

Betsy Franco Lets Teenage Boys Speak for Themselves

People warned Betsy Franco, author of more than forty books—including poetry and nonfiction for children—that if she wanted to compile an anthology of stories and poems by teenage boys, she wouldn't receive any submissions. But with three sons of her own, and the conviction that it was "about time," Franco did it anyway.

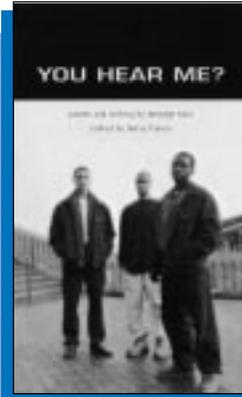
"My philosophy when researching and writing books," she says, "has always been to let people speak for themselves as much as possible." *You Hear Me? Poems and Writing by Teenage Boys*, published by Candlewick Press, is the compelling result of that philosophy—more than seventy uncensored poems and essays by more than fifty teenage boys from across the country.

All kinds of voices

The focus and significance of the project didn't become clear until Franco had received several dozen submissions and had spoken to a number of the authors. It was soon obvious that boys needed a forum to speak for themselves on issues that concern them: identity, love, envy, gratitude, sex, anger, competition, fear, hope. "My goal was to include all kinds of voices," she says, "from the suburbs to the heart of the city, from those who love to write to those who just have something to say, if someone will listen."

Uncensored accounts

Betsy Franco advertised in creative writing journals, found an Internet site that linked her to forty-eight hundred classrooms, collected poetry from writing



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projects in Detroit, Houston, and Chicago, and invited individual boys to submit. She recalls how relieved one author was that she wasn't planning to include commentary to clarify the work, that it wasn't being used as evidence of a theory. "He said he'd read a number of books in high school that supposedly addressed boys' issues . . . and he 'couldn't relate.'"

"In the case of teenage boys," says Betsy Franco, "I've noticed that people tend to put words and feelings into boys' mouths, based on secondhand information and stereotypes. I wanted to present uncensored accounts without the filter of adult sensibility. Most important of all," she says, "were my many consultants in their teens and early twenties."

The inner and outer sides of boys

Franco says that as she watched the collection grow, she noticed frankness and honesty in the writing, but also sensitivity. *You Hear Me?* clearly reflects both the inner and the outer lives of boys. "I wasn't sure that they would be willing to share their thoughts and feelings in a publication," she says. "I found out that they are willing, and the result is a powerful statement of who they are."



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