the hospital. Delusional? In pain? “Then this woman swallow up all the quiet. She go to S C R E A M I N G in the room across the way. You think she seen her own death comin’ the way she go on. She was fierce in her sound.” (p. 50)
Tish steppin’ up to the guys. “She roll em breasts a li’l too open to be up in church. Might blind the holy right out every brother in the room with ‘em.” (p. 107)
Gabi, Jimmy’s girl who he hasn’t seen in a while, but he runs into her at the club. “She do a step-back showcasing all her curves. Jimmy smile go wide. I ain’t mad at it.” he say. “You ain’t … she say, and fo’ real, drop tongue all up in Jimmy and grab his Man. Damn@ She got no limit.” (p. 134)
Most female characters are developed little beyond their introductions but we find out just a little more about Nia, the girl who catches T’s eye.

“That what you into?” I ask. “Brothers with guns?

She tease the lip of that can with her finger

“I don’t step anywhere with a brother that carry heat,” she say. “It ain’t my cool. Ever.”

“Me neither,” I say. “I mean heat. Not brothers.”

She bust out smile.

It put my stomach to twitching.

“Where is you I say. I mean, you from Atlanta? That’s what Gabs was sayin’.

“Yeah. My mom and I came to share time for the Fourth.”

“Fo’ real?” I ask.

“Yeah…?” she say.

“Look I’m sorry. It’s just… you come all the way from Atlanta to visit West Split? That’s just — we in the

hood. You on that, right?" (p 149)

As Nia weaves her intoxicating, alluring and sexy spell over T by simply circling the top of her soda can with her finger, we realize how naïve and unworldly our young protag is in having never travelled outside his own confines. We also realize his disdain for this place. Why would Nia, this lust-filled goddess visit this, his neighborhood? And here, e. E. Charlton-Trujillo levels condemnation on this space that so many African Americans call home. Outsiders writing about a community often do this, not seeing beyond the broken beer bottles (p, 6), casually commenting that it's not "something fresh to see a kid busted up" (p. 10) rather than seeing through to the ebb and flow of life that make the city blocks a vibrant community.

Here in The Split, there is no code switching. African Americans in The Split speak the same broken vernacular whether a child is speaking to a parent, police officer or peer. T's mother walks into her son's hospital room and finds a police officer there.

"You been questioning my boy?" she ask.
I was here when he woke up, Ms. Clark."

"Mrs. And don't play me the fool with your with eyes, Mr. Kelly," she say. "You can sniff somewhere else." [These black women are such Jezabels!]

"Mrs. Clark—"

"Let me clear the noise for you, sir. My son nearly lost his life today. And whatever questions you have can wait till he up and pee without a tube in his man business." (p.36)

This inability to switch indicates a lack of sophistication among her characters, an unwillingness to draw a line that defines the other and holds them as outsiders. Yet, in the language Charlton-Trujillo creates, there is a distancing created between the characters and the reader. Her language provides indirect action.

p 62 "Man, my pain ached!"
p 64 "You need to get real fact, Theo," Hilda snapped. Read on the paper."
76 "he just keepin' me to the know. That's all."
19 "Money Mike hated on me for not enlisting."
As if creating the language is not offensive enough, we have to deal with the use of 'slave' and 'nigga'. Figure this out.

"Shit beast!" Jimmy was raw at Catch!

"What the fuck, Negro?"

"Don't talk slaves to me,

"Stay out between this, smalls," warned Catch. (p. 7)

Slaves? Negro? What the what??

Charlton-Trujillo's voice comes through (p.116) when she breaks into her tirade on 'nigga'. Although many of us who are not young African Americans do not embrace usage of this term, we know and understand why young people incorporate 'nigga' into their vernacular. Their vernacular. This highlights the

transgression committed in the writing, publishing and editing of this book about which Charlton-Trujillo proclaims “I had to write this story now. Kids needed it. The Fierce wouldn’t let me go.”

Whose voice? Whose language? For whom is this book featuring African American characters and mimicking black language, black culture, black youth and black community written?

Brooke says

I agree with previous reviewers for the most part:

1) No one talks like this all the time. Peppered broken English is one thing. This wasn't peppered.
2) Is this lingo even real? Some of it? All of it? I haven't heard any of it but this isn't my world.
3) Do we need more books with black kids killing other black kids? We need more uplifting stuff for our black youth to read.
4)Formatting...novel in verse? It felt kind of in-between to me.
5) Characters and plot were a bit flat.

6) I loved Fat Angie. So this was disappointing.

Jennifer says

This is a tough one. I got a galley at BEA back in May and it sat in a pile for a long time. When I read an article in SLJ that the book had been delayed due to criticisms, I decided to read it for myself. First, the good. The author has written a book that shows a slice of life rarely seen in teen literature, that of an African-American teen boy who is fighting to survive in his urban environment without resorting to violence, without joining a gang. He has close family ties, a group of friends who are both naïve and not, as teens can be. They need to find a way out without leaving everyone they know and love behind. It's violent. It's gritty. It's a reflection of a life that some teens live that, as a society, we turn a blind eye to. Unfortunately, there are some flaws to the book that may not be overlooked. To an extent, I can forgive that the author did not give each individual a more individual voice--it's irritating, unrealistic, and is certainly a factor in criticism that the book uses too many stereotyped characters. It's not an uncommon flaw in novels in general, but let's go on. The charge that the book is "unsalvageable" is due to the staccato, not-correct-English nature of the language for this novel in verse. It's been called a made-up dialect. Had it been used for some characters and not others, perhaps the characters wouldn't all read with the same voice. Theodore's sister, Monica, is college-bound. She's not supposed to speak with the same voice as an uneducated character. There is slang used throughout which I do not know whether it is true or invented (for example, the use of "smokers" for "guns"). Is it offensive? To some people it will be offensive. The release has been delayed by Candlewick as they review the work again and decide what to do. Can this book be salvaged? If the author does a lot of rewriting (and I mean A LOT). Theodore's story is a story worth telling and in some ways, his story is already out there as I, and who knows how many others, have read it already. Theodore deserves a wider audience, but it needs to come with a greater variety of voices within the story.

Mollie says

Raw. Real. A novel in verse.

"She put eyes to the kids at the park. They was a lotta 'em . . . No gangs. / No drugs. / No guns. / No hate. / They ain't learn it yet. " p 244

Teen boys, including T, the main character, witness a murder and do what they can to lay low. When family is involved in gangs, and a father is brought down by gangs, it's hard to keep a straight lifestyle. Can T conquer the streets, or will the streets conquer him?

e. E. Charlton-Trujillo writes a savagely accurate portrayal of life in neighborhoods where everyday is a struggle to survive . . . from lack of income, to lack of education, to lack of family.

Lora says

Oh-kaaaaaaay...I had no idea of the controversy surrounding this book until AFTER I read it. In fact, I just discovered that I could SELL it for upwards of $80 since it is no longer in print, the publisher having pulled it. Before I knew how much certain black reviewers et al hated it, my thoughts about the book were a. the characters were a bit flat, b. the narrative was pretty good and moved right along and c. that dialect was very off-putting and made the book really hard to read. I kept thinking that I've NEVER heard my black students talk like this- what is the deal? I understand about code-switching but hey, they don't always know the librarian is listening to their conversation. Now I know that the author made it up. Whew! In light of the controversy, l'd kind of like to give this book to some African-American teens and see what they think of it. The people who were offended seem to have all been adults.

Caryl says

I bailed on this one.

Alicia says

I had a very hard time following the narrative in digesting the language and format for the book. I enjoy verse novels, but this was somewhere in between a full narrative and a verse novel. The choppiness probably lent itself to the harshness of the community in which these boys are growing up, but it's also hard to read. The violence propels the book forward with much gloom and no real hopefulness.

Knowing the controversies surrounding the book that was actually pulled from publication, I'd be interested to read others by this author and was endeared to hear from others regarding the book to help better frame my own reading.

Sally Kruger says

*Review copy courtesy of author and publisher.

According to Theo "T", he and his buddies was fierce the day they was rolling down the street and witnessed Ricky-Ricky get flat-fixed. T tried to revive his friend but couldn't. The helpless feeling he had as he watched Money Mike gun down a neighborhood kid was the worst thing he had ever experienced.

Witnessing the shooting makes T angry and bitter. Listening to his mother and sister and the warnings they speak about staying at home and off the streets, fall on deaf ears. Even with threats that his mother is going to ship him off to Texas, T sneaks out to join his buddies and scheme ways to change things in the hood.

The sound of gunfire is common place in the hood, and there are far too many funerals. Mothers and grandmothers mourn the loss of boys who will never become men or even young men.

Having already lost his father in a shooting, T knows how tough it is to survive in the hood, but still he dreams of experiencing all the pleasures of life. He wishes his sister's unplanned pregnancy could work out, but he knows she plans to give up the child for adoption in hopes of finishing school and improving her life. He dreams of having a girl friend and his hopes grow when he meets Nia and discovers she might have feelings for him, too. But, when he learns Money Mike has sprayed a local basketball court with bullets and flat-fixed several little kids, T may be ready to sacrifice it all to get revenge.

Author e.E Charlton-Trujillo takes readers right to the streets in WHEN WE WAS FIERCE. Tough, vivid street talk leaps off the page as her characters reveal the odds stacked against them in the hood. Mentions of Ferguson and Trayvon Martin connect fiction to real life and remind readers that what's between the pages is in fact what it's like for many young people simply trying to stay alive.

Claire says

Amazing novel that touches on an undercurrent of frustration and anger prevalent in so many young people across the world. Would recommend to any one and every one.

Britt isadora says

Its crazy how someone can write about an experience or situations they have never been in and write in voices not of their own. The language in this book does not exist in any modern society. To portray language such as this demeans the African American community as a whole. I'm from New York and I lived in The Bronx my whole life and I have never heard anyone speak the way these characters did. I find this book not only unnecessary but offensive on a whole other level. To be African American in today's society is not only a struggle but a sacrifice and to have someone use it as a toy or a tool to further their writing career is disgusting. For the people who enjoyed this book, I have no words. It just shows how naive and oblivious people who aren't minorities or african american can be when it comes to this book or the daily struggles

they must endure on a daily basis.

Lynette Bromiel says

I was really disappointed in this book... I loved Fat Angie, and I also heard e.e. Charlton-Trujillo speak at a conference and she was wonderful. She does so much community outreach and lots of school visits as well!! Novels in verse are also very popular at the library where I work... So for alot of reasons I really wanted to love this book! But Charlton-Trujillo's use of invented language, created by her to represent a real community, which is not reflective of the way in which people in that community speak, is problematic.

Sheila says

Wow. This book is so, so important. I read an advanced reader copy: the book comes out in August. It's the story of some inner city teens who are in the wrong place at the wrong time and suffer all kinds of negative consequences because of it. It's raw and real and powerful, told in the protagonist's voice and language. I couldn't stop reading, and I gasped aloud several times. This book makes you FEEL how trapped kids feel and how badly they want to be safe.

Jennifer says

Review originally posted on librarian Edi Campbell's blog: https://campbele.wordpress.com/2016/0...

BOOK SUMMARY
"When We Was Fierce" focuses on and is narrated in the Brokenest of Manifested English (examples to come) by T aka Theodore. At the start of the book T is hanging with his friends Catch (the resident hothead of the group), Yo-Yo (the softie to Catch Me's hard a**), and Jimmy (who also has a "grimy" girlfriend or so the narrator pigeonholes her for the reader). The group watches as Ricky-Ricky (the resident lackey with a stutter we're to feel sympathy for) attempts to talk to a rival gang thereby getting jumped. This sets off an unsavory chain of events leading to more jumping, people like T being marked, and others getting "flat-fixed" (aka murdered). Not only that but Pretty Ricky's beat down ultimately escalates and incites a gang war. As it turns out, the head of the gang the Jives (aptly named considering the speech construction) and Pretty Ricky's tormentor is T's older brother, whom I imagine is parodying Tupac's overzealous rabble-rouser in "Juice." The rest of the book resorts to your usual tropes/stereotypes of what one assumes is a "gang banger" life for an all Black cast. We have the wise veteran; the impregnated teenage girl who aspires to more; the hardened yet fragile single mom working multiple jobs in the 'hood; the abusive (albeit seemingly alcoholic father figure); multiple casualties; kids who are interested in basketball, DJing, graffiti; one-dimensional love interests strategically placed for being possible love interests; racist cops (aka "Pigs"); someone ending up in the penitentiary to make up for their sins; as well as a Come to Jesus moment and a quick Hail Mary save for the protagonist/narrator.

And let me not forget that there is also a scene with a literal whipping of a teen to the back (pp. 123-124). If Pinky (the abuser) is in fact a white man than this symbolism is not lost on me and further reflects the down and out, violent, and abusive history of Blacks When We Was Fierce leans on to show the "hard knock life" that is, apparently, so ingrained in Black culture that no one can escape it or has no choice but to accept this

fate.

NARRATION/STRUCTURE
Beyond the overly clichéd characterizations my biggest issue with this text is the audacity in the constructed Ebonics. It's not only inconsistent, it's abhorrent without much understanding or even consideration for the structure of Ebonics (aka African American Vernacular English, AAVE). In this text the author goes beyond to present, as I said, the Brokenest of Manifested English to be perceived (and current reviews from White reviewers see it) as "real." This narration strikes me as deeply offensive and extremely hard to read without having to re-read, not for interest but for comprehension.

Here are some examples of the Brokenest of Manifested English in "When We Was Fierce." If you can decipher much of this, I salute you.

Brothers get beat down
fifty-nine times worse
and got their sneaks under
the kitchen table for meal same night. (p. 49)

Broad on the daylight (p. 67)

I was midspeak when I got an interrupt. (p. 73)

My think go to racing (p. 82)

So, you aren't worried about Catch in speak with Nacho? (p. 129)

We just holdin' time. (p. 129)

Don't talk slaves to me. (p. 7)

Text like "speak" and "think" and "truth" are not used in a way that recognizes it's tense and form in a sentence's construction. When you read lines with "my speak, our speak, her speak" (not my speech, her speech, our words) and "my think" (I dunno why "My thoughts started racing" isn't enough in this instance) are not cohesive in any way. I find it incredibly hard to believe that not only do the children/teens in this book speak this way all the time but so do the adults (notable exceptions are the cops).

Looking at slang such as "chill," "woke," and "I'm dead" they all have stirrings in textual cues that make their meaning evident. These terms adhere to the basics of American English grammar while adding a particular zest and definition to the urbanized vocabulary. The narration in Fierce shows a blatant disregard and lazy vocabulary creation that's continually insulting in the hopes that it's avant garde. This linguistic framework of butchery is new, the attempt to create new sounds is not.

Let's look at other examples of speech in texts by Jason Reynolds and Mitchell S. Jackson from "down and out" Black protagonists that retains slang and doesn't attempt to reinvent, or slur, the wheel. And thus sounds/feels/is more realistic and in line with AAVE giving a strong voice to the protagonist by not resorting to caricatures of perceived "uneducated" Black youths.

"When I Was The Greatest"
"You moused up, man!"

“Aight. Well, let’s start from the beginning. Why did they jump Needles? Last I checked, he was chilling in the corner, out of the way.” (p. 152)

"The Residue Years"
Homeboy’s all of five feet nothing—no lie, we’re talking centimeters off a certified dwarf. With hands no good for shooting pool or poker…” (p. 25)

Take my girl: She’s a good woman, one of the best I’ve been with…., but sometimes, no lie, I wish instead of always accusing me, always threatening me, instead of doing that, I wish sometimes she’d just leave.

Not threatens to bounce, but sashays right out of my life for good, those lustrous tresses waving good-bye, so long; have a cursed life. (p. 146)

See the difference?

In terms of structure, the attempt at a novel-in-verse is not cognizant of the format. Understandably these forms of narration are “hot” right now, but they’re “hot” because of the poise and control those who have used it applied to personal and not, here’s that word again, stereotypical stories (e.g., Jacqueline Woodson, Kwame Alexander, Margarita Engle most recently). When We Was Fierce would’ve been slightly better in straight prose.

Here’s an example of the disruptive break in this text in “verse.”
"When We Was Fierce"

Catch ain’t said one thing all the way over
from his place. We ain’t say nothing either.
Gotta respect a brother after a beatin’ like
that. (p. 126)

Here’s a section from Kwame Alexander’s "Booked" for comparison’s sake of how/when it works. (Keep in mind Booked is close 2nd person while Fierce is 1st person narration.):

The library door
swings open
just as you and Coby arrive.
The twins grit hard. (p. 41)

Also, there’s the attempts at dramatics at the end of every chapter in "Fierce" which, after a while for an almost 400 page tome, wears on you and relies too much on the heaviness to invoke feelings of concern from the reader:

I think Catch in edge. I
think we all was.
We just couldn’t know it yet.
Not in the way that would make me know to
r u n . (p. 147)

Going back to "Booked," Alexander uses this method of emphasis sparingly so it has more effect when it does show up:

Shut up, she fires back,
and gives him a shove
that only makes him laugh more,

and makes you
WANNA. SHUT. HIM. UP. (p. 104)

CHARACTERIZATIONS
When We Was Fierce is also hard to finish based on the affronting conventions and portrayals of Blacks in the ‘hood. As I mentioned in the plot summary, each character serves their purpose. In all honesty, this book made me think of a mash up of "Juice" and "Boyz N’ the Hood" based on the general premise, the quartet of boys, as well as the lives lost and the thinly rendered female characters. Hilda and Monica (T’s mother and sister, respectively) get the most screen time but don’t stretch beyond images we’ve seen before. Hilda being the new widow wanting to protect her children and Monica the honor student who “unfortunately” and “accidentally” got impregnated. Nia, the underutilized love interest and “urban” manic pixie dream girl, serves one purpose and one purpose only: to give T someone to talk to and admire beyond the sketchier ladies buzzing around that he judges harshly. For someone who says he likes to “feel up some girls” I lose sympathy and empathy for T and his crew with this permissive “boys will be boys” attitude towards young women.

We’re told so much more than we’re shown. No one really “gets out” of where they are and I have no inkling beyond a few convos of what people want is not to die on any given day. Now, that’s a suitable life goal, but this also adds to the bevy of texts we already of have books with perception of gang life, or urban life, of ‘hood life for African Americans in particular with little levity that also utilizes the worn-out interests of partying, sex, and power. The simplest things can be the strongest and Fierce misses the mark without allowing T to be anything but physically hurt or rage filled, but mostly he is an observer and descriptor in a language that pushes us as readers away rather than bringing us in to who he is and wants to be.

Here’s an example from When We Was Fierce of the protagonist’s attempt to woo Nia:

When we hit the door, I kick attention to Nia.
Smile out real large.
And know this: she didn’t give me much,
But I think she into my step. (p. 110)

Here’s an example from, you guessed it, Booked of the main character talking to his friend about how to approach the girl he likes:

Just for a minute. I don’t know what to say.
Just talk about the weather or something.

That’s corny.
Nick, it ain’t that deep. Talk about what you know.

Soccer?
Yeah, talk to her about the Dallas Cup.

Good idea, but what if she thinks it’s boring?
Then she’s crazy, in which case you don’t want her anymore. (p. 130)

What adds to the perception of the characters in this story being marionettes is the quick and not at all insightful references to Black Lives Matter and those lost. Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Freddie Gray are brought up as a way to show anger by citizens and a distrust in the “po-lice” (author’s spelling, not mine). However, Fierce does not recognize that there’s always been a deeper distrust there and to throw out the names of these deceased without any real discussion/understanding on the long-standing issues between state and citizens is irresponsible and frankly dismissive of the larger problem of anti-Blackness. It feels like a carrot dangled to make the characters seem more real but for those of us living this life and this fear in real time it’s another flippant element in a text rife with insult and lack of awareness.

This review is already longer than I’d like, yet I have so much more to say. I’ll leave it at this and with the note that, on a personal level, I was incredibly hurt by the depictions in this text, particularly the jive-ish, broken language. Having provided sensitivity reads where Black characters sounded like Hattie McDaniel in Gone with the Wind and then this in a kid’s books it makes me realize how much work there is to be done. And while I assume much trust was put into the author’s work because of her own marginalization as well as occasional work with Black teens, it doesn’t dismiss how off-the-mark this work is in scope and execution. And it doesn’t dismiss that throughout the whole creation and production process not one person recognized, or sought council/feedback potentially, from Black people to see how this would make members of this community feel. Thinking of the young reader demographic I’d like someone to sit back and consider work created by so many marginalized artists that seeks to show an alternative while also showing truth and tell me if you would actually feel comfortable showing When We Was Fierce to a group of Black children and saying ‘This is how I see you.’ How much do these reflections really say more about the state of publishing rather than the state of progress where the industry I work in continues to covet Black pain?

Brenda Kahn says

This book gutted me. While it was probably possible for me to read it all in one sitting, I didn't. I couldn't. It hurt too much. I couldn't rush through this gritty, important story because that wouldn't do. It would not do it justice. I felt like I needed to bear witness. I needed to lean in and Listen. I do not speak this language. The language. The language is tough and True but also beautiful, lyrical and deep. Most of the book is dog-earred in order to revisit moments - of revelation, of sadness, of admiration.
