

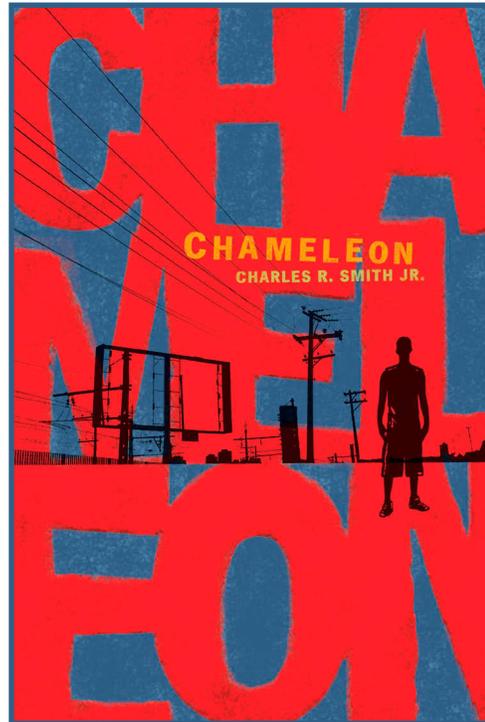
Q&A with
CHARLES R. SMITH JR.
author of
CHAMELEON

Is there any backstory to your writing of this novel?

There isn't a particular story because I didn't really plan on doing this book, but it did begin in a unique way. What happened was one day I was hunting through files on my computer, reading through some old things I had written, and came across an unfinished short story. The dialogue was good, but the characters weren't doing anything. For some reason, new voices appeared in my head, and I started writing them down. The story ending up being the opening fight scene in *Chameleon*. I was pleased with it and tweaked it a day or two later, but it sat dormant for quite a few months. One day I was talking to my agent and told her what I had done and showed it to her just to get an opinion. She loved it so much that she suggested I write more. It would be more than a year before I touched it again. At the time, I was doing a number of conferences with all kinds of writers, including novelists, and I began to pick their brains. The constant piece of advice I got was to just finish it. So, upon my return, I did.

What inspired you to turn from poetry to your first fiction endeavor?

Ever since I was a kid, I have always loved to write, whether it be poetry or short stories or even essays, so I never considered myself *just* a poet. I've always considered myself a writer. To me, poetry is like doing sprints, and I felt ready for a marathon. The challenge of a novel has hung over my head since I did my first published book; it was just something I've always wanted to do.



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Why did you want to tell this story in particular?

I wanted to create a story about boys that I identified with and could root for. When I read some books about boys, I constantly find myself saying, "A boy would *never* say that." I wanted to celebrate all that goes with being a young man: the bravado, the camaraderie, the loyalty, the humor, and the testosterone that affect a young man's judgment. Having been in the same situation as Shawn in terms of my upbringing (going to school in Compton while living in Carson), I also wanted to show that not every kid in the ghetto is considering joining a gang and that there isn't crime, violence, and despair everywhere. Yes, he grows up in a tough city, but having witnessed firsthand what gangs are all about, he and his buddies want nothing to do with them. It was also important to me to show honest, hardworking adults, including positive male role models who still had flaws.

Do you think that *Chameleon* might have a crossover adult audience?

I honestly don't know. I know that every time I go through to edit a line here or there, I enjoy hearing all the boys talk and interact with each other. I think in that regard, it may cross over to adult men because all guys enjoy seeing true brotherhood in action in any capacity.

Which characters did you most enjoy writing? Which characters were the most challenging to develop?

Well, since this was my first novel, they were all a challenge. But the women and girls were probably the most challenging, because I didn't want them sounding like guys. Also, Aunt Gertie is such a tragic figure that I didn't want to create a stereotype of her or have her actions be too predictable, so she was a challenge. The most enjoyable by far was the boys because each of them basically represents a different part of me: intellectual, joker, athlete, and oddball.

Is this story completely fabricated, or are any parts based on real-life experiences?

I think any novelist will say there's a bit of truth in everything he or she writes, and that's the case here. Like I said, I was in the same situation as Shawn, but I didn't have to make the high school decision he did. Lots of the characters are based on real people, but a lot of the situations are made up based on the characters' interactions with their environment. Having gone to school in Compton, I came across a number of characters that made their way into the book in one way or another. I have relatives who were alcoholics; I had friends who had siblings in gangs; many of my friends' siblings and parents left an impression; numerous older people who sat on their porches and waved hi stayed in my memory as well. But in the end, Shawn's summers are a lot more exciting than mine were.

What do you most want readers to take away from this novel?

I tried to be as true to all the people that I've met throughout the years that inspired this story, so I want anyone who reads the book be able to connect with the characters in some way. Probably the biggest thing, though, is that I wanted to open the door on what makes boys *boys* and how important brotherhood is to boys becoming men.



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CHARLES R. SMITH JR. is the author of *Hoop Queens* and its companion, *Hoop Kings*, as well as the Coretta Scott King Author Award Honor Book *Twelve Rounds to Glory: The Story of Muhammad Ali*, illustrated by Bryan Collier. He also wrote and illustrated the American Library Association Notable Book *Rimshots: Basketball Pix, Rolls, and Rhythms*, among other titles. *Chameleon* is his first novel for young adults. He lives in Poughkeepsie, New York.



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