

Jason Reynolds

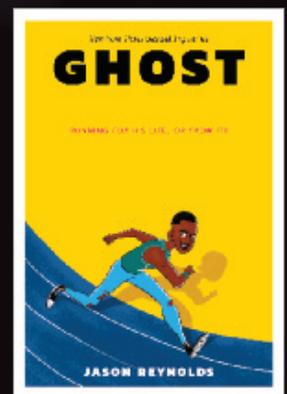
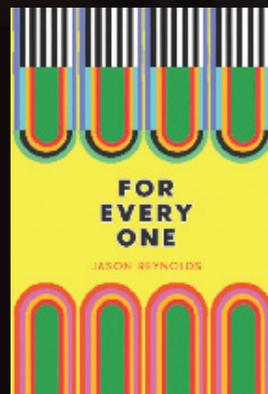
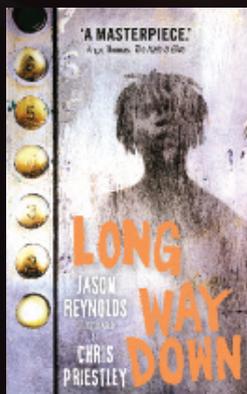
Crochet as a Metaphor for Life!

Best-selling American author Jason Reynolds didn't read a book out of choice until he was seventeen. Growing up, books and reading just didn't feature in his life or the lives of his friends and family. He thought reading was what they gave him in school and thinks school ruined reading for him. It took any potential for discovery, identity and relatability away from him, believing, "they were making us read books that were so far away from who we were, from our experiences and the things we were used to doing". As a young person, he found writing through music. In 1990's America, rap music was the most important thing coming out of the black community and as a young, black American, rap music grabbed hold of him. He started to read rap lyrics, discovered poetry and found his way into writing. He says, "I wasn't the best student or a voracious reader, I was a kid who fell in love with rhythm, words, the power those things had and how you could use that power to make life better."

Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, was a key influence, because there was something about the timing of when he read it which changed the way he felt about reading. He didn't know the world of Black American Literature existed. After reading it, he read everything he could; Harlem Renaissance, Black Arts Movement, Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, among many others. He says, "I realised I did have a place, these authors' voices were authentic to mine, they were familiar, their books made me feel validated and I realised that I could be good at writing and still be me." Reading James

Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and Jean Toomer taught him that you can use multi-disciplinary formats and put both poetry and prose together in the same book. This was life-changing.

His novel in verse, *Long Way Down*, is an extraordinary book, which explores the effect of guns on lives and families. Its impact on the reader is immense, and for me it's the outstanding novel of 2018. Part of its power is not just the text, but the style and format in which it's written. He initially wrote it as prose but felt that didn't work, so broke it down into verse. Jason wanted to figure out how to use space on a page to create discomfort in the reader's mind, so he experimented by spacing words to create effect. The book came out of personal experience when one of his friends was shot and killed. He hopes the book makes young people think about the decisions they have to make and the repercussions of those decisions. Chris Priestley's superb illustrations work perfectly with the text and enhances the story. Jason acknowledges this saying, "Chris did an incredible job and took the book to another level".



For Every One has Jason writing to himself and is very much an open letter to every kind of reader with a dream. He reflects, "Anything I write is rooted in who I am, what I've seen, how I feel, what I'm dealing with, what I'm trying to understand and make sense of in my own world. If I can do that honestly and authentically, then maybe someone reading it will relate to it too."

His latest UK published book, *Ghost* - the first in a quartet, is consistently top of the bestseller lists in America. It features Castle Cranshaw, aka Ghost, whose stepfather tried to kill him and his mum, leading to his imprisonment and leaving Ghost angry and secretive. The school coach discovers Ghost has a talent for running, but will he be able to stay on track literally and figuratively, or will his past destroy his future? Jason wanted to write a sports series and chose running because all it requires is a pair of feet, and although it is a team sport, runners are really competing against themselves to be the best they can. It's a compelling read. He is currently working on a collection of ten short stories focusing on young people walking home from school. Jason thinks everything he learned, good and bad, happened on his walk home - first kiss, conversations with friends, concerns, pain and struggles, and he wanted to reflect these.

Asked what makes a good story, he summed it up as humility, intimacy and gratitude. He feels characters need to have a sliver of humility so that readers see that it isn't weak to show this trait. As a writer he always approaches the page with humility, writing about characters who live in humble spaces internally and externally. By intimacy he means how you make the connection with young people through language. He tries to put the words on the page in a way that creates intimacy with the reader who can feel and see it as theirs. In terms of gratitude he asks, "Is this a story that when young people finish reading it, it makes them feel like someone knows their lives matter and is thanking them for being who they are?" He loves working with young people and undertakes many visits to schools and young offender units. He wants them to know that just because they've done something that placed them into a young offender unit or prison, it doesn't mean they are bad people. To understand one mistake doesn't have to mean a lifetime of mistakes; one good choice can offset one bad choice.

I asked him what advice he would give to teachers, librarians and parents to help them get young people enjoying reading more. He feels we need to include young people in the conversation, find out what their interests are, and then find ways to create spaces for reading within the space of what they like doing. He also believes reading time in class, where teachers read aloud to students, is a great way to make young people want to read for themselves. One idea he thinks works well, is what he calls "translation work", giving young people a passage from a book and asking them to rewrite it in their own language or dialect. He thinks this helps validate their own voices while subconsciously aiding their reading comprehension and driving reading. For would-be writers, his top three tips are Read - as much as you can, anything and

everything, Write - put pen to paper and do it, write in the way that you want to write and trust your gut instinct and Create habits for yourself - discipline yourself, because if you create your habits it becomes less of a struggle.

A surprising discovery was that Jason crochets, although not as much as he used to. As a young person, he wanted to make hats. His mother's friend taught him to crochet which he enjoyed. He taught his friends at college and during the Monday night football game, these big alpha males would go to his room to watch the match, eat nachos, drink beer and crochet! He feels crochet taught him patience, rhythm, a feeling of completion, to note detail and achieve a sense of satisfaction when he finished a piece. It also taught him that you can't skip a step or take shortcuts. If you do, you end up creating a lopsided piece with a hole in it and he thinks that's very much a bit like life!

Annie Everall

Bibliography

Long Way Down Faber & Faber £7.99 ISBN: 978-0571335121

Published by Knights Of:

Ghost £6.99 ISBN: 978-1999642525

For Every One £5.00 ISBN: 978-1999642532

KNIGHTS OF

It's always exciting when there is a 'new kid' on the publishing 'block', especially when they bring fresh approaches and champion diversity, as with KNIGHTS OF, publisher of Jason's latest books. Founders, David Stevens and Aimée Felone told me that KNIGHTS OF was born out of a passion for children's books and a desire to make them better. They have taken deliberate steps to move away from conversations about how we can make children's publishing a more diverse, inclusive space and instead have committed their entire company structure and ethos to ensuring that the books they publish are from as diverse a team as possible. They are publishing children's books for ages five to teenage, and stories with bold characters, adventure and heart! Their vision is to bring inclusivity both behind the scenes, in terms of their workforce and between the pages of their books. They want to ensure that as many people from as many different backgrounds get to work with them and to make sure as many voices are published as possible. Every book they publish is extremely special to them. Their commitment is to making books better by putting inclusion at the heart of everything they do. 2019 sees an exciting publishing schedule for them and they are proud and excited to have crowdfunded an inclusive children's bookshop. This will be opening in Brixton later this year, as well as pop-up bookshops that will be appearing across the UK and Ireland.