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## A Stroll Through Harlem, Interview with Author Christopher Herz

'*The Last Block in Harlem*' Releases July 13 Through Amazon Encore

By Shamontiel

Have you ever been to Harlem, New York? If not, author Christopher Herz's book "*The Last Block in Harlem*" drops you right on the sidewalk to stroll from 145<sup>th</sup> street to 155<sup>th</sup> street, meeting people you may relate to in your own neighborhood. Outside of the block, readers are given the opportunity to find out just what unites a neighborhood, how a neighborhood can be torn apart by greed, the back story behind one particular apartment and what makes a marriage work. Take a trip to Harlem. The book is on sale today, Tues., July 13, 2010.

But before you put your luggage down and head to St. Nick's or grab food from the Chicken and Rice guy, tag along and read an interview with the author who talks about how he got his publishing deal hip-hop style, his complex views on gentrification, Harlem residents' opinion on the novel and how the characters in his book came about.

**Shamontiel:** You sold "*The Last Block in Harlem*" in a very unique way, like a **hip-hop artist** with mixtapes. You sold them on the street and wanted to sell 10 copies a day. What made you go that route as opposed to going to a traditional publisher first?

**Christopher Herz:** You kind of hit it on the head. I grew up in the **hip-hop generation** and I saw that that business model, that sense of **entrepreneurship**, is really the best way to get your stuff out there and create a fan base. I figured the best way to do that would be to walk around the streets of the city, go up to people and present my novel to them and get the book in their hands. Once they read it, they would create a buzz from there.

**S:** According to the Advanced Reader's copy I have, the book is an **Amazon Encore** title. Was the book originally published some time ago and then it came back and was republished?

**CH:** A year ago to this date, I finished printing up about a thousand copies. I was walking around the city selling them. A few months passed and a woman was sitting in the park. She had just signed a publishing contract. I sold the book to her, and she thought it was pretty unusual that someone was walking around the street selling the book hand to hand. She forwarded the story to a friend of hers at *Publishers Weekly*, *Publishers Weekly* wrote a story about it and somebody from **Amazon Encore** picked up the story, purchased a copy of the book, read it, liked it and said he wanted to republish it. So now I'm sitting here on a hot summer night in Harlem waiting for the book to come out.

**S:** Even though the story is about a guy who is basically trying to help the community, I see little bits of hip-hop every once in awhile. Readers hear about Slick Rick on MTV and so forth. What made you want to incorporate hip-hop?

**CH:** I grew up listening to **Slick Rick**, Guru, X Clan, **KRS One** and Run DMC. These are the people who influenced me. For me, these were the original storytellers in the golden age of hip-hop. Even though there are a lot of hip-hop references in there, I think the book is written in that vein of hip-hop, as far as structure goes, where you would have a whole narrative going on. In the middle, there would be a scratch and there would be a sample and then come back to the main story. I have a heavy base in literature, but I listen to hip-hop nonstop.

**S:** How much is similar between the narrator and you? I notice that the narrator doesn't have a name.

**CH:** That's true. In a sense every writer has to put a little of themselves into the book. For me, putting the narrator as the first person, I really wanted to give the reader the sense that they were the person walking through the story. I wanted them to submerge themselves in the story and be on the streets. I see the narrator as the villain in the book. I don't really see myself as a villain. That would be a major difference. The narrator doesn't have a name, but you notice he names everything else. He associates people with what they do and what they produce in the world.

**S:** Speaking of being a villain, interesting reviews on **Amazon.com** pointed out that although the narrator wanted to help improve the neighborhood and it ended up with gentrification, the narrator was also new to the neighborhood, too. He'd just gotten there two years ago from California. So in a way, he was trying to change the community just like the next set of people were trying to change the community. Do you feel like he helped or hurt the community?

**CH:** I saw a couple of those reviews, and I think **they missed the point**. It was pretty obvious that he was trying to help himself. He wasn't out there trying to make his mark. He was just trying to do something for himself. That was a major theme in the book. He wanted to explore what it's like to go out there and be a man, have to balance the accomplishments of going out and trying to leave your mark on the world and do something great. Do something super important, and at the

same time, not lose sight of what's really important to you, which is often right next to you. Of course the narrator was responsible for so much that happened in the neighborhood. But I don't like to hit people over the head over what's right and wrong. The narrator can be the reader, and the reader will be a couple steps ahead and know what's going on. They can get angry with him and turn that inward to maybe see faults of their own.

**S: You did a great job of setting up Harlem for us so we could picture it in our heads. There was so much room for someone to relate to the community in their own neighborhood. Did you do that on purpose?**

CH: Yes. Even though it takes place in Harlem, it could've taken place anywhere in the country, in the world, where there's just that sense of community. The best part was the people who have lived here for some 40 odd years come to me and tell me that I did right by the block. For me, that was a very important thing. I felt like the story wasn't written so much by me. It was written through me kind of like my love story to the block wrapped in fiction.

**S: Did you get inspiration from just walking down the street? I see references to a wall with Harriet Tubman. Did you walk down the street, see these pictures and say, "I want to put that in there"?**

CH: Absolutely. The picture of Harriet Tubman, that's more down on 125<sup>th</sup> Street. The book takes place in Sugar Hill. This particular block was between 145<sup>th</sup> and 155<sup>th</sup>. You could literally walk up the block and it turns into Washington Heights. It's the last block in Harlem. All the actual physical places that you see in the book are very real.

**S: Are the characters (real) like the Chicken and Rice Guy or The Boxer, or did you make those up?**

CH: The Chicken and Rice Guy is real. As a matter of fact, he just got his own store on the block. It's bits and pieces of other people turned into fiction.

**S: Have any of these people who you made characters out of read the book?**

CH: The guy who blasts his music from his car—in the beginning of the book in the gold Lincoln town car that blows bass—everybody in the neighborhood knows that guy. He found out that his car was in the book and other people were asking me, "Where am I in the book?" For me, the whole block is the character, so there are bits and pieces pulled in. But again, it's a piece of fiction so you have to mess things around a little bit.

**S: There's also a situation with a relationship that you touch on with the narrator and his wife, Namuna. It's timely because right now we're going through an unemployment situation. You touch on both ends of unemployment—the side that's happy to be able to live out your dreams and do what you want to do as opposed to being stuck in a corporate office. But the other side is slightly bitter about somebody else who is okay in the corporate world. What made you make Namuna unlike the narrator?**

CH: For me, it's important to not pass judgment on what's right and wrong. I saw her as the strength. If you notice, most of the women are the strong characters in here, and they're mentioned by name. (Namuna) was able to survive in that (corporate) world and do that thing, but that wasn't her whole world. Her world was the love of her husband, the family that they were creating, the life that they were living. The job was just something she needed. It wasn't her driving force, and I wanted to contrast that with the narrator whose driving force was to make a name for himself and create a legacy.

**S: What I found interesting was you made The Green Fitted Hat Kid more human than the news would. We got to see both sides of him.**

CH: The stuff you see on the news, talk about fiction. That's the biggest fiction out there, I think. I think this is an amazing block. People say "hello" and the kids say "hello." Even the toughest kids on the block, once they know you and once you're part of the neighborhood, they look out for you, they invite you to their barbecues, they sit down and talk politics with you. We talk about what's going on in the news and what this governor or that governor is doing. I think it's important to take it down to an on-the-block level. I think the most enjoyable part of being a human being is going out and interacting with other people.

**S: One of the most important topics in the book is gentrification. Do you think it's ever necessary for a neighborhood to go through something like that?**

CH: There's a scene at St. Nick's with two women talking back and forth with each other about what's going on in the neighborhood. They're both arguing different points. The area that I grew up in was a very tough gang-filled kind of crazy neighborhood that you didn't walk around in at night. Now it's totally (different). Is it as cool and authentic as when I grew up? Probably not. But can my mom walk around there at night? Absolutely. There's a balance to all those things. It's a big issue in my neighborhood right now. There are a lot of hard-working people here, and some of them are being forced out.

**S: I read the conversation between the two women in the book, but I was asking for Christopher Herz's opinion.**

CH: I think that if you establish an economic power base in your neighborhood and keep the money within the community and really do things to keep the neighborhood up, I think you could pretty much control what's going on. If you drink a can of Coke, you throw the Coke on the ground, you're tossing trash everywhere, you're not respecting things and you're bringing the property value down, then someone's going to come in there and buy it up. A lot of the neighborhoods are brought down by powers from the outside that are trying to bring the property values down. I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing. There are negatives and positives on both sides. Hard-working people shouldn't be forced out of their homes, but I don't think that it's right that people who throw trash on the street should sit there complaining that they're getting kicked out of the neighborhood.

**S: When people finish "The Last Block in Harlem," what do you want them to come away with?**

CH: I think what I want them to come away with is a sense of power that they have in their own community. I would like them to go out and meet their neighbors and talk to the people around them. Make them their extended family so when they come home there's pride and they can create a power of uplifting your community within. If you look to other places to help you out, they're not going to do that because everybody's going to have their own special interest at heart. If people get the basic economic principles that Malcolm X was doing with the Nation of Islam early on with cleaning up the community and keeping the money within the community and creating an economic power base, you have something to fight back with. Outside influences came in and shook that up and destroyed a pretty credible movement.

I also hope the reviewers enjoy it. When I finish a novel and close that last page, I'm really sad because I can't read that book anymore. I'll have to go back and re-read it again. I want this book to resonate with them the way that books that I have read have stayed with me. I want to have that connection with people.

**More resources**

<http://www.herzwords.com/>

[http://www.amazon.com/Last-Block-Harlem-Christopher-Herz/dp/1935597043/ref=ntt\\_at\\_ep\\_dpt\\_1](http://www.amazon.com/Last-Block-Harlem-Christopher-Herz/dp/1935597043/ref=ntt_at_ep_dpt_1)

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