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Can You Hear Us, Now?  
Co-ed Author Team Works to Highlight African American Children's Authors

(Severna Park , MD ) YA authors, Paula Chase and Varian Johnson have never met in person. One lives in Maryland, the other in Texas. One is a spokesperson for a small city government, the other designs bridges. But they share two things in common: they write YA fiction and they're tired of watching themselves and many of their peers fly under the radar. "If I hear 'There's no YA out there for African American teens' one more time I'm going to scream," says Chase, the author of Dafina's Del Rio Bay Clique teen lit series. "Granted, it may not be publicized like some of the flashier mainstream YA fiction, but it's out there."

After bumping into one another on various children's writers' boards, they realized the same issue popped up again and again – the overwhelming lack of awareness to African Americans writing for children, especially YA, outside of the heavy-hitting veteran authors. Determined to launch an initiative that would shine the spotlight on the varied African American voices writing for young readers, Chase and Johnson took a page from Readergirlz, an online community that celebrates strong female characters in YA fiction, and created The Brown Bookshelf. "According to the Children's Book Collective, out of the approximately 5,000 children's books published in 2006, less than one-hundred were written by people of African decent," says Johnson, the author of Essence Magazine best-selling novel, *A Red Polka Dot in A World Full of Plaid*. "If we want those numbers to increase, we have to do a better job of supporting African-American authors and illustrators."

Chase and Johnson recruited fellow writers Carla Sarratt and Kelly Starling Lyons, and award-winning illustrator, Don Tate, to serve as a research and review team. On February 1st the group will launch the 28 Days Later Campaign, an initiative designed to highlight African-American authors with recently released books or books that have "gone unnoticed." Each day during Black History Month, a different book and author will be featured at [www.thebrownbookshelf.com](http://www.thebrownbookshelf.com). The campaign will culminate with a day of giveaways and announcements of future programs on February 29th.

"The name is a play off the zombie movie, because it signals the aftermath," Chase says. "Once we showcase the twenty-eight best voices in African American children's lit, parents, teachers and librarians will walk away with a full arsenal of recommendations for young readers."

The committee is already scouring the shelves to identify authors of color offering the best in Picture Books, Middle Grade and Young Adult novels. They will be taking nominations from others in the Children's Lit Community and requesting publishers to submit authors. "We're asking for help from all corners of the online Children's Lit community," Johnson says. "The more suggestions we get, the better."

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In addition to soliciting suggestions from the online Children's Lit Community, the authors are partnering with the African American Children's Book writers and Illustrators (AACBWI) and the Black Caucus of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) to ensure the 28 Days Later campaign reaches the intended audience of educators and librarians. Both organizations see merit in The Brown Bookshelf.

"We have been able to grow the African American Read-In through partnerships with those of like interest and commitment. The launching of this new literacy campaign is timely and we are excited that new seeds are being planted at a time when they are needed to reach out and encourage people of all ethnic groups to balance the images of reading failures with images of reading success," says Jerrie Cobb Scott, Founder and National Director of the African American Read-In Chain. "Another partnership seed is certain to blossom into new readers and new supporters for literacy, the gift that keeps on giving."

"Our online community boasts many authors and illustrators who are published or on the cusp of being published, and their words and art represent a broad spectrum of experiences and cultures," says Karen Strong, moderator of the AACBWI forum. "The Brown Bookshelf is a great way to showcase these authors and illustrators and connect with readers."

The Brown Bookshelf founders emphasize their desire to enhance, not duplicate efforts to increase awareness to books by authors of color. "We weren't about to recreate the wheel," Johnson says. "Our partners are in the trenches doing similar work to bring attention to good books. But often the focus is too broadly focused on all books by African Americans. Our focus is solely on books for children. It's imperative people see there are lots of quality books out there for teens and young readers."

Johnson and Chase encourage publishers to submit their authors work for consideration. Authors may also self-submit. However, self-published works are by invitation only. "There are so few national venues for under-promoted books to get a boost, authors are hungry for the attention. So we had to set limitations," Chase says. "But we'll be showcasing two self-published works in the campaign."

Chase and Johnson see a life for The Brown Bookshelf beyond the 28 Days Later campaign. There are plans to launch a special initiative targeting book clubs, start a monthly author feature and make 28 Days Later an annual event. "Until people can name more than Walter Dean Meyers and Sharon Draper when asked about African American children's authors, there's a need for an initiative like this," Johnson says. "We're in it for the long haul."

The Brown Bookshelf is designed to push awareness of the myriad of African American voices writing for young readers. Their flagship initiative, 28 Days Later, is a month-long showcase of the best in Picture Books, Middle Grade and Young Adult novels written by African American authors.

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