



Jason Reynolds, Author

The Power of Narrative

Lesson Introduction

Interview Log: Interviewed on September 18, 2023 by Matt Henderson

- Access *The Thread* episode of Jason Reynolds on our [YouTube channel](#) or at [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)
- Access his long-form interview on [LifeStories.org](#) and download the transcript [here](#)

Learning Objectives

Social Studies Focus

- Explore the role of literacy as a civil right
- Incorporate literature, *All American Boys*, as social commentary on contemporary issues such as Black Lives Matter and excessive force by law enforcement
- Connect with the issue of book banning

English Language Arts Focus

- Examine the power of language and voice
- Introduce poetry and its intersection with music and rap
- Examine perspective taking from the point of view of one author
- Explore the idea of purposeful work and a meaningful life
- Use Jason Reynolds' episode as evidence to write a rhetorical argument, commentary, or synthesis essay

Episode Overview

Jason Reynolds reflects on his upbringing in Oxon Hill, Maryland, and how his parents gave him freedom and encouraged open communication. Reynolds discusses his approach to connecting with young readers and the importance of literacy, emphasizing how it teaches discipline, persistence, and broadens vocabulary.



Biography

Jason Reynolds was born in Washington, D.C., and was raised in neighboring Oxon Hill, Maryland. Inspired by rap, he began writing poetry at nine years old. He focused on poetry for approximately the next two decades, only reading a novel cover to cover for the first time at age 17. He published several poetry collections before his first novel, *When I Was The Greatest*, came out in 2014, earning the Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award for New Talent. Seven more novels followed in the next four years, including *Ghost* (2016) and two more books in what became his *New York Times*-best-selling "Track" series, *Patina* (2017) and *Sunny* (2018); *As Brave As You* (2016), winner of the 2016 Kirkus Prize, the 2017 NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work for Youth/Teen, and the 2017 Schneider Family Book Award; and a Marvel Comics novel called *Miles Morales: Spider-Man* (2017). Reynolds returned to poetry with *Long Way Down* (2017), a novel in verse which was named a Newbery Honor book, a Printz Honor Book, and best young adult work by the Mystery Writers of America's Edgar Awards. Reynolds was the 2020-22 National Ambassador for Young People's Literature. He is on the faculty of the Writing for Young People MFA program at Lesley University, and lives in Washington, D.C.



Teaching Tip: First Take

A **First Take** is a warm-up writing or conversation exercise created uniquely for *The Thread* that strengthens media literacy skills. Like an opening song in a musical, the first stanza of a poem, or even the first impression one person makes on another, the First Take asks students to reflect and share their initial thoughts and feelings about the episode's opening.

Suggested Steps

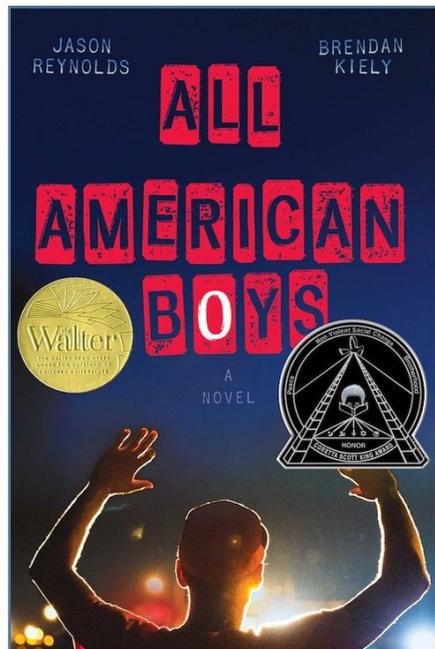
Before watching "The Power of Narrative"

- Read the opening of Jason Reynolds' episode aloud to students:

"The mere act of reading teaches discipline, persistence, consistency, and broadens the vocabulary. The more words you have, the less violent you have to be. Teaches you know how to listen to yourself and it keeps your imagination stoked. Which is to say, literacy is important because it keeps us free."



- Ask and Discuss:** What do you know about Jason Reynolds? What do you learn about Jason Reynolds' life from these opening sentences? What insights can you infer?
- Next,** have students do a one-minute quick write reflecting on what he shared or have students get into pairs and share their thoughts and feelings.
- Last,** as a class discuss the reasons they think the filmmakers choose this opening for the episode?



Photos: Jason as a young kid. (Jason Reynolds) top; "All American Boys" by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely book cover. (Jason Reynolds, Simon and Shuster) lower left; Jason and parents. (Jason Reynolds) lower right



Teaching Tip:

***THE THREAD* Up Close**

After watching the interview, have students debrief his life story with these suggested questions:

- ▣ Why do you think Jason Reynolds' episode is titled "The Power of Narrative?"
- ▣ In what ways did you connect with his life story?
- ▣ What was something Reynolds shared that you remember?
- ▣ How do you understand his statement "I made a decision to save the fish every day"?
- ▣ What new insights did you gain about (yourself, your community, your world) from his story, his success as a writer, and his point of view about the power of voice and the written word?

After discussing, have students return to ***The Thread*** episode and engage them in a close read and analysis of his interview using the video and transcript. Depending on the lesson, question, or theme you are aligning ***The Thread*** with, have students annotate the transcript, select passages that reflect the assignment, and explain their reasoning in class.

Here is an example of ***A Thread*** connection: Book banning has gained currency in some states across the U.S. Jason Reynolds talked about why his book *All American Boy* is on the list and why book banning is occurring today. This excerpt is an example of what can be used as commentary or textual evidence.

"The one liner is Rashad and Quinn, Black boy and white boy growing up in the same neighborhood, go to the same school, and even have the same friends, but they do not know each other. On Friday night, Rashad is accused of stealing in the grocery store and is abused by a police officer. Quinn witnesses it and knows the cop as his father figure and then this sets off two weeks where the two of them are trying to reckon with this experience. That book was made because nobody wants to ever talk about police officers in any way that isn't sort of like these are the greatest human beings in the world, as if they're not human beings."

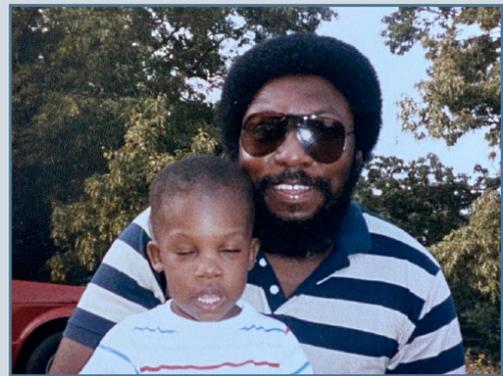


Photos: Jason and his mom. (Jason Reynolds) *left*; Jason as a kid and his mom. (Jason Reynolds) *right*



Connections

- Who are the artists, authors, poets, actors, leaders that inspire you to create?
- Have you had a time in school, in your family, in your faith community, or with friends where you felt similar to how Jason Reynolds felt when he said, “As a young person, you mean to tell me that I have power? That’s all I needed, right? I have power because I have language and language has power and now that I know that, I can wield this sword and shield in a very different way.”
- Who are the people in your life, or what experiences can you recall, that have helped establish your moral compass?
- What outlets do you have to help you process your emotions?
- What do you do to help yourself better understand your thoughts and feelings on a daily basis?



Activity: The Power of Narrative

In this 30-minute episode, Jason Reynolds expressed so many rich ideas to reflect on and discuss. When asked, “Why write?” he responded, “I think I write to try to understand myself, I think that’s why I started just trying to figure out where do you put it.”

To show your gratitude to Jason Reynolds for sharing so many personal insights, write him a letter and tell him a bit about yourself. You may want to start with the prompt, “You shared with us why you write. I want to share with you why I _____.” (fill in the blank.)



Additional Resources

- See www.jasonwritesbooks.com
- Watch Jason Reynolds talk about how poetry can dazzle reluctant readers, [PBS News Hour](#)
- Listen and read his take on book banning: “Author Jason Reynolds on book bans, racism, and Spiderman”, [NPR](#)
- “Author Jason Reynolds on His Books Being Banned: It Feels Insulting”, [People Magazine](#)

