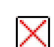
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AN INTERVIEW WITH JASON REYNOLDS

Article Author:
Imogen Russell Williams [1]
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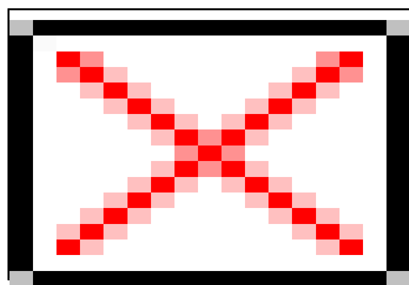
The American author Jason Reynolds interviewed by Imogen Russell Williams.

Jason Reynolds is the best-selling author of books predominantly for young readers, including **Ghost**, a National Book Award finalist, **As Brave As You** and **All American Boys**. His work has won numerous awards, including a Kirkus Prize and a Newbery Honor. His latest book, the young adult verse novel **Long Way Down [3]**, is the first of his books to be published in the UK. Illustrated by Chris Priestley, it focuses on Will Holloman, traumatised and furious in the aftermath of his brother?s shooting, and on the mysterious figures Will encounters in the elevator on his way down to street level, weighing up a decision that will shape his future.



Imogen Russell Williams interviewed Jason for **Books for Keeps.**

What first drew you to tell this story?

There?s a personal element to it. When I was young, I lost a young man named Randell, who was murdered - one of my best friends. In that moment, I remember being a hundred percent certain that I could kill a man. The kind of anger, the kind of pain one feels, having a loved one snatched from them; you bump up against your humanity in a way that you don?t normally. All of us are capable of awful things. His mother begged us to let it go, so we let it go, and I?m glad that I did, but I?ll never forget the way it felt. To know, in that instant, that I could have taken a life.

In America, there?s a conversation around gun violence, an ongoing, perennial conversation ? but no one?s ever asked why young people are so angry, why they?re so upset, what they?ve been through, and what they?ve seen, why they feel insignificant. What I wanted to do was humanise them. They?re not gangsters, or monsters ? they?re children, and they?re afraid, and they?re angry. And perhaps we should start asking questions about their environments, and the ecosystems of those environments: poverty, politics, education, tradition, on top of all that anger.

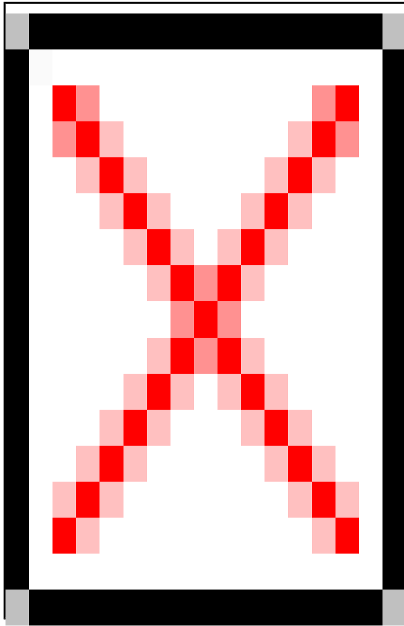
Did you always know you would tell it in verse?

No - I originally wrote it in prose, in short vignettes. But it just wasn?t working. When you?re writing a story with such a tight scope ? this whole book is about 60-70 seconds of a kid?s life ? it?s really hard to suspend reality when it takes you three weeks to read it. Urgency is necessary to fortify what I?m trying to say in the story. It only takes a few seconds for an entire life to change, and I wanted you to feel that way. I wanted you to feel trapped in that elevator with

this kid.

Where did that central concept of the elevator come from ? this limbo-like space, where all the usual rules are suspended?

I wanted to mimic a traumatised mind. If we were to objectify a traumatised psyche, what exactly would the object be?

If we  were to contextualise it, what would the context be? So the elevator was perfect. The characteristics of the elevator are directly in line with the characteristics of a person going through extreme trauma ? it?s cold, it?s small, there?s vertigo involved, it?s actually hanging by a thread ? and there?s a healthy fear of it. It?s a fascinating environment to set a story like this?[Will] could be in his bedroom, but bedrooms don?t move ? he could be in a car, but it?s a very different thing, because you have total control over a vehicle. But elevators are machines that function on their own. You push a button, and there?s no one cranking it any more ? the elevator is just doing its thing?And it?s a multi-person space. It has stops along the way, people can get on and off. All of those things play into the idea of what trauma feels like. It was almost like it wrote itself.

How much does the shape of the words on the page matter to you?

A thousand percent. Everything in that book is intentional. Ali Smith is one of my biggest inspirations, and she does this a lot too, in prose? just kind of fools around. I believe that every page is a canvas, and that we have an opportunity to manipulate the reader ? and we only do it through words, but we can actually use space and composition. I am a big film person, and if you study these old Alfred Hitchcock movies, he always tilts the camera just so ? just enough to make the person watching the film feel uncomfortable, even if nothing uncomfortable is happening. And you can do the same thing on the page with space. I wanted to fool around with manipulating the psychology, the subconscious of the reader, to build tension. It?s what theme music does in movies.

One thing that particularly stands out about *Long Way Down* *[3]*
is the need for control and certainty in a context where tragedy is waiting to strike at random, anywhere and any time ? particularly for boys and young men. Did you intend that to be at the heart of the book?

Absolutely. This idea that the wolves are always looming ? even at the beginning of the story, when Will experiences his brother?s death?the tone of his voice is so numb. He does not emote until he?s on the elevator. It?s almost like he doesn?t feel anything, because he?s so used to this happening. This has been a part of his community, a part of his reality.

It?s easy for us to point our fingers on the outside of the fishbowl. It?s different, though, when you?re on the inside of that bowl, and you understand how hard it is to swim against the sharks. And you didn?t create those sharks; you didn?t create this fishbowl, for that matter, and it?s not your fault that you?re on the inside of the bowl. So what exactly are you expected to do? That?s what it?s about ? it?s about survival. It?s about the fact that there are kids all over the world who

don?t know what it feels like to breathe freely.

But in this inimical environment ? the fishbowl filled with sharks ? there are also really close bonds. Can you tell me a bit more about family in the book?

If you want to know about me, talk to my friends, and family members ? you?ll learn more about me than I?ll ever tell you. It?s just the way that we all work. We all have satellites that orbit us. So I wanted to make sure that I showed [Will?s] family?that he knows his brother isn?t perfect, but he idolises him. He loves him. He knows that he was living a life that was complicated and dangerous, and he loved him none the less; he knows that his mother is dealing [with his brother?s death], and he?s doing the best that he can to protect her from the decision that he?s making. Then you see his father?People have asked me, over the course of this year, if his father loved him, why does he put the gun to his head? And my answer is that it isn?t that his father puts the gun to his head, it?s that he puts the gun down again.

[Will?s] uncle is hard on him, too, his uncle says ?You ain?t ready for this, this ain?t what you?re about? ? but that?s love, that?s what love looks like. That?s the way I was raised, with these men and these women in my life who were tough people, but we never questioned their love for us. Even if the family dynamics come across as different, I think it?s important that you add in that element to the story. Some would call this a broken family, some would call it a dysfunctional family ? people can use whatever term they want - I just call it a different kind of family.

There?s a real surge in verse novels for teenagers at the moment. Why do you think that?s happening now?

I think that as stimuli have changed and things have shifted, and we lose readers every year, we have to figure out how to keep young people engaged. And we can either fight against the stimuli that they have, or we can learn and try new things. When I was a kid, as someone who refused to read until I was eighteen years old, it was poetry that saved my life - because it was less daunting, there were less words on the page, the white space felt a little less intimidating. The feeling of accomplishment in turning the pages ? all that stuff matters, especially if you?re dealing with somebody who doesn?t like reading?[The verse novel form] has always been around, but now it?s having a moment, and that?s a Good Thing. Poetry to me is the piano of literature; you understand poetry, and you can play anything. I am grateful that my first discipline was poetry.

What else has influenced you in your development as a writer?

The moment I realised that rap lyricists were writing poems. The way I found that out wasn?t from listening to them ? it was from reading liner notes, back in the day, when you could buy a cassette and open it up and read the lyrics, and see the form ? verse, chorus, verse ? you could see stanzas. It changed the way I thought about everything. I was like, ?Wait, so you mean to tell me that what they were teaching me in school and this stuff is exactly the same thing, a generation removed?? I think that was the beginning of it. And then it was understanding language, understanding and being comfortable with my own language. It?s complicated when you tell kids that they speak improper English.

**In *Long Way Down* [3]
, parts of the book are idiomatic and use slang - and some are very formal, with an almost Shakespearean heft to them. How conscious a decision was that ? or was that simply the shape that those words and lines needed to be?**

No, it?s conscious. The usage of slang is a delicate, delicate thing. I teach graduate school in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and what I always like to explain to my students is that if you are a good drummer, then you hold the beat, and when it?s your turn, occasionally, you add a little flair. But a good drummer holds the beat ? and an amateur drummer solos the whole song. And slang can easily turn into a cultural performance. It becomes performative and it becomes cheapened, and it becomes clownish and buffoonish, and I?m very very careful with that. It needs to be used to texture a story, but it doesn?t need to be the thing that drives it ? because any time a voice drives a story, you can expect there to be nothing behind it.

Have you ever had work illustrated before?

No. They don?t do it in America.

Did you work with Chris Priestley, or was it remote?

It was all separate. They sent me what he had done, and I had no idea?I was thrilled. I thought he did an absolutely phenomenal job, and I thought he exercised such taste and such restraint, to lift the story, and not detract from it, and not to overshadow it. He let the words do their job, and he created these accent pieces?To put faces to my characters ? I thought it was fantastic. I couldn?t have been happier. The first thing I did was send it to my American publishers and say ?We could do this.?

Without wanting to spoiler it, you leave the book poised on this incredible two-word open ending. How optimistic are you about Will?s prospects after the closing of the book?

I?ll never say. (Laughs) I never have, I never will. I just can?t. And, to be completely honest with you ? I want us to all struggle with it. I want us to all sit with it. I want the young people who read it to activate their imaginations and to deduce whatever they want to have happen, and I want the adults who read it to deal with their prejudices and biases, to ask themselves questions about why they feel the way they feel. It?s good for us, I think it?s healthy. But I won?t say. I *want* it to haunt you. I want it to *haunt* you. I think it?s a book that should stick on all of us.

Imogen Russell Williams is a journalist and editorial consultant specialising in children?s literature and YA.

Long Way Down **[3]** by Jason Reynolds, illustrated by Chris Priestley, is published by Faber & Faber, 978-0571335121, £7.99 pbk

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