

# Jason Reynolds Curriculum Guide and Classroom Resources

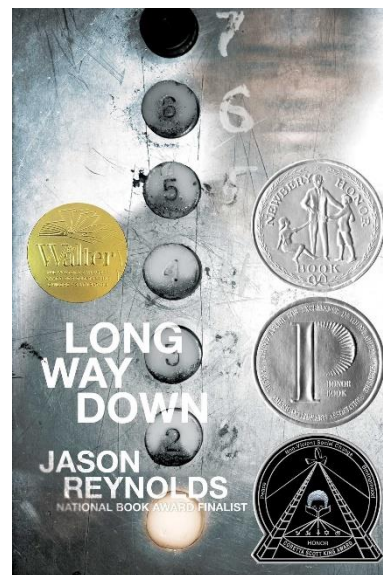
Winner of the 2021 Anne V. Zarrow Award for Young Readers' Literature –

## Jason Reynolds

Lesson ideas for selected reading: *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds

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<https://www.jasonwritesbooks.com/>



Authentic characterization drives the work of award-winning author **Jason Reynolds**. Focusing mainly on African-American teens and kids in realistic urban settings, he crafts characters whose words, actions, and emotions ring true. Reynolds doesn't shy away from portraying painful and deeply moving situations, but presents them in an honest, accessible style that will appeal to all kinds of young readers.

- NoveList database description

## Getting To Know Jason Reynolds

We are fortunate that Jason Reynolds has given a lot of interviews (and continues to do so). Here are a few notable ones, but you could just as easily find 10 more, just as good:

- **“Jason Reynolds is the Hardest Working Man in Washington”** – Publishers Weekly, July 2017: <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-authors/article/74244-jason-reynolds-is-the-hardest-working-man-in-washington.html>

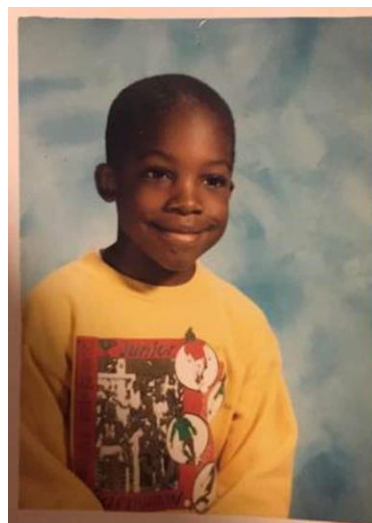
This makes a pretty good case for Reynolds being “the hardest working man” – at the time, he had published 8 books in 3 years (add many more since), but he was also constantly on the road, giving presentations at schools. Why does he do it? Because he truly loves kids. “I give all that I have, three to four talks a day, 100 times a year, every year for the last three years. This opportunity means the world to me.”

- **“In ‘Long Way Down,’ the Ghosts of Gun Violence Chill A Plan for Revenge”** – NPR Author interview, October 2017: <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/30/560286304/in-long-way-down-the-ghosts-of-gun-violence-chill-a-plan-for-revenge>

In a 7-minute radio interview, we learn more about the forces that led Reynolds to write *Long Way Down* – including his own brush with the choice of whether to take revenge for a loved one’s death – as well as why he wanted to give young people “no excuse” to not read the novel and engage with it.

- **“How a kid who didn’t read a book until he was 17 grew up to become a literary star”** – Washington Post, October 2017

That’s right: one of the greatest writers living today didn’t read a full book until he was 17. But he is absolutely on a mission to make sure that’s not the case with kids today. Bonus content: this picture of Jason when he was a kid:



- **“Author Jason Reynolds: Racism hasn’t changed ‘because we still haven’t talked about it”** – Washington Post Magazine, November 2020:  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/author-jason-reynolds-racism-hasnt-changed-because-we-still-havent-talked-about-it/2020/11/20/48e494c8-13f2-11eb-bc10-40b25382f1be\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/author-jason-reynolds-racism-hasnt-changed-because-we-still-havent-talked-about-it/2020/11/20/48e494c8-13f2-11eb-bc10-40b25382f1be_story.html)

The most recent work by Jason Reynolds isn’t fiction – it’s a “remix” of a nonfiction book for adults about the history of racism in our world by Dr. Ibram Kendi. In this interview, Reynolds talks about how he got involved in writing *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*, based on *Stamped from the Beginning* by Kendi, its important message for today, and what led him from being a nonreader as a kid to a prolific writer today.

- **“ ‘A Flame in Water’: Jason Reynolds on Writing for Middle Grade Readers”** – School Library Journal, January 2017

The focus in this Q&A with Reynolds is on his middle-grade novels such as *Ghost* and *As Brave As You*. In response to a question about historical fiction, he says he’s not opposed to those stories, but that’s not what he wants to do: “My charge is to make sure I can show young people who they are today. Right now. ... During this weird, murky, middle grade age, which many people see as ‘the crossroad,’ I just want them to feel acknowledged and empowered through representation.”

- **“Jason Reynolds: Fortifying Imagination”** – On Being with Krista Tippett, June 2020:  
<https://onbeing.org/programs/jason-reynolds-fortifying-imagination/>

While you can read the transcript, this 45-minute podcast interview is worth listening to the entire thing for such beautiful insights as: “Ultimately, I think that my role, for as long as I am on this plane and as long as I am doing this work, my role will always be to figure out how to create fortitude in the minds and bodies and spirits of young people. ... At the end of the day, I need young people – we, the collective we, need young people to be able to activate their imaginations. If they cannot, if by the time you’re out of high school, your imagination is shot, we’re in trouble.”

## Discussion Guides & Curriculum Sets

There are a number of excellent discussion guides and lesson plans available online. My favorites:

- **Simon & Schuster reading group guide:** <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Long-Way-Down/Jason-Reynolds/9781481438254#reading-group-guide>

Nineteen multi-layered discussion questions covering anagrams, character motivations, and more, and 7 extension and writing activities make up this excellent guide.

- **Columbus City Schools Curriculum for *Long Way Down*:**  
<https://oh01913306.schoolwires.net/cms/lib/OH01913306/Centricity/Domain/207/LONG%20WAY%20DOWN%20BY%20JASON%20REYNOLDS%20TEACHER%20RESOURCE18.pdf>

An extraordinarily in-depth curriculum guide with 8 total lessons using poetry, a TV interview of Reynolds by Trevor Noah, anagram analysis, and more to deeply explore *Long Way Down*.

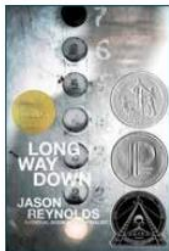

- **Coretta Scott King Award Honor overview**

**2018 CORETTA SCOTT KING BOOK AWARD AUTHOR HONOR**

**LONG WAY DOWN**  
Written by Jason Reynolds

A Caitlyn Dlouhy Book, published by Atheneum Books for Young Readers, an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing

After losing his brother Shawn to gun violence, Will intends to follow the unspoken code of conduct by avenging Shawn's death. On his way down from the eighth floor of his apartment building to the ground level, Will is greeted by seven ghosts known to him before their untimely deaths. The story takes place in the span of just over one minute, and each chapter is numbered based on the floor, starting at seven and descending from there. Written in unforgettable free verse, Reynolds empathetically explores ongoing cycles of violence within urban communities. A thought-provoking, thrilling ride, all the way down.



**Activities and Discussion Questions**

- Will talks about "beef" and how it is passed down, or "inherited like a trunk of fool's gold." What does the word "beef" mean to you? Do you believe it is passed down, as Will stated? Why or why not?
- What are "The Rules"? Have you heard of these rules before? What do you think Will means when he writes, "They were meant for the broken to follow"?
- Do you think Will is right in wanting to avenge his brother's death? Identify two or three additional ways for Will to channel his emotions.

**Related CSK Titles**

*Monster*, written by Walter Dean Myers, published by Amistad, an imprint of HarperCollins Children's Books; *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty*, written by G. Neri, illustrated by Randy DuBurke, published by Lee & Low Books, Inc.; *Bronx Masquerade*, written by Nikki Grimes, published by Dial Books for Young Readers, an imprint of Penguin Random House.

## Lesson: The Elevator Floors of Your Life

The structure of *Long Way Down* is unusual and a good pattern for budding creative writers to use for their own memoirs or short stories.

Ask students to use the frame of an elevator ride down to the first floor to create a story about different people they might meet from their life. (They do not have to be dead!)

Tone variations:

- Make it funny: people you have laughed with the most
- Make it sweet: people you love
- Make it weird: your favorite animals

Intention variations:

The different people that Will meets on his elevator ride down are trying to convince him not to use the gun and shoot somebody for revenge. Using the same elevator ride as a frame, ask students to write a story where the characters are trying to convince you:

- Not to get a burrito from a taco truck that made you sick the last time
- Not to ask a girl or guy out because they are immature
- Not to get a haircut because you're cute the way you are

You can also use these assignments as discussion starters, not writing prompts!

Floor	Person	What they say
1 <sup>st</sup>		
2 <sup>nd</sup>		
3 <sup>rd</sup>		
4 <sup>th</sup>		
5 <sup>th</sup>		
6 <sup>th</sup>		
7 <sup>th</sup>		

## Lesson Background: Embedding Nonfiction

One approach to teaching literature that can be effective is to embed nonfiction – “to strategically select, adapt, and pair nonfiction texts within the study of a core fictional text,” as described in the book *Reading Reconsidered: A Practical Guide to Rigorous Literacy Instruction* by Colleen Driggs, Doug Lemov, and Erica Woolway.

When you embed nonfiction in literature study, it helps deepen student understanding of the fiction they read while increasing their background knowledge and ability to connect to additional texts.

There are two ways to embed nonfiction: “Inside the Bull’s-Eye” and “Outside the Bull’s-Eye.” The first (Inside) contains “content necessary to support basic understanding of the primary text” (p. 123, *Reading Reconsidered*), while the second (outside) “causes students to look at the primary text in a new and unexpected or more rigorous way” (p. 123, *ibid.*).

Some examples:

- An article about World War II concentration camps, paired with the novels *The Devil’s Arithmetic*, *Number the Stars*, or *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*.
- An excerpt from a book about the Black Panthers’ free breakfast program, paired with the novel *One Crazy Summer*.
- A nonfiction picture book about wolves, paired with the novel *Old Wolf*.
- A Smithsonian article about young male elephants and their peer connections with the novel *The Outsiders*.

Ultimately: “When students start from a base of knowledge, their inferences allow them to engage with the text with much greater depth – to learn from what they read as efficiently as possible. They’re more attentive, both to the emotions of the characters and to the factual information presented in the fictional text” (p. 123, *ibid.*).

Here is how one teacher selects nonfiction to embed in literature study:

<https://teachlikeachampion.com/blog/ideas-sourcing-embedding-nonfiction/>



## Lesson: Dante's Inferno, A Christmas Carol, & Other Metaphors

Jason Reynolds uses an elevator as an organizing principle (and metaphor) for *Long Way Down*, with the main character making 7 stops. On each floor, he meets a person he has known from the past who are now gone.

While Dante's long poem *The Divine Comedy*, including the most famous section, *Inferno*, is an exploration of supernatural (not realistic) places of heaven, purgatory, and hell, there are still striking parallels between his story and *Long Way Down*.

- Each work includes levels – in *Long Way Down*, floor stops; in *Inferno*, circles of hell
- Each work introduces the main character meeting people who are now dead
- Questions of moral actions as well as life and death are key to both works

Introducing a summary of *Inferno* – by short readings, videos, or charts – after students have read *Long Way Down* can be a source of rich comparison and discussion.

Sources of summaries:

- [Wikipedia entry](#)
- [Basic plot diagram](#)
- ["Visitor's Guide to Nine Circles of Hell"](#)
- [Video overview](#)

Another text that shares literary conventions is Charles Dickens's story "A Christmas Carol," where the main character is visited by ghosts and must confront people (living and dead) from his life in order to make a moral choice.

Both *Inferno* and "A Christmas Carol" also point to a shared text feature of *Long Way Down*: the use of a larger metaphor to explore a character's inner world.

In groups or individually, guide students in determining what the story of *Long Way Down* would look like if the central metaphor was not an elevator, but:

- A circus
- The ocean
- A busy supermarket
- A library
- A fashion show
- American Idol tryouts

## Lesson: The Science & Benefits of Crying



Rule #1 in the world of *Long Way Down* is “Don’t cry.”

But science and psychology tells us that crying can have psychological and physical benefits. Introduce the following articles and use them as a basis of discussion for why “Don’t cry” is a rule (as well as maybe why it shouldn’t be). Explore both the benefits of crying – and the benefits of NOT crying in Will’s community.

[“Why Do We Cry?”](#) Time magazine

[“How Crying Works”](#) How Stuff Works

[“8 Benefits of Crying”](#) Medical News Today

The Writing Revolution (<https://www.thewritingrevolution.org/>) has several excellent resources to help students write better sentences and essays, including a **Single Paragraph Outline** (SPO), in Appendix of this guide. (Customizable templates are free to download with creating an account on the web site.)

Here are a few possible outlines to create with your students using these articles and *A Long Way Down* as content.

Topic sentence: Although there are psychological benefits of crying, the characters in <i>A Long Way Down</i> by Jason Reynolds choose to follow the “Don’t cry” rule for several reasons. [Provide this topic sentence and brainstorm sections, below.]	Topic sentence: Will, the main character of <i>A Long Way Down</i> by Jason Reynolds, should not follow the rule of “Don’t Cry” because crying will actually help him.  [Provide this topic sentence and brainstorm sections, below.]
1. Summary of benefits of crying	Reason #1
2. Reason #1 why they follow “Don’t cry” rule – Shows they are tough	Reason #2
3. Reason #2 – People won’t take advantage of you	Reason #3
4. Reason #3 – Protects your tender feelings	Concluding sentence:
Concluding sentence: [Write together as a class]	



## Book Reviews: *Long Way Down*

### Booklist:

Grades 7-12 /\* Starred Review \*/ Spanning a mere one minute and seven seconds, Reynolds' new free-verse novel is an intense snapshot of the chain reaction caused by pulling a trigger. First, 15-year-old Will Holloman sets the scene by relating his brother Shawn's murder two days prior—gunned down while buying soap for their mother. Next, he lays out The Rules: don't cry, don't snitch, always get revenge. Now that the reader is up to speed, Will tucks Shawn's gun into his waistband and steps into an elevator, steeled to execute rule number three and shoot his brother's killer. Yet, the simple seven-floor descent becomes a revelatory trip. At each floor, the doors open to admit someone killed by the same cycle of violence that Will's about to enter. He's properly freaked out, but as the seconds tick by and floors count down, each new occupant drops some knowledge and pushes Will to examine his plans for that gun. Reynolds' concise verses echo like shots against the white space of the page, their impact resounding. He peels back the individual stories that led to this moment in the elevator and exposes a culture inured to violence because poverty, gang life, or injustice has left them with no other option. In this all-too-real portrait of survival, Reynolds goes toe-to-toe with where, or even if, love and choice are allowed to exist. -- Smith, Julia (Reviewed 7/1/2017) (Booklist, vol 113, number 21, p49)

### Publishers Weekly:

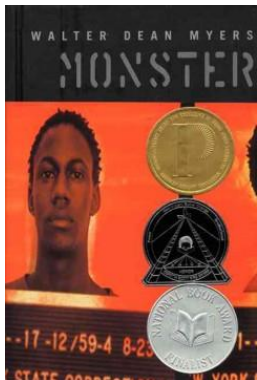
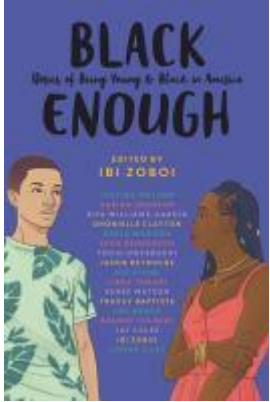
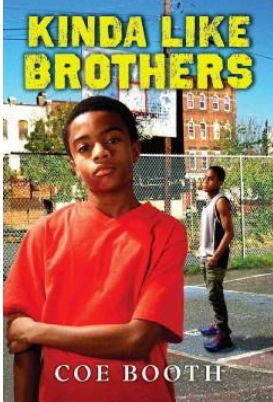
/\* Starred Review \*/ Will, 15, is following his neighborhood's well-established rules—don't cry, don't snitch, but do get revenge "if someone you love/ gets killed"—when he leaves his apartment, intent on killing whoever murdered his older brother, Shawn. He's emboldened by the gun tucked into his waistband: "I put my hand behind my back/ felt the imprint/ of the piece, like/ another piece/ of me/ an extra vertebra,/ some more/ backbone." As Will makes his way to the ground floor of his building, the elevator stops to accept passengers, each an important figure from his past, all victims of gun violence. Are these ghosts? Or is it Will's subconscious at work, forcing him to think about what he intends to do and what it will accomplish? The story unfolds in the time it takes for the elevator to descend, and it ends with a two-word question that hits like a punch to the gut. Written entirely in spare verse, this is a tour de force from a writer who continues to demonstrate his skill as an exceptionally perceptive chronicler of what it means to be a black teen in America. Ages 12–up. --Staff (Reviewed 07/31/2017) (Publishers Weekly, vol 264, issue 31, p)

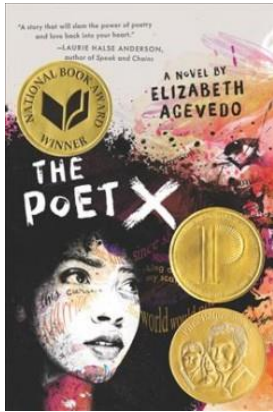
Kirkus:

*/\* Starred Review \*/* After 15-year-old Will sees his older brother, Shawn, gunned down on the streets, he sets out to do the expected: the rules dictate no crying, no snitching, and revenge. Though the African-American teen has never held one, Will leaves his apartment with his brother's gun tucked in his waistband. As he travels down on the elevator, the door opens on certain floors, and Will is confronted with a different figure from his past, each a victim of gun violence, each important in his life. They also force Will to face the questions he has about his plan. As each "ghost" speaks, Will realizes how much of his own story has been unknown to him and how intricately woven they are. Told in free-verse poems, this is a raw, powerful, and emotional depiction of urban violence. The structure of the novel heightens the tension, as each stop of the elevator brings a new challenge until the narrative arrives at its taut, ambiguous ending. There is considerable symbolism, including the 15 bullets in the gun and the way the elevator rules parallel street rules. Reynolds masterfully weaves in textured glimpses of the supporting characters. Throughout, readers get a vivid picture of Will and the people in his life, all trying to cope with the circumstances of their environment while expressing the love, uncertainty, and hope that all humans share. This astonishing book will generate much needed discussion. (Kirkus Reviews, July 15, 2017)

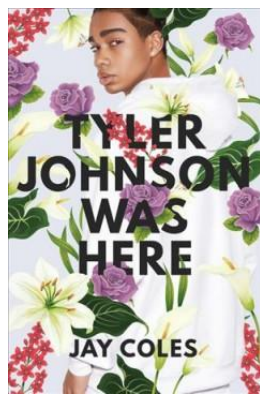
## Related Authors & Novels

If you are looking for read-alikes for *Long Way Down* (though, truthfully, *Long Way Down* is in a class of its own), these authors and books are a good place to start:

	<p><b>Walter Dean Myers</b> – the master of the YA novel exploring the lives and emotions of African American young people in tough environments. As one writer observes: “No writer has captured the psychology of urban youth more honestly.”</p> <p>Best known for <i>Monster</i>: While on trial as an accomplice to a murder, sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon records his experiences in prison and in the courtroom in the form of a film script as he tries to come to terms with the course his life has taken.</p>
	<p><b>Black Enough: Stories of Being Young &amp; Black in America</b></p> <p>A collection of short stories explore what it is like to be young and black, centering on the experiences of black teenagers and emphasizing that one person's experiences, reality, and personal identity are different than someone else.</p>
	<p><b>Kinda Like Brothers</b> by Coe Booth</p> <p>Accustomed to the foster care babies and toddlers that briefly stay in his home, Jarrett initially feels threatened by a foster boy, Kevon, who is his age and whose story leads to an unexpected bond.</p>



**Elizabeth Acevedo** – “Elizabeth Acevedo's multi-award-winning, own voices novels provide a window into the innermost thoughts of culturally diverse, often disenfranchised teens. Drawing on her time teaching inner-city youth and her Afro-Dominican heritage, Acevedo writes moving, realistic stories in prose and verse. Her experience as a slam poet brings authenticity and verve to her performances as an audiobook narrator. Start with: *The Poet X*.” – *Novelist* description



**Tyler Johnson Was Here** by Jay Coles

When Marvin Johnson's twin brother, Tyler, is shot and killed by a police officer, Marvin must fight injustice to learn the true meaning of freedom.

# Appendix: Single Paragraph Outline

Find this and other writing templates at <https://www.thewritingrevolution.org/>



## Single-Paragraph Outline

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

T.S.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

1.

\_\_\_\_\_

2.

\_\_\_\_\_

3.

\_\_\_\_\_

4.

\_\_\_\_\_

C.S.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_