Amplifying Unheard Voices

Shout Mouse Press

In schools, libraries, and bookstores across Washington, D.C., readers of all ages can find books by unexpected authors: poetry by incarcerated youth, novels by teen girls in a housing project, graphic memoirs by Latinx immigrants, children’s books by former child slaves in Haiti. These are just a few of the books published thus far by Shout Mouse Press, a nonprofit writing program and publishing house for unheard voices.

Shout Mouse operates with a bold mission: to empower those from marginalized backgrounds to tell their own stories in their own voices and, as published authors, to act as leaders and agents of change. In partnership with other nonprofit agencies serving communities in need, Shout Mouse is publishing a collection of these mission-driven books, all designed to expand empathy, affirm the vulnerable, and develop understanding of unheard perspectives.

Given today’s charged political climate, we believe that promoting the power of diversity, especially to our next generation of thinkers and leaders, could not be more important—or more urgent.

The idea for Shout Mouse Press (SMP) was born in the summer of 2013, when SMP founder, Kathy Crutcher, was approached by a friend and colleague, Mark Hecker, suggesting a bold new venture. Hecker is the founder of Reach Incorporated, a nonprofit organization that hires high school students to work as literacy tutors for struggling second- and third-grade readers. Through this work, the tutors of Reach had identified a problem: the books they read with their students did not represent the realities of their communities. These books rarely featured characters of color, and when they did, they were often historical, focused on slavery or the Civil Rights movement. These teens felt they could write better books than those they found in the libraries, and the folks at Reach believed in them enough to pursue it. When Hecker asked Crutcher, who had a background in creative writing and youth mentorship, if she could help make it happen, she saw the great potential for this project—and for many other necessary #OwnVoices book projects as well—and responded, “Absolutely.”

This venture became the beta-project for SMP, which incorporated in 2014. We defined our mission—to amplify unheard voices—broadly, including all marginalized communities, not limiting the scope either demographically or geographically. Our work is about passing the megaphone and building a platform for others to lead—especially those who are not usually afforded that opportunity. Our authors determine the missions of all projects and serve as the public ambassadors of our work, representing their books at book festivals, conferences, schools, and community centers.

Since this 2013 beginning, SMP has led writing workshops with more than 200 at-risk teen authors from five partner nonprofit organizations, resulting in publication of twenty-four original children’s and young adult books. In 2016, we became the publisher for a sixth nonprofit partner, Free Minds Book Club and Writing Workshop, and now distribute their collection of poetry by incarcerated youth, bringing our current catalog total to twenty-five. Five more books are in progress, scheduled to be released by early 2018. Currently, there are over 30,000 SMP books.
in circulation, including in every public school in D.C., more than twenty local nonprofits, charter schools, and libraries, bookstores, and homes across the country, as well as in more than twenty-seven countries around the world. Here are a few highlights from our collection:

**REACH CHILDREN'S BOOKS BY TEENS**

Five summers after the inaugural workshop, SMP story coaches continue to work with Reach’s teen tutors to create diverse, inclusive children’s books. These books sometimes explicitly explore topics that rarely are represented in the traditional children’s book marketplace, such as having incarcerated parents or living in a homeless shelter. They also examine every-day children’s challenges—like feeling lonely or dealing with bullies—in unique ways that connect with their audience through both insight and whimsy. For example, in *Drip, Drip: The Story of the Angry Sherbet* (2016), the main character—a cup of rainbow sherbet with anger management issues—is literally destroying himself by losing his cool. Reach’s teen authors bring a fresh approach to children’s literature while also expanding the horizon of possibility about who can be an author and whose stories matter.

**RECENT YA HIGHLIGHTS: NOVELS-IN-STORIES AND GRAPHIC MEMOIRS**

SMP’s other partnerships and book series expand possibilities for their authors and readers alike. Our YA catalog of titles—all by young adults themselves—includes not only the aforementioned poetry collection by incarcerated youth but also memoir collections by high school students of color and novels-in-stories that provide unguarded insights into the world of today’s urban teenagers. These books are especially successful at engaging reluctant readers and inspiring teens to craft their own stories in response.

Our most recent YA release, *The Day Tajon Got Shot* (2017), proves to be our most ambitious project yet. (See review in this issue.) Over the course of two years, ten teenage girls from our nonprofit partner, Beacon House, an academic enrichment center based in a housing project in D.C., came together to produce a novel inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement. The teen authors began with one central question: *What really happens in a community when a black youth is the victim of violence by police?* Each writer took on the perspective of a central character—the victim, the police officer, the witness, the parent, the friend, the officer’s kids—and examined how it felt to be a human being on all sides of this event. Their stories, totaling...
more than two hundred pages, thoughtfully explore issues of race, violence, loyalty, and justice in a community torn apart but seeking connection.

Another ambitious new project, to be released in March 2018, is SMP’s first YA comic book: a graphic memoir collection by Latinx teens. These youth from another nonprofit partner, Latin American Youth Center (LAYC), are immigrants, some having arrived as recently as six months ago and some having spent most of their lives in this country. They articulated a mission to “change the story” about Latinx immigrants and to inspire, support, and educate their intended audiences of youth, educators, and policymakers who will benefit from hearing directly from Latinx youth immigrants. Through this collection, they share true stories—in both narrative and comics form—from their own lives that affirm Latinx identity and counter anti-immigrant bias. Professional graphic artists and comics instructors supported the art component during a workshop. We look forward to releasing the book at the 2018 Virginia Festival of the Book in Charlottesville, a poignant venue for a much-needed dialogue to complicate and deepen our understanding of the “American dream.”

What makes Shout Mouse Press different from similar organizations is that we are more than just a creative writing program, and our impact and mission extend beyond those we directly serve in our workshops.

Shout Mouse Press is also, importantly, a publishing house. Our goal is to provide a real platform for leadership and community change through the power of published works. Books equal credibility, authority, and legitimacy for these authors’ perspectives, which can be eye-opening not just for the readers, but also for the writers themselves. Shaquon Wells, whose essay “New Beginnings” appears in Our Lives Matter (2015), describes his experience this way: “I never thought that I could write a piece and then actually be published in a book. I never imagined that people actually would listen to me or feel how I felt about something.”

As authors, these young adults are invited to speak publicly to others—educators, peers, community leaders—and to address issues on which they are experts but are rarely consulted. Recently, two of our authors were invited to Denison University in Granville, Ohio, to speak to classes ranging from education to psychology and to give a talk about their work. Litzi Valdivi Cazzol, co-author of two children’s books as well as two memoir collections, talks about the power of this opportunity: “During this experience, I realized that my story impacted everyone who came across it. To have college students and professors admiri
me because I continue to persevere shows me that, despite my age, I’m teaching those older than me that everyone’s story matters.” Becoming an author leads to ambassadorship, leadership, mentorship, and championship of their own communities and voices.

Also, because we focus on distribution and sales of these books in significant ways—especially to other young people in learning environments—the impact of the work extends to all our readers. SMP is a diversity initiative, an educator on the importance of valuing diverse life experiences. Our books act as both mirrors and windows. For those who do not often see their own lives represented on the page, our books are their mirror. They encourage ALL young people to ask, “Wait, you wrote a book? Does that mean I could write a book, too?”

Donna Eisen, a D.C. public school librarian, tells the story of the first time one of her students—usually a reluctant reader—picked up an SMP book. “[An eighth grade] student ran down to show How to Grow Up Like Me (2014) to his reading teacher and he [was] absolutely captivated . . . Now [he] can’t wait to come to class to read the stories and hear the voices of these courageous authors. This is a great victory.”

Finally, for readers who may not relate to the experiences represented on the page, our books serve as windows into other worlds. Our authors become educators and bridge-builders. Through this work, we are able to engage those who are not marginalized in this society to listen to and value the perspectives of those who are. This seems especially important for adolescents, who are developing their own critical thinking skills within a charged political climate. We hope that our books can engage this audience in meaningful dialogue and reflection, and we could not be more proud of our authors for their courage in putting themselves authentically on the page.

Shout Mouse Press and our authors are just getting started. There are many ways to sign on to this mission and support these voices, including becoming a Shout Mouse Megaphone or introducing young people to the powerful work of their peers. To learn more about our mission, our upcoming projects, our opportunities to connect, and all of our teen-authored books, visit http://www.shoutmousepress.org. All books are available for purchase through our website, through Amazon.com, and through Ingram worldwide.

Sarah Johnson works as an outreach associate and story coach for SMP. She is a 2014 graduate of Howard University and a current MA candidate at American University, where she also teaches composition.

Rachel Page is a sophomore at Columbia University majoring in American Studies. Her writing has been published in the Adroit Journal and Scholastic’s Best Teen Writers 2015, and recognized by the YoungArts Foundation and the United States Presidential Scholars program.