# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussion Questions</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason Reynolds on 'Ghost' and writing about real issues for young readers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q &amp; A With Phaedra Patrick</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 things I'd like my reader to know about me</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion Questions

1. The cover of Ghost includes this question: Running for his life, or from it? Explain the role that running plays in Ghost’s life. Why does he start running? How does his reason for running change?

2. What memory is triggered about Ghost’s dad from the sunflower seeds? How does this flashback help develop Ghost’s character? What other things bring back memories of his father? Are any of his memories positive?

3. Initially, what sport is Ghost interested in playing? Why isn’t he interested in track? What do you think makes him decide to race Lu?

4. Consider the connotations of the word defender. What does it mean to be a defender? Many of the characters in the novel play the role of defenders. Choose a character and explore the ways that they embody the idea of being a defender. Why is this an appropriate name for Coach Brody’s track team?

5. How did Castle get his nickname? Why do you think he likes the name Ghost better than his given name? Which name do you think suits him best: Ghost or Castle? If you gave yourself a nickname, what would it be? Have others given you a nickname? If so, does it properly reflect who you are?

6. How does Coach Brody convince Ghost to join the Defenders? How does he convince Ghost’s mom? How hard is it to balance athletics and academics?

7. Ghost has to deal with bullying at school. Why do you think Brad Simmons picks on Ghost? How does Ghost respond? Instead of fighting, how could Ghost have retaliated?

8. What do you think Ghost means when he says, “I got a lot of scream inside”?

9. What do you think Ghost means when he tells Coach, “I guess the only other person I’m really scared of, maybe . . . is me”? How does Coach respond? Do you think Ghost is hard on himself?

10. Closely read the last few pages of Chapter 5 and the beginning of Chapter 6, making sure to pay attention to the author’s use of figurative language. How does Ghost’s flashback help develop his character and internal conflict?

11. Think about the consequences Ghost faces as a result of his decision to steal a pair of running shoes. Do you think that the way that Coach punishes him is fair? What would the consequences have been if Ghost had been stopped by the police instead? What would the consequences have been if his mother had discovered the theft? What would have happened if Ghost had never been caught? Why might it have been better for him to get caught?
12. In addition to training the Defenders to be competitive runners, Coach also teaches them to work together as a team, helping them learn to be responsible and empathetic. What tactics does he use to teach these life lessons?

13. Consider the way that the author contrasts Glass Manor with Sunny’s neighborhood in Chapter 7. How does this contrast help you understand Ghost?

14. Chapter 8 ends with Ghost saying, “And it felt good to feel like one of the teammates. Like I was there—really, really there—as me, but without as much scream inside.” Why are teams important? Have you ever been a part of a team? If so, how did your experience compare to Ghost’s experience?

15. What leads to Ghost’s decision to steal a pair of running shoes? Why does he feel like stealing is his only option? What are the short- and long-term consequences of his decision? What would you have done if you were in his position? What could Ghost have done instead? What lesson does he learn as a result?

16. At the newbie dinner, what secrets do Patty, Lu, Sunny, and Ghost reveal about themselves? How does this dinner impact their relationships with one another? Why is trust so important in relationships? How can you build trust with others?

17. Gradually, Coach reveals things about his own past to Ghost. What does Ghost find out about Coach’s childhood and relationship with his father? How do these revelations develop Ghost and Coach’s bond?

18. Ghost ends with a cliffhanger. What do you think the outcome of the race will be? This is the first book in the Track series: What conflicts do you think Ghost is going to face in the next book?

http://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Ghost/Jason-Reynolds/Track/9781481450164/reading_group_guide
Jason Reynolds on 'Ghost' and writing about real issues for young readers

Isabella Biedenharn
October 31, 2016 at 02:52 PM EDT

After developing his own lyrical voice in acclaimed slice-of-life YA novels, Jason Reynolds has scored a National Book Award nomination for his trenchant middle-grade tale Ghost. Below, he opens up to EW about what inspired the book and how he gets inside his characters’ heads.

ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY: In Ghost, a father tries to murder his wife and their 9-year-old son. Where did the idea for this story come from?

REYNOLDS: A version of it happened to one of my best friends when he was 6 or 7—it was his mom’s boyfriend who tried to kill them. They got out of the house and ran into a 7-Eleven, frantic and begging. I was like, “I’ve got to put this in a book.”

When you borrow from someone’s life like that, do you ask them first?

For sure. Especially if it’s something this traumatic. Not for nothing, it could be a trigger if I didn’t tell [the friend who inspired Ghost], and he read this book and was like, “Yo, this sounds a lot like me.”

Did you incorporate the actual emotional aftermath of his ordeal?

Nah. It’s the whole Toni Morrison thing. When she wrote Beloved, she got the premise from a newspaper article. But she didn’t do any research. She was like, “Let my imagination do the rest of the work and create this story.” My job is to put myself in the situations using my own trauma and my own experiences. I know the feeling of confusion and betrayal. I know the feeling of fearing for my life. These are the things that I tapped into.

The main character in this novel runs track, which you use as a powerful metaphor.

There’s running from things—which we learn to do very young—and running towards them. Running from yourself. Running from your community. Those are all things I wanted to explore.

This is your second middle-grade book. What sets them apart from writing YA novels?

Fart jokes! They make middle-grade a ton of fun—writing from the point of view of an 11-year-old and being outrageously immature in all the best ways.

Is anything too dark for young readers?

No. It’s about how you execute it. Eleven-and 12-year-olds are aware of things that you and I weren’t at their age because of the internet. It’s almost dangerous for us as adults and artists to be afraid to go there, because they’re living it. It’s happening. And we should be there with them and give them a safe space to have a discussion.

https://ew.com/article/2016/10/31/jason-reynolds-ghost/
An Interview with Jason Reynolds

Author Jason Reynolds talks about what inspired his book, *Long Way Down*, why he writes about boys, and why literacy is more important than literature. Most importantly, he says, "Tell all the kids I love them. It's important that they know that."

**Audible**: Do you have a favorite reaction from a kid hearing you at an author visit?

**Jason Reynolds**: The best ones are always the ones where some young person says they don't like to read, but this is the first book they've ever read. A lot of those kids are 16, 15 years old, and they say things like, "Look, I didn't think there were books that could capture an authentic voice," at least their authentic voice, the voice they are familiar with, which is something I totally understand.

The other thing that's really cool is when I walk into these schools or libraries or bookstores, correctional facilities ... the way young people react to the way that I look is fascinating, because they never expect me to look the way I do. You know, sneakers and T-shirt and tattoos and long hair ... black. I look like them. You know? That's always really, really fascinating because I think there's currency in the familiar. Because of that, I think they're just a little more excited and a little more engaged, simply based on the fact that someone who looks and talks like them could write books about them. There's an authenticity immediately attached to me once they see me in real life.

**A**: Your voice does make your characters so real. How do you do that?

**JR**: The voice thing is interesting only because I almost feel like I'm cheating a little bit. I'm an eighties baby; all through the eighties and early nineties, I was a part of the generation that got to see hip-hop grow up, right? Hip-hop, rap music boomed in my childhood and teenage years, and it crystallized in a way no one was certain that it would. The upside of that is the language attached to that music, to that specific culture ... and at the time, it was a specific culture; it was tied to the black community. But as it grew up and spread around the world, hip-hop culture and the language attached to it become youth culture, universally, right? So my natural tongue just happens to be the very thing that 14-year-olds and and 12-year-olds are attracted to by default. So luckily for me, I'm writing in my natural tongue. It's pegged as a voice, and it is a voice, but the truth is it's also just my authentic hand. That's the way I speak when I'm with my friends. That's the way I speak when I'm with my cousins, my family, right? That voice feels so real because it is real.

**A**: Your characters have so much heart and vulnerability. Can you talk about why that's important for kids?

**JR**: This is a motif that runs through all of my books, a deconstruction specifically of masculinity, right? Every single book, no matter what it is, there's a throughline in all the books touching upon the deconstruction of what it means to be a boy. Part of that deconstruction is basically turning the young men inside out. The way these boys are feeling is the way that boys feel. It's just that it's not celebrated in our cultures of young men. So what I'm intending to do is let all these young men off the hook and say, "Guess what? It's okay. I'm going to air this out. I'm going to put it on the page so when you read it, you know it's not just you. It's not just you who feels the pain on the inside. It's not just you who has a hard time expressing yourself. It's not
just you who feels fear and insecurity and who wants to cry and who wants to scream. That's all of us because we're human." Because we're human, you know?

A: What led you to start writing for young people?
JR: It was an accident. I got my first contract when I was 21 years old with HarperCollins and back then I had no idea YA was even a thing or middle grade was even a thing. I just wanted to get my stuff out there, and they categorized it as young adult. That was the first time I had ever even heard of it. That book was published, and then I kind of disappeared for a while. When I got back in the industry, the people in my Rolodex that I could call to help usher me back into the game were in the young adult world because children's literature is where I was placed in the beginning.

Then I realized I had this opportunity to write the books I didn't have as a child, and it actually just made sense for me to be in this category, because all I really ever wanted as a kid was to see myself, was to read the stories about kids in my neighborhood or about my family or my friends, and to really figure out how to put the things I was hearing in rap music that seemed so real to me, how to put that stuff on the page for young people so they can have a better chance than I had, right?

A: Congratulations on the National Book Award nomination for Long Way Down What inspired this book?
JR: I get really frustrated with news pundits and other big-mouthed know-it-alls who wag their fingers at young people growing up in challenging and marginalized communities by calling them "thugs" and "animals" and "monsters" and so forth, without ever understanding the ecosystem of these neighborhoods and the culture codes that have existed in these spaces, almost within a vacuum, after decades and generations and eras of the same exact code. It really bothers me that we don't complicate the conversation when it comes to young people in these environments. I spend a lot of time in juvenile detention centers. When you're talking to kids in juvie, you realize that many of them are in there retaliating back and forth, sort of volleying bullets, based on beefs that started in the 1960s and 70s. These are beefs that started 40 years before they were even born, but they don't know that. For them, there are codes to the community. No snitching, no crying, and you always seek vengeance. So if my friend is killed by a rival gang, then my job is to kill the kid who killed my friend, not realizing that 40 years ago is when that original beef began, and now it's just spinning on its own axis. When you compound that with the generational trauma involved, and then you compound that with poverty and education, and then you compound all of it with the social ills that exist in general for poor people and for marginalized people in America, especially people of color, this is what it looks like. This is what it looks like.

The last thing that drove the book is that I lost a friend when I was 19. One of my best friends was murdered. It wasn't the first time I had lost a friend, but it was the worst time, for sure, because of the way he was killed. I remember feeling, though I claimed and was raised to be a peaceful person, that now my peace was challenged and I was forced to grapple with a part of me that could take a life. In that moment, I was certain, as time sort of suspended, dealing with the pain of loss and the way he was murdered, I knew in that particular moment, I could retaliate and be able to sleep at night. And I had to grapple with that strange feeling of knowing that was a part of who I am. And then, fast-forward six months later, of course I'm happy I didn't really do
that. But I wanted to tell a story that humanizes people who are dealing with pain and loss without automatically putting them in these strange categories as "inhumane" or as "monsters." They're people, and the very thing that you say makes them monsters is in you; it's in you if your peace and your ethics are challenged. Let something happen to your child or your mother, and then I want to hear you be peaceful, right?

This is what I tried to say: "Look, these young people who are dealing with this, let's wash them in humanity so that we can better serve them by loving them and by being compassionate and empathetic to their situation."

A: Why did you decide to do this novel in verse rather than prose?
JR: Verse is my first love and it's what I studied in school. From the beginning, I wanted to be Langston Hughes. I never wanted to be a novelist. That was never on the agenda. For a story like this that takes place over the course of one minute of a young person's life, I think the functionality of poetry works in this way, right? He's trapped in an elevator, which means he has constraints; he's in a tight space. Poetry can mimic that. His brain is working a mile a minute, and poetry has a way of being immediate and being urgent.

And then lastly, I care about multi-layered, multi-level stories. It matters to me that there are different meanings for almost every part of the book. This book can be read multiple times and you can really journey down the rabbit hole of what it all means. I took my time ... every single word is the word I want, right? So if I'm talking about eczema, yeah, it's eczema, obviously, and then it's the metaphor of scratching something raw, of opening a wound or something being scabbed over and then being undone. And then there's the etymology of the word, which means something like "explosion." All of this stuff matters, and all of it is intentional, and the best way to do that is to use verse.

A: You write for both young adult and middle grade audiences. What are your thoughts about presenting violence and trauma in a middle grade novel vs. a YA novel? Is there a difference there for you?
JR: Not really, not for me. Honestly, I mean, Ghost has his trauma at the beginning, and ... I recognize it's touchy, but I also know that it's only touchy in books. So if I talk about a father shooting at a son in a middle-grade novel, perhaps people are like, "Oh, that's a bit much." Yet children can jump on a video game and simulate robbery and murder. Children can watch YouTube videos and listen to the radio and watch television and get on the Internet and Instagram, and still be children. I try to be as honest and as respectful as possible to the child. I want to respect that human being, and sometimes in order to do so, I need to be honest and forthright. I think when you do that, when you expect them to step up to the plate and level, they oftentimes do.

A: A lot of people are feeling disheartened by the lack of empathy we are seeing in society. Is it naïve to think that diverse books can make a difference?
JR: No, it's not naïve. When we talk about fiction specifically, we talk about it as if fiction is the cornerstone of the whole person. I personally think that's a little dangerous because I know so many people who don't read fiction but who are amazing. There are so many people who, like, only read nonfiction, and those people are whole human beings. So it's a complicated thing.
I will say that the function of fiction ... if it does its job ... is to perpetuate empathy. Books are literally empathy machines. What I do think is naïve is the belief that young people lack empathy. We're serving young people these diverse books so they learn about people who are not like them, and engage and live in the space of characters where they may not be able to every day in hopes that they grow into compassionate and empathetic human beings. Now, being as though I spend time around so many young people, what I'm fortunate enough to learn is that there's a huge, huge bulk of them who are already thinking about the world in that way. So for me, I take great solace. I know they're a little bit more open-minded and a little more empathetic and compassionate than my generation. Yes, there's social media; yes, there's cyber-bullying, the same way there were ills during my generation. But spending time with them, you see so many of them honestly don’t care about things we cared about. They honestly don’t see why adults can’t move on and figure out how to fix the issues, because to them, their friends are their friends, the people around them are the people around them. Whether you’re Muslim or whether you’re gay ... so many of them honestly just don’t see it the way we grew up with it or the way our parents grew up with it, or even the way we’re still projecting.

That doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist, that the state of America isn't in serious trouble, because we are. And it doesn’t mean that we shouldn't make sure they hold on tight to their compassion and their empathy, but I want to give them a little bit of credit, right? What we should do is make sure they can maintain this thing that, for a lot of them, already exists. Make sure they can mature into something even more beautiful. But in order to that, we have to acknowledge the fact that a lot of them, a lot of them, are wide open in ways many adults can't even imagine.

A: What do you say to kids who claim they don’t like books or reading?
JR: I claim that they don't like to read the books they have read, or attempted to read. For me it's always funny, because there are so many different stories you could bring up that kids don't know are Shakespeare, right? I always ask, "Okay, so you don't like to read, I understand. Well, do you like the show Empire?" They're like, "Yeah, I love Empire." I'm like, "Well, funny enough, that's King Lear." Or I pitch ideas like, "Hey, so, think about this: there's a man whose mom married the man that killed his fat her." They're like, "That's crazy!" I'm like, "Yeah, that's Shakespeare."

So I say to young people, "What you don't like is the way the story is being presented to you. It's not that you don't like to read." Some kids are struggling with reading, and that's a different conversation. But for young people who are like, "Reading is boring," the answer to that is, "Yes, it is sometimes—until you find the book that's not boring for you. So let's do our due diligence to find a book that's not boring to you." Sometimes that book is going to be fantasy, sometimes it's going to be something like my stuff, sometimes it's going to be a graphic novel ... sometimes, honestly, if we're perpetuating literacy and not just literature, sometimes it's going to be the Minecraft game book. Sometimes it's going to be Sports Illustrated magazine. Sometimes it's going to be your favorite blog, right? Whatever it is to get you to build a relationship with language, I need to be doing that and not breaking my neck trying to convince you of something that may be futile. I'm not going to be pushing these stories on you if I know you don't really want that. It's more important for me as an adult to make sure you understand what literacy is and how you need it in your life. Let me figure out ways to engage that, and from there, we can start talking about literature.

https://www.audible.com/ep/jason-reynolds
Jason Reynolds: Writing is an adventure

BookPage interview by Dean Schneider
Web Exclusive – August 30, 2016

Jason Reynolds inaugurates his new Track series with Ghost, the story of young Castle Cranshaw, who discovers something about himself the night his father shoots at him and his mother: He can run fast. When Coach Brody puts him on the track team, Ghost finds a community he never expected, one that includes different kinds of kids, some with stories like his own, all ready to be there for each other.

In his signature prose style—full of affection for his characters, humor and wisdom—Reynolds has crafted another novel with the same subtle elegance that has earned him several honors from the Coretta Scott King jury as well as a recent Walter Dean Myers Award. In fact, Reynolds has been hailed as the heir to Walter Dean Myers by writing fine stories about black kids, especially boys, stories that “peel away some of the layers and walls to expose the humanness and the connectivity in us all.”

**Ghost begins the Track series. How many volumes do you envision?**
As of right now, there will be four. But who knows? Maybe people will really like them, and I can convince the publishing company to let me write four more. We’ll see!

**At the beginning of Ghost, Castle Cranshaw sees basketball as his real sport; he never really planned on joining the track team. What is your sports background?**
I grew up loving basketball. I played almost everyday until I got to high school, where I joined the wrestling team and the track team.

“If writing isn’t an adventure for me, I can’t expect it to be an adventure for you all.”

**What will you say to middle school readers, who don’t always like open-ended endings, when they ask why you concluded the novel at the start of the race instead of at the finish line?**
That they have to check out the next book to find out what happened!

**You seem to have a fondness for tough, independent-minded girls in your books: Love in The Boy in the Black Suit, for instance, and Patty in Ghost. Are they like the girls you liked in high school?**
Absolutely. And the girls after high school. And the girls I still like. They’re my mother, my cousins and almost every girl/woman in my life.
In the touching scene in the Chinese restaurant when Ghost reveals his family secret to his teammates and coach, he thinks to himself, “I felt like they could see me. Like we were all running the same race at the same speed.” Was that a conscious theme—a character named Ghost and the theme of seeing—when you began the novel, or did it evolve?

It definitely evolved. I’m actually not even sure where the nickname, Ghost, came from. It just popped in my head and I ran with it (pardon the pun). But as the story started to unfold, the name Ghost unfolded with it, and I love when that happens. If writing isn’t an adventure for me, I can’t expect it to be an adventure for you all.

When Coach reveals his own story to Ghost, he says, “You can’t run away from who you are, but what you can do is run toward who you want to be.” One aspect I especially like about all of your books are the adult characters who act as mentors—parents, Mr. Ray in *The Boy in the Black Suit*, and in *Ghost* Mr. Charles and Coach, along with Ghost’s mother. Do you see these characters as your way to offer life lessons in a natural way, without ever needing to impose a lesson on a story?

Honestly, I struggle with this. I’m not sure if I ever approach a story thinking about what I can teach. And I typically don’t even think about that as I’m writing. I mean, I contemplate what the story’s about. But not what a kid can get out of it. On the other hand, I love adult characters who are interesting and complicated, and usually people who are that way always have really interesting nuggets to share. All of my mentors were that way—human fortune cookies—sweet but broken, with a tidbit of wisdom to share.

You said that writing *As Brave as You*, your debut middle grade novel, was the hardest thing you have written yet. Why was that?

For a few reasons. The first being that it’s in third person. I rarely write in third person POV, and, a little secret, *As Brave As You* was originally written in first person. But my editor said it didn’t work. So I re-wrote the whole book in third. Another hiccup for me was convincing myself that I could just write. When I thought of the term “middle grade,” it immediately spawned the envisioning of a child swaddled in a blanket. Someone too young for reality, and so I wound up “talking down” to the reader. But thankfully my editor snapped me out of that one quickly. And lastly, I was used to writing young adult, which most people think of as stories about firsts. But middle grade stories are all about the curiosity and the questions that will eventually lead to those firsts. So there was definitely a recalibration that had to happen.

The cover of *When I Was the Greatest* features a gun on the cover, sparking challenges in some schools. How do you feel about that, given that guns and violence are a fact of life for many of your characters?

I’m torn. I understand the sensitive nature of the gun argument and would understand the outrage over the gun on the cover of *When I Was the Greatest* if we also thought about challenging covers with scantily clad teenage girls on them. And is it just that it’s a gun with no one holding it that makes people uncomfortable? Because there never seems to be a problem when that gun is being held by, say, a soldier. *Ugh.* Can I say *ugh* in BookPage? *Ugh.*

You have now been honored several times by the Coretta Scott King jury. What has that meant to you and your work?

Everything. It means that I’m part of an incredible legacy, and with that legacy comes responsibility. It means that I have work to do.
Earlier this year, *All American Boys*, co-written with Brendan Kiely, won the inaugural Walter Dean Myers Award for outstanding children’s literature in the young adult category. I know Walter Dean Myers’ son Chris is a friend of yours and introduced you to the work of his father; how does it feel to be a winner of the award and a writer who is carrying on Myers’ work?

Ah. Well, first, if it is somehow true that I’m carrying on Walter Dean Myers’ work, one can only help to be a pebble at the base of his boulder. It was an honor to win that award. It was humbling, surreal, emotional. My mother was there. So many friends. And it was held at the Library of Congress. It was truly a sweet moment. But again, this award, much like the Coretta Scott King Award, is less of a hat-tip and more of a charge. And I’m going to take heed. Better yet, I’m going to take pride.

https://bookpage.com/interviews/20356-jason-reynolds#.W9nk4zFReUI
How a kid who didn’t read a book until he was 17 grew up to become a literary star

By Nora Krug
October 23, 2017

Jason Reynolds can empathize with kids who don't like to read: He was 17 before he read a book cover to cover. It's a fact he's shared with thousands of kids in classrooms and auditoriums across the country, as a cautionary tale.

"It's not something I'm proud of. It's not cool," he told a group of seventh-graders in Stafford, Va. "The truth is, my life was made infinitely more difficult because I didn't read any books. But I didn't read any books. That's my story. That's my truth."

This week Reynolds will publish his ninth book — his third this year: a novel in verse called "Long Way Down" about a young man coping with the shooting death of his brother. It was longlisted for the National Book Award for Young People's Literature. At 33, Reynolds is a best-selling author with an array of awards, including multiple Coretta Scott King Book Award honors and an NAACP Image Award. He's been a National Book Award finalist, shared stages with Ta-Nehisi Coates and Rep. John Lewis and appeared in the pages of People magazine.

All of which asks the question Reynolds posed to his young audience: "How is it that a kid like me, a kid who grew up reading no books, eventually became a man who writes books for y'all?"

The tale of Reynolds's transformation from a nonreader living on the edge in Oxon Hill, Md., to a literary celebrity is the kind of relatable story he wished he'd read when he was a kid. "It's hard to be what you can't see," he said in an interview in the District, where he lives part-time.

When he was in school, teachers gave him the classics — Shakespeare, "Moby-Dick," "Lord of the Flies." They didn't click with him. As he explained to his middle-school audience, "The teacher was like, 'Read this book about this man chasing a whale,' and I'm like, bruh. . . . I don't know if I can connect to a man chasing a whale when I've never seen a whale," he said. "Nothing that's happening in these books is happening in my neighborhood."

Reynolds writes books about what's happening in his neighborhood. "Ghost" tells the story of a boy who joins a track team as an escape from the violence in his past. "The Boy in the Black Suit" tells the story of a city kid grieving the death of his mother. "When I Was the Greatest," tells the story of a group of friends navigating the streets of non-gentrified Bed-Stuy in Brooklyn. The voices are those Reynolds heard around him in the 1980s and 90s, in a neighborhood
where drugs and violence were on his doorstep, but inside was a loving family — aunties and
close friends, one of whom taught Reynolds how to crochet (which he still does).

Written for middle-graders and teens, Reynolds's books address difficult subjects, but they
aren't scary. They reflect his understanding of the fears and challenges that all young people
experience. They also reflect his awareness that today's kids face huge distractions: "The
literary world has to compete with YouTube, Instagram, PlayStation, Xbox, Hulu" and so on, he
acknowledges. When it comes to books and reading, "we have to get creative."

The finger-wagging and required reading lists of well-meaning teachers and parents can
backfire, he says. Instead, Reynolds recommends books written in a "natural tongue," in
comparative literature and the use of nontraditional materials — comic books and rap music, for
example — "as a catalyst for literacy."

Reynolds recognizes the constraints that teachers face but hopes for greater creativity in
curriculums. "We should say okay, let's watch 'The Handmaid's Tale' and then read it, draw
comparisons," he says. Kids need to see the relationship between pop culture and high culture
— the connections, for example, among Shakespeare, "West Side Story" and "Twilight," or
between "Lord of the Flies" and "The Hunger Games." "Let's take a rap song and figure out how
we can connect it to a piece of literature," he says.

It was rap music, in fact, that opened Reynolds to the world of literature. As he likes to tell his
middle-school audiences, one day back in Oxon Hill, he went to the store and bought a Queen
Latifah cassette tape for $5. As he was listening and rapping along, he opened the liner notes
and made a life-changing discovery: "This is also literature in the form of poetry, but it sounds
like me."

The first book he read, just before he turned 18, was
Richard Wright's "Black Boy." "The mischief in that book," he
says, "reminded me of the mischief that my friends and I
had done." Reynolds, then a student at Bishop McNamara
High School in Prince George's County, Md. (the same
school, coincidentally, that "Wimpy Kid" creator Jeff Kinney
had attended years earlier), delved into the works of Toni
Morrison and other African American authors. But he
confesses that he was by no means a stellar student or an
avid reader.

What it sparked in him, though, was a love of language, and
so he began writing. As a student at the University of
Maryland, he and his best friend wrote a book together
called "Self." A collection of poetry and art, it's something
Reynolds laughs about now. He and his friend went into
debt printing it, and after graduation, they brought it to New
York, expecting to get a deal. What they got was an agent
and an editor: Joanna Cotler at HarperCollins, who took
them under her wing and encouraged them to write books for reluctant young readers. It was a
demographic Reynolds knew well.
The result was "My Name Is Jason. Mine Too" (2009). It was not exactly a commercial success. A broke and disheartened Reynolds returned to the D.C. area, put aside his literary dream and went to work for his father, the director of a mental health clinic. Being a caseworker and helping clients get medicine and shelter taught him "true empathy," he says. "I learned just how interesting stories can be, how complex humanity really is, how necessary it is sometimes to humanize those who have been vilified."

After a year, Reynolds returned to New York but not to be a writer. He needed money, so he began working in retail, becoming a manager of a Rag & Bone clothing store in Manhattan. And he'd still be there, he says — he'd been rejected three times by graduate schools because of his poor grades — were it not for the intervention of an old friend, the writer Christopher Myers.

Myers encouraged Reynolds to write in his own voice and to tell stories about "the neighborhood kids, the black and brown kids who need to know that they exist, that they are special and valuable." So that's what Reynolds did, often while standing at the cash register when business was slow. "When I Was the Greatest" came out in 2014. The book was a critical success and gave Reynolds the confidence to embrace his identity as a writer. Nearly a decade since his publishing debut, he says with a smile, "Here we are, rockin'."

Reynolds says he hopes that his books can serve as both a mirror of a life and a window into another. "All I want kids to know is that I see them for who they are and not who everyone thinks they are," he says. He is committed, he says, to getting their stories right — "and putting that on the page with integrity and balance, to acknowledge the glory and the brokenness. That's all I want to do. It's a lot, but so are they."