

Kensington Grows Its Children's Offerings

By Sally Lodge, *Children's Bookshelf* -- *Publishers Weekly*, 7/10/2008

With the addition of three imprints in two years, Kensington Publishing is working to expand its presence in the children's market. Dafina Books, which launched in October 2006 with L. Divine's Drama High series, marked the publisher's first foray into the young adult market. Aimed at an African-American audience, this paperback imprint now releases 12 titles annually. Kensington has just introduced a general YA line focusing on fiction, and will debut Marimba Books in September. Marimba, a multicultural imprint aimed at younger readers, was established in partnership with the Hudson Publishing Group, newly formed by Wade and Cheryl Willis Hudson, founders of Just Us Books.

At Dafina's helm is executive editor Selena James, who moved to Kensington almost two years ago from Pocket Books, where she had spearheaded an inspirational teen publishing program. Drama High, which James describes as "an African-American Sweet Valley High," has five titles in print, with *Courtin' Jayd* due in September. "This is one of our star series," James says. "It's an episodic series with a multicultural cast. The books move seamlessly from one to the next and readers become very invested in the characters."

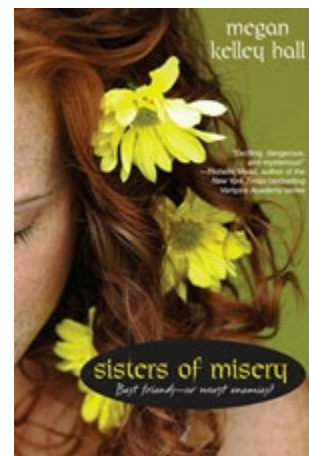
James, who explains that Dafina's goal is "to publish teen fiction series that deliver tales tailored to today's diverse youth and that reflect the real world," also cites the success of Stephanie Perry Moore's Christian-themed Perry Skky Jr. series, which focuses on a teenage African-American football star. "I'd say we took a risk on this series," James says. "There aren't many books in the market featuring black males dealing with everyday life and juggling issues of faith, but these books have worked." The latest installment, *Promise Kept*, was published in May.



Targeting a younger audience, Dafina's Del Rio Bay Clique series by Paula Chase adds its third volume, *That's What's Up!*, this month. James anticipates that Dafina will publish at its current rate—a book each month—for the foreseeable future, noting "we don't want our books to compete against each other in an increasingly competitive market."

The driving force behind Kensington's second YA imprint, which is still unnamed, is "strong female heroines dealing with issues that readers can identify and learn from," says senior editor Danielle Chiotti. Among the inaugural releases are *City of the Lost Souls* (May), the first volume of The Vampress Girls, a graphic novel series by Jacy Nova and Nick Nova; and *Amor and Summer Secrets* by Diana Rodriguez Wallach, an August novel launching a series about a teen coming to terms with her cultural identity.

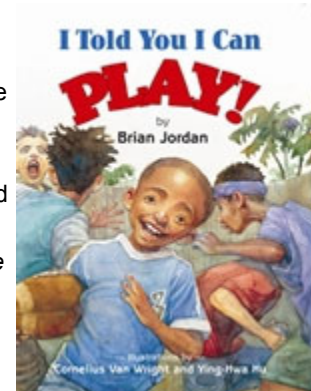
A novel Chiotti believes will "provide a solid cornerstone for this imprint" is Megan Kelley Hall's *Sisters of Misery*, which involves witchcraft, runic mythology, the supernatural, family ties and an ominous high-school clique. Due next month, this first novel is set in a Massachusetts town with echoes of Salem (of witchcraft trials fame) and introduces three generations of women. "What appealed to me when I first read this manuscript was the novel's voice as well as its subject matter," says the editor. "I was drawn in by this heroine who is plunged into the scary high school world and wants so desperately to fit



in. It is a story about choosing paths and dealing with the consequences and it is very compelling.”

Hall, who founded a literary publicity company with her mother and sister in 2005, had penned numerous magazine articles before realizing her dream of becoming a novelist. Two years ago, at age 32, she had open heart surgery after suffering a series of strokes and was housebound for four months while recuperating. “I took a negative situation and turned it into a positive,” she says, explaining that she focused her recovery time on writing her novel. “Within a year I had finished the book, found a literary agent and landed a book deal. I realized that if I wanted to do this, it was the time to do it. I seized the day.”

Through Marimba Books, Kensington hopes to extend its African-American publishing program to a younger readership. The line is named for a percussive musical instrument that was brought to South America by African slaves; its name is meant to symbolize the cultural diversity and rhythm of language that the imprint’s books will feature. The list will include paperbacks, hardcovers and board books and will target readers from toddlers to middle-schoolers. Launch titles include *Clothes I Love to Wear* by Cheryl Willis Hudson and *Places I Love to Go* by Wade Hudson, both illustrated by Laura Freeman; and *I Told You I Can Play!* by former baseball player Brian Jordan, with art by Cornelius Van Wright and Ying-Hwa Hu.



Marimba Books, James explains, represents a fitting extension of Dafina’s mission. “These are beautifully illustrated books that star a diverse cast of characters,” she says. “This imprint reinforces Kensington’s continuing commitment to multicultural publishing.”

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