

# Author makes voice heard with 'street lit'

Niobia Bryant hopes urban fiction stories educate, entertain

**A**fter 15 years, dozens of novels and numerous awards, author Niobia Bryant is trying something new. She's launching an urban fiction series under her pseudonym, Meesha Mink.

*Kiss the Ring*, which hits store shelves Tuesday, may appear similar to the other popular titles she's written for the genre, but according to Bryant, Naeema "Queen" Cole faces dilemmas that anyone can relate to, even those dwelling outside of "the hood."

"What I love about her is that she's not perfect," Bryant said during a recent phone interview from her South Carolina home. "Queen is strong but still growing to better herself, so while she's out there being a vigilante and trying to save a little piece of the world, there's a part of her that also needs saving."

Cole adopts the "Queen" identity in order to infiltrate the vicious gang she holds responsible for the death of her teenage son.

"I see her character as one that can go on and on in the tradition of [Walter Mosley's] Easy Rawlins or [Valerie Wilson Wesley's] Tamara Hayle," Bryant said. "Because she goes off her emotions, Queen does a lot of things she shouldn't do while trying to protect herself and her family. There are so many possible story lines for her. I'm just excited."

The 41-year-old New Jersey native has enjoyed years of success as a writer of multiple genres: romance, mainstream novels, young adult fiction and urban fiction. Romance novels had been a favorite of Bryant's since she was a teen, but it was only after reading *Heart of the Falcon* — written by the late Texas novelist Francis Ray — that she found the courage to publish her own voice.

*Admission of Love*, Bryant's 2000 debut, was the beginning of dozens of well-received titles. Even with the immense popularity of her romances, however, Bryant concedes that some readers remain uncomfortable with the tales by Meesha Mink, thanks to the stigma attached to the typically graphic and violent content of "street lit," initially popularized in the late 1960s and '70s by authors like Iceberg Slim and



LORRIE IRBY JACKSON

Donald Goines.

Bryant understands the reluctance, as many unpolished, self-published e-book writers have diluted the quality overall. But thanks to her early taste of "the hard-knock life," Bryant feels her stories can educate

as well as entertain.

"I did go to South Orange's Seton Hall University and got two degrees, but I also grew up seeing people on the corner hustling," she said. "Married folks went to work alongside single mothers raising their children, and people owned their homes next to folks who needed Section 8. Sometimes readers relate better to the pop culture references, the everyday lingo and to characters they have something in common with."

Bryant majored in social and behavior sciences with a psychology minor, and said she tries to deliver messages in her stories. "But we also have to remember that the books are entertainment and not the total reflection of who we are" as African-Americans, she said. "Readers can find lessons in those types of stories, and we shouldn't just bash."

The fate of Naeema Cole, like other characters, remains in the hands of fans. In the meantime, Bryant is perfecting two new romance novels due to publish this year and has just approved the script of a film adaptation of her 2010 novel, *Message From a Mistress*.

No matter what genre readers may gravitate to, Bryant is thankful for their support and having the freedom to dabble in them all.

"Thanks to the late Francis Ray and my fans, I've been able to go from romance to mainstream to urban," she said. "I hope readers enjoy that time and effort put into the books that I present."

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