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Gangsta Rap

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Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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This is a disappointing novel. Benjamin Zephaniah looks at the association of violence with rap and hip-hop music by following the career of the Positives-Negatives, three young East End rappers who make it big but whose success is marred by gang warfare between their followers and the fans of a rival hip-hop band. Zephaniah sees hip-hop as a creative force that enables kids from a disadvantaged back-ground, particularly black kids, to make something of their lives and to give voice to their anger about social injustice. Equally he wishes to separate the music from the gang violence which is associated with it. These are serious issues and Zephaniah's message emerges clearly from the novel but it doesn't pack the punch it should. There is a strong impulse toward social realism: the rappers are excluded from school, and the father of the chief character, Ray, is sometimes drunk and violent. But the story of the band's almost effortless success wouldn't look out of place in a 1960s Cliff Richard film. The source of the gang violence that is revealed at the end of the story, while it may make a point about commercial exploitation, is too neat as social criticism and too contrived as a plot device. Overall, the novel's tone is uncertain. The rap lyrics and some of the dialogue contain strong language that suggests the powerful emotions that drive the band and their followers: 'We live the hip-hop philosophy/ So if you wanna live/ You gotta know not to fuck with we.' People are stabbed, savagely beaten, and shot dead during the course of the story, but, for the most part, the narrative fails to convey either the drama or the horror of the events it is describing. That said, this modern parable may well get young people thinking and talking about how the music they enjoy relates to the society they live in.

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