



JASON REYNOLDS INTERVIEW
PORTIONS USED IN: *THE THREAD SEASON ONE*

Jason Reynolds, Author
September 18, 2023
Interviewed by Matthew Henderson
Total Running Time: 1 hour, 24 minutes and 25 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

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JASON REYNOLDS:

My name is Jason Reynolds and I am an author.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Jason Reynolds

Author

ON SCREEN TEXT:

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Life Stories

Kunhardt Film Foundation

Jason Reynolds

Author

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MATTHEW HENDERSON:



I actually want to start in the beginning, as most interviews do with you. I'm curious about where you grew up in Oxford Hills, growing up in the 80s, you know, especially in a Black neighborhood.

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JASON REYNOLDS:

When you're growing up, you're growing up. And when you've grown up, you have perspective, and you sort of look back. Oxford Hill now, and the way I feel about it, has changed, because I'm probably more grateful for Oxford Hill today than I think I was then. Think then you're just in it, right? And Oxford Hill was one of these neighborhoods specifically. My part of Oxford Hill is one of these communities where we had a little bit of everything. You knew that like like I live next door to a teacher. And on the other side there was a preacher. Right? But you also had, like, you know, a hustler who lived up the street. You had, you know, around the corner. There was all these other things going on. You had a you knew that like in this in this sort of hodgepodge community, there was a little bit of everything. And whatever you were looking for, you could find, right? It's like if you were looking for the good, the good was around you, mentorship was around you, examples were around you. And if you were looking for for that, which is a bit more funky, all that was around you too, right? And there were lots of mentors and examples of that of that as well. And I think looking at it now and in retrospect, I think it made me malleable, it made me adaptable, it made me fearless. And then I could move to the world, any part of the world, and sort of feel comfortable. Right. Nowhere is strange to me just because a little bit of everything was right there in my neighborhood. I also live, you know, just two blocks from



the D.C. lot where they used to call Oxon Hill Ward nine. Right. Like this. This sort of, you know, this weird community just outside of the south side of the city. And we could walk DC and man and are separated by water. You just walk across the street, right? It's not like Jersey in New York. It's not like, right. You just walk across the street and then you're in the city, right? And so we spent a lot of time and my friends just going down the street and hanging out on the south side of Washington, D.C., catching the bus and moving all over the bus that was in front of my house. So, like, you just move all over the place and go to the train station and do all the things that that any kid in those environments can do and go on adventures and, you know, making mistakes and do all those things. Everything was right there in in this weird little community, you know, a boxing team.

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MATTHEW HENDERSON:

What was the demographic?

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JASON REYNOLDS:

Black. Black, black. Yeah, it was black maybe. I mean, I had there were remnants of old boxing here sort of lingering. So you have you had Mr. Brown, Mr. Brown, live up the black or white man rode a bicycle everywhere. The coolest dude in the world, though, right? Never felt uncomfortable. He never it was sort of like everybody knew Mr. Ryan. Mr. Ryan knew everybody. And Mr. Ryan rode a bike until he was probably 100 years old. You see him just riding around and taking care of his business, a wonderful person. And then



there was another white guy who lived next to him that didn't speak to anyone. Right. And he, you know, at the ball bounced in his yard. We were in trouble. Right. And then there were two older white ladies. We didn't live on my block who lived on a different in a different part of Jacksonville, but they would just walk around. You would see them everywhere, just walking like walking buddies. And you see them occasionally stop, like pick up trash and, you know, and nobody bothered them. I never knew their names. I never knew where they lived or who they were or how long they've been around there. But they were mainstays and nobody bothered them. You know, it's sort of like they felt safe. We were okay with them sort of being around. Nobody messed with them. And and that's pretty much it. I got it. I don't know that they were any more white folks or any other nationality ethnicity in my community, by the way, not just not just white people, but there was there was no one else there but black people in Notting Hill when I was growing up.

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MATTHEW HENDERSON:

I wonder, you know, I grew up in East Flatbush, and there were certain smell or smell. As in and sounds and daily goings on in the neighborhood that was very familiar. and also I feel like growing up in the eighties, especially in most neighborhoods, especially in black neighborhoods, you know, we were out in the street all day.

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JASON REYNOLDS:



You know, that was.

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MATTHEW HENDERSON:

What were some of those sounds and smells.

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JASON REYNOLDS:

Outside babies, first and foremost. And when we were outside, you open the door. My mom opened a door at 9:00 in the morning and that's it. Like, go outside and it's like, and do what? No matter. But you know that cell phones, without any of the things that we had known to monitor the whereabouts of children, we were just outside on our own and expected to just be home before it was dark. Right. Street streetlight rules. Right. But mom has no idea what we're doing or where we are in it apparently didn't really matter that much in that time. It wasn't it wasn't like it is now. First of all, we start within the house. So I come from a very traditional black well, I would say traditional, actually, but I come from this black household with my mom was a Southern woman. So, you know, Sunday mornings you had gospel music playing. You know, it was Saturday morning, you know, it was it same thing as it is. And so many of us, you play Anita Baker, you play, right, because we got to clean the house, right? Or Friday nights. My mom played funk music on the radio, and that's just what it was. Right? My father was a very different It was different. So when we got in his car, it was all like rock and roll. I listening to Hendrix and we were listening to Bruce and we were listening to, you know, just all sorts of he love eighties pop rock, right? So we listened in the Hall and



Oates and all that kind of stuff. And it was Phil Collins, right? And that was sort of another one of the sound that we heard. We also heard my father and my next door neighbors, two houses down, Sidney and Hassan, some of my father's friend's sons. Basically, they were all like gearheads, right? So they're all outside fixing cars. My father was a big mechanic kind of guy, right? So they're fixing cars and you're hearing the sounds of of the ratchet clicking. You're hearing them trying to start a car that won't turn over. You're hearing beer bottles, you're hearing lots of cussing. And, you know, just this noise. And and on the other side, the preacher, it was very different, right? Because there wasn't any of that. It was more sort of like the gospel music of him going to church on Sundays and packing up all of his children to get there and things of that nature, the up the street, the top of the block we had. Mr. Ruth is my favorite person because Mr. Roof is the the very top of the block and he he is still alive as the he's the wildest man I've ever known. You know, when I was a kid, he would say, look, I'm gonna teach you how to be wet. Right? And as a mom, of course, is like, my son is a he. This is a little kid. You you like nice all the, you know, come up there and he would take tobacco juice because he was that he used to chew tobacco and he would spit in this jar and he would take the jar of tobacco. James, I don't know what you call that, Right. But it looked like oil. And he would pour it into the weed whacker. Everybody absolutely wacky. I have no idea why or what this does or if it's even good for the weed whacker. But that's the way he used to crank up the weed whacker. And the first time I saw that, it was, of course, the strangest experience, but also the coolest thing in the world to then, like, use this machine to chop down whatever was in his yard. You know, he also was a car man, so he had cars all over the place. Still, to this day, when you come to my mother's block,



is cars everywhere in the way Ray is. He's out there trying to fix everybody's car. And then he also do the most ridiculous barbecues and everybody would be out there, His family, everybody, you know, is outside doing that across the street from him with everybody. But there was the candy lady and everybody's babysitter. The key. And it wasn't a whole lot of noise unless there she was yelling at her kids. And she did that often. But she loved us and we all loved her. And and I'll tell you, her house looked very different, Terry, her yard, because she was a person who took care of a lot of kids and therefore bought a lot of stuff, games and food. And so they were there was stuff every outside of her house and inside. Right. It's like walking through, you know, a child's paradise just when you get sick. But, you know, if you if you're a homeowner, you like clean up, clean up, You know what I mean? But it just was what it was. And she got to kind of do what she wanted to do because she was the person looking out for everybody's kids, you know, I mean, and that was sort of an agreement that we all had. You know, you had to deal with ambulances. People were on my block were also you know, I've had my neighbors die of AIDS during this time, this the eighties and early nineties. Right. People who are dying of AIDS. And that's happening. And so we're seeing ambulances. We're seeing, you know, you're dealing with all of that stuff, too. You're dealing with cop cars because of break ins and things of that nature as well. Dogs barking in eighties, everybody had a dog and mostly outside dogs. It's a very different time now. Right back then, your dog was on the outside. Your dog was in a doghouse. Right. And like your dog, you know, if you live in those kind of neighborhoods, it was like a dog coming inside. And so a lot of dog barking all night, all the time. Right. Just because people had outside dogs, Mr. Brooks had a chow chow we all thought looked like a



lion. He would say it's terrified him. Mr. Tan live next to him. And he had an Akita that we thought was a wolf, and we were terrified of it. Right. Like that. These are things that that sort of made us. That made us we that made me who I am, who I am, me and my siblings and my friends, all of us. And I grew up in this in this community. Here. You hear telephone cords, long telephone calls, a straight once from back in the day, we would use those the double Dutch right to jump rope. And so you would hear the skipping of the ropes, right? You hear the sound of roller skates, the wheels of roller skates on the asphalt. Right. We would go to the roller rink, but we got messy. So you had tons of skates for us to just put on and we could just skate up and down the street. Right? Like all of those things are the. Sounds like today. The soundscape of my childhood ice cream jets, of course.

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MATTHEW HENDERSON:

And it's interesting because you also didn't necessarily go away. I mean, you lived in New York for 16 years, but you because of your relationship with your mom, you go back often. But what's it like to go back to the old block nowadays?

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JASON REYNOLDS:

You know, it's different. The block as I changed the block, was very young when I was growing up. Everybody was it was young and everyone had young kids. And so it felt like a you know, it felt like a nine or 10:00 in the morning. There was a watershed and all the kids just poured into the street, you know,



into the block. And we just hung out all day or or we just migrated to this part of the neighborhood by neighborhood or to another neighborhood. Right. But now everyone's kids are gone and no one came back. And all these old ladies and old men have kept their houses for the most part on my mom's block. For the most part, I think one or two people are gone, but same neighbors, you know, everyone's just kind of settling and they're now aged, right? They're now elders. And so it's quiet and it's a quiet block up the street. Most of my neighborhood has is also turned over. I mean, you know, my next brothers and sisters, everybody got to find a place to live. And Oxford Hill is still a place that you can afford, right? Actually, Hill Lane is never going to be gentrified. And Hill is still what Oxford Hill was, right. It's just a different demographic of people now, right? A lot of black folk have moved on and moved or passed away or have lost their houses for that matter. And a lot of my Latino, my Latino brothers and sisters are now there, which is absolutely fine. You know, I think, you know, just keeping in mind that like, well, we we all need habitat. We all need places to be first generation folks need places to be, right. Newcomers to the country need places to be as they build their lives here. And so for me, when I ride down the street, it actually kind of makes me kind of warms me to see people doing the same thing that my mother did when she bought that house in 1981 or whatever. It was the first person in our family to own a home racing moved across the to live not too far in D.C. She moved across the line and she bought a house. Is the first person to own a home, moved all of her family in. And so they were able to afford to buy their own and to see the same thing happening for other families who are just trying to make a way is actually to me, it's actually kind of cool.



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MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Describe what street life was like in Oxford Hill. Well, you know, what was home life like was a very different home life.

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JASON REYNOLDS:

My home life was honestly, it was so cool. I this is another thing that sort of comes into clearer view as you get older. As I've gotten older, I realize now that I was growing up in a household with with an uncanny amount of freedom that my mother, my parents were together for the first ten years, and they modeled love in a really specific and and vibrant way. My parents, my father was very affectionate. My they were they were a very they were a touchy feely couple, which is a can. It's so gross As an adult, though, I know what love looks like. I know what it's supposed to feel like. And so and even when my parents broke up and divorced, they still were good friends. And so I also got to see what love looks like when the circumstance changes. And they still love each other. But just the conditions were different. Right? And I got to see what that looked like as well in that house. The other thing was we my mom was all about open channels of communication. So she had rough days, right? We there was some days, but that was sticky for us, of course, because she's a person, she's a human, and she was carrying a lot of weight trying to make sure that everything. Say the flo that me, my older brother, that everybody was safe, that we that the streets hadn't done what it does to so many black boys that that you know that but but also that we were that we were testing our boundaries that we were pushing the line a little bit. You



understood it. That was a part of our maturation and made space for it. She made space for us to say anything we wanted to say. I never had to worry about hiding and lying. I never had to. Like I could just say, hey, you know, I'm I'm interested in these things or I want to do this or I want to try this, or what does this mean? Or I'm afraid of these things or, you know, I like this girl. Can you I remember this one time, you know, and this is this will give you a good a good a glimpse of who she was. I remember being in 10th grade or 11th grade. I had this girlfriend really well just dating. And we're like, we were dating and I liked her a lot. And it was Valentine's Day and I was like, Mom, like, I need like, I need to do this right? I need to, like, oppressed this girl, right? It's snowing. I never forget it was snow on the ground. And my mom was like, cool, like. And here I'll tell you what to do, right? She's like, You go to this store, we gonna go get you a stove. As Listen, I never forget this because I was like, Man, you got to help me. Like, I got to make, like, a nice dinner. You know what I mean? You can go to the store, get you some stove is designed to cook. It was like they were going to take it out the tent, and we will put it in a pan as if you made this right. And then you go pull it out the oven. We should get here and you going to serve it right? And then on top of all that is my mom was like, and I'm going to not I'm going to leave the house, like, give me space for your romantic time. I'm going to allow for you to to, like, learn how to do this, because you're going to need to know how to do this. Right. How to how to treat someone that you care for and how to be. I think romantic is a cheap word. I think I think it diminishes with I think wishing to try to teach me how to be thoughtful, how to be intentional, and how to put forth effort, even when you may lack resource and talent. Right. It was like you may not know how to cook, was not you? Well, we've been to work around that is going



bigots when it tastes good. And she might know the difference. You might not, but she'll appreciate the effort. And it was an amazing night. Right? And that's when she was it was always like, how do I give my kids the edge? How do I teach them how to move, how to move through the world, how to see the world and view it right? How do I teach them sort of how to change bits of it that they want to change? How do I give them a heightened sense of discernment while also giving them the wings to be unafraid?

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MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Did you have brothers and sisters that you grew up with?

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JASON REYNOLDS:

So I have an older brother and an older sister and a little brother as well. But the older brothers who are primarily grew up with in the house, and that was a trip I was you know, he had eight years on and that's a lot of time to build resentment. And we're very close. We're very close now. But my brother was one of these guys who he was dealt that he was dealt a tough hand and he did the best he could. My mom and my father did the best he could. Everybody did the best they could and sort of make sure that he got what he needed. But this is a different time. But they had learning differences at a time when we weren't sure. We didn't know how to diagnose them. We weren't sure how to sort of care for these people, for these young people. We weren't sure how to sort of delineate and disseminate resources for his own folks. I mean, they just what we call the short bus. So you put them in a resource room where



you it was almost like they they it was like they were in a leper in a leper colony, right. Where really it was like now I just learned differently. Like, I'm not that I don't have a disease, right? I just learn differently. But this is eighties, right? This is the eighties and early nineties. And my brother, he took some, he took some licks and and then. And then he started to deliver a few licks and and that complicated life even more. I'll tell you this one story man we you know my brother was couldn't stand but he wasn't some sort of deep seeded him it was that he was 16 and I was eight right. It was like and my mother was very much like when I was that take you little brother. Right. Where are you going? Take you little brother. Right. Because he needed a break. News. I also was like, Oh, that's a little brother. You need to look out like, that's your brother. That's your this is your blood, you know? But my brother was like, I'm with my friend. I'm doing things that he need to see. Right? And when he was 16, 17, he was in a terrible accident. He was stabbed in the face and he loses an eye. I'll never forget this. He loses a knife. We I would say my brother did not come out of town with this, my mother and father. And that's how we rushed back to go to the hospital. He's in the hospital with the bandage on. It's a it's a it's a gory scene. Right. And he's sleeping And I'm worry because this is because no matter how he treated me, he was always my hero. Nothing he could have done could have shaken the way I felt about him as an older brother. And I remember he woke up any sort of starting to rehab and everything was different. Right? It's like a we and we he and I talked about this. In the taking of the partial taking of his site, he was able to see something else and see something clearly. And and one of the things that he was able to see was was just how much I loved him or how much I was. I'm your person, bro. Like, I'm never I don't care what you do to



me. I'm when you woke up, I was at the hospital. I was next to you being your little brother. Eight, nine years old. Concerned, right? It's me who's here. It's me. He's always been here. Right? Well, me and my mother. We'll go to dinner without him, or we take a ride to the store. And she's mad at something he done. Was me defending you. It was me saying, Don't talk about him like that. Is me saying you should get off his back, Right? Being. Being sort of, you know, shipping with our mother on your behalf without you even knowing when we go to restaurants. Because he was a shy guy, I would order your food for you. Right. As a as a as your little brother. I always protected you. Right. And I think he we both know that now. Right. But we woke up in our lives were never the same. Our relationship was completely different from day one now, you know. So I say that all that to say. It was interesting growing up with my older brother, it wasn't the traditional big brother, big little brother story. I think he had a lot of peaks and valleys and and and I honestly think it's one of the most beautiful parts of our lives.

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MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Throughout your life you've had the opportunity to observe. You talked about the sounds and smells in your neighborhood, you know, just the way your your home life went and just watching your brother, but still being there as a as a constant source, You know what, what do you feel that you were able to gain being that middle child, being eight years younger and being able to observe, you know, even the way you talk about your relationship with your parents?



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JASON REYNOLDS:

Yeah, I think, you know, I think my observations have given me an incredible sense of grounding. You know, I tell my brothers all the time, growing up with them, I could never be unkind and I could never call anybody stupid or or ugly or like, it's hard for me, right, a guy, because I know how he was treated. And I watched and it was there to sort of see how he was treated. I also like I would see him on my parents, right. Observing them. I know that their love is not ownership and that it that it isn't, that it can't even be encapsulated by titles and in in contracts and you know, like I don't believe in any of that. I mean, I think that it's bigger than all of it. And I think that love is bigger than than than a marriage. It's bigger than, you know, than than than a household. Right? It's bigger than all those things. And I got to watch my parents sort of enact that. And it wasn't perfect, right? It took time to heal. But even in the midst of the healing process, they they were loving toward one another. I mean, it's just it's a weird thing to say sometimes to people, but I really believe that like like if you love me, then don't treat me like you. Simply don't treat me like you hate me. And if you leave me, then leave me like you love me. Leave me like you love me, right? Like not not like I'm your enemy, right? And I think because life is life. And I think we try to create these weird sort of fantasies and fairy tales around how life is apparently an unchanging thing. Everything in life changes. But apparently our love, right? Oh, apparently our our situation where the love is encapsulated right in this particular case, marriage. The truth is, I wish life were that simple, but everything in life changes and doesn't mean that marriages don't last. It just means that if they don't last, you can still leave me. We can leave each other like we love each



other because we do love each other. And I think that was something that I observed. I think I observed my mother with her siblings. I watched them fight and then I watched them let it go. They never they were they they were so mean. They could be so mean to each other. Three sisters. They can really get at it. Right. And then like 5 minutes later, it's like, I like, you know, we got that out. We say we said nobody takes anything personal. And I think I learned that like, they're like, Oh, I'm a person. And things can get things can get a little dicey. Right. But but it doesn't mean I don't love you. It means that I need to express myself to. You mean maybe you hurt my feelings or maybe you've done something that I think is wrong, and I'm going to tell you that. But I can tell you that, like, let's move forward. And I watched him do this for over an. And I mean, I watched my mother do this with her older sister still. Right. I think I got to watch my mom work and it taught me what to do and what not to do. It taught me that that there is value in work ethic. There is not value in working yourself to death.

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MATTHEW HENDERSON:

What's your mom do?

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JASON REYNOLDS:

My mom worked in insurance and then she was an educator, but she worked in insurance from the age of 15 to 50. And then she worked in education from 55 to 75. Right. This is a person who only knows where she knows to work. And so I know how to work. I know how to not make excuses for the work



that needs to be done. I know how to self motivate. I waited for inspiration. I waited for nobody telling me I got to do something. Every day I wake up and I get to it. I have a ritual of routines. I get to it the same time I watch my mother work herself to the bone and I watch everybody around her, work her to the bone because they knew that she was a worker bee. Right. And we've been having conversations recently about about me sort of slowing down or taking a break or. Buying a house on the beach or somewhere else where I can sit in and relax. And she's like, Well, what are you going to do? I'm like, I'm going to sit down and I'm going to sit down. I'm going to take some deep breath. I'm going to look at the water, read a little bit, learn something new. And she's like, But you couldn't just you couldn't just let all that is you can just quit, right? And I was like, maybe. And she's like, But what about your purpose in life? I'm like, It might have been fulfilled. Right. Well, perhaps there are multiple purposes, and I know what my purpose is not, which is to work myself to death. I don't. I just don't agree with that. I think this new generation is like, yeah, no, I don't think. Because what I know for sure is that there is that I'm I am just I'm just one in the number, right? Like I'm just where my time is that people will mourn for me for a day or week and everybody will move forward. The world will keep turning and there'll be somebody else to do the work. And and that's a reality. It sounds it sounds a bit McJob, but it's it's true. Toni Morrison, the great Toni Morrison died. And we mourn. We mourn for a week. We mourn for two weeks. And the world kept moving. We reference her work when we can, but the world just kept going. There was no there's no holidays. There's no the world just keeps going. And I. I want to make sure that when my time comes that I have that I can also say that I enjoyed myself, that I rested. But then I kicked back and got



to see the world around me as a beautiful place, not just trying to figure out how to translate the beauty into something that I'm making for work. And, you know, I don't want to do it. As my mentor wasn't in my head, said I don't want to live my dream and never live my life. And there's no merit at all from old black folk. They really they put a lot of value in this life. And then you got to work this up like a job. There are no job. I don't think we have to do that right. Or at least those of us who don't don't. Right. And I and I, if I'm privileged enough to be in a position where I don't, then I won't. But it's still something that I observed watching my mother do and realizing like, I love you. But that part that's a part of that change I'm going to break.

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MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Tell me about your grandmother.

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JASON REYNOLDS:

My grandma on my mom's side, Daisy Bell. Former Daisy Bell was a wow. You know, back in those days, they had all kind of strange pejoratives like Battle AX and, you know, me and she is she would have counted as one of those women. She'd taken a mess. She put a gun to your face in a heartbeat if you threatened the children, especially coming up in South Carolina. So if you were a white man threatening her family, then you would once you were going to be looking down the barrel of a, you know, of a shotgun. Right. Like and that was just the reality for her. She worked the fields and managed a farm. Right. My grandfather had made. So my mom stories very different



because because they had hundreds of acres of land and because they had hundreds of acres of land that would have made them wealthy in South Carolina, they had more money than most people because they had more land. And land equals money and power. And this would have been the 1940s, right? In the forties. You know, my grandfather had had workers. He's like, Look, you don't want to be a sharecropper. I'll pay you a wage, I'll actually pay. You can be an employee. Right. Which is very different than being a sharecropper. Right. And so he would make sure that he had farmers able to work his land. My mother would get out there and her sisters would work the land as well. My grandmother would cook everybody lunch, make sure that everybody was taken care of, make sure their babies were taken care, make sure everybody got to and from work, work to home. And then after they all left, but then in the field herself to scrap cotton. Right. Like this is a woman who and then later on, you know, moving to D.C. in 55 would go up to Silver Spring and work Gumby County and clean white folks houses. Just like a woman who has had a sturdier backbone than most. You know, I think Magill talks about that. Right. You ride right through the back of a this woman, someone who was unwavering. And, you know, I look back on this now because I think we romanticize the stories of the stories of persistence, which is my grandmother deserved to be solved. Right. I see no differently now. I'm like, am I proud of what I'm made of? Yeah, right. Because I'm made of oak and made of pine, right? I come from I come from thick, sturdy wood, you know, I come from some of them were from a mud and a dirt that was fertile but still had to be worked. I come from that. That matters to me. I know what that means in terms of my identity. But I also come from a people who were never allowed to be saw. My mother was never allowed to be. So my mother



says that she learned to hug from my from when I was four or. Right. She learned to hugs and auntie learned affection to me right beginning and also beginning with my father because he was like, I mean, I need you to write. Like, that wasn't a natural instinct for her because of the way she was raised by her mother and father. Affection wasn't a thing that they offered much love they knew very well. But softness, the gentleness of touch, right. The linger they had on the bosom and the blanketed feeling that that gives is is immeasurable. And unfortunately, she didn't get to experience that. My grandmother wasn't that kind of woman because she couldn't be that kind of woman. And so, you know, I look at these ladies and I'm proud and I got a bit of a chip on my shoulder because of them. And I feel ten feet tall because of them. But I also know that they deserved more than strength and that for my life, I will not be anything other than a whole person. When they can access my emotions, my feelings I can give of myself in spaces that are vulnerable without fear.

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MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Especially with black people. I mean, it's beautiful to be able to, especially in your shoes, in your within your generation, look back and see those character traits. I mean, there are scientific studies that show that those character traits passed down from generation to generation to generation, sometimes seven generations down. And so you can be both things. You can still inhabit the strength that your mother, her mother, her your mother's mother. You know, you can go back however many generations you know, you can still inhabit



that strength, but you can still realize that there's also something greater and something better possible.

00:29:30:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

Yeah. You know, my father was it was a bit of a softer man, you know, And I never saw him that way until later in life. But he, you know, same thing looking back on, it's like my father was the one who was kissing his boys. My father got us up in the morning. He cooked his breakfast, he took my father, did all those things. My mother was at work at 5:00 in the morning. Right. My father was the one who was he was just a yeah, I mean, he was he was loving in a different way. He had a gentle touch. My father never touched us. He wasn't. My mom did very well. My mom. I would you know, she put boots to you, but my dad never did. He could never, can never. You know, he was just him. A big old teddy bear. He'd look menacing, covered in tattoos, motorcycle gold chains and all that and stuff. Right. But he really was just a sweetheart with a whole lot of charisma and. And a whole lot of sensitivity to anyone who for anyone who needed it. You know.

00:30:31:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

One of the reasons you can and you you mentioned this just now that you can stand ten toes ten toes deep nowadays is because you sit on the shoulders of Isabel Rose. Some of my moms.

00:30:43:00



JASON REYNOLDS:

You know, Isabel Reynolds is to me for a woman coming up in her time, a revolutionary, a maverick. She said this about her mother. But when I look at my mom, I look at her. I'm like, Oh, you really did some special things. You know, this is a woman. 15 years. You graduated from high school early. First of all, she's from from the mud from rural South Carolina. They moved to D.C. where she's ten years old. And the D.C. school system does everything they can to keep her back because of her of an accent. Right. They looked at her accent as if it was a symbol for ignorance, as if she could not know. She could not keep up with the rigor of a city education. My mom was being taught in one room schoolhouses and like, you know, my mom was going to school with her older sister because they had to go somewhere. So your big sister going to school in a town for you to go to school but go with it because you got to go. We will be in a field to go watch acting. So go with your older sister. Right. And so she was able to be in school earlier than usual, gets to D.C., gets challenged. And her mother is like, let a test. Let it test and then ends up graduating early. Right. Which is also to say, don't sleep on this. Sometimes we sleep on the south. The brilliance of the south. There's a lot of brilliance in that red clay, right? Accents. Accents. They have nothing to do with intellectual capacities. Right.

00:32:09:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

And it's ingenuity. There's, you know, come on.

00:32:12:00



JASON REYNOLDS:

There's resourcefulness. New York, I can tell you the fancy place to eat in a South Carolinian can tell me how to grow that. It's very different. Right. And so she gets these she graduates early. She takes a job, 15, 16 years old, working in the mailroom of this insurance this insurance policy. And works their way up. You know, season goes to the march on Washington and realizes that like, oh, she's 16, goes to the march on Washington and realizes, oh, this moment being here has catalyzed me and I now know I will not stay in America. Before that, she wasn't sure. Women didn't have a lot of opportunity. Black women had even less right to Google Music. And so I could teach you when you look in the mirror. And my mom was like, and at the witnessing, what I've just witnessed and I know I don't know where I'm going, but I know I'm not gonna stay in this never took a 12 years to get a bachelor's degree, Got a bachelor's degree in education while working every single day and going to school one class at a time and doing it the hard way. The first person in our family to get a degree, even after taking 12 years to do so, right. She ends up working her way up the ladder, learns all these interesting things along the way. You know, I was raised in a household where, like we were taught how to use a soup spoon in the salad fork, right? Because my mom was taught this by the people around her who were trying. One, there's one particular white man named Harry, but basically was like, I'm I can see it in you. Let me give you some of this game, right? Because you have to know how to speak this language and move this way and. Right. And so let me show you how to order a drink. Let me show you. You know how to order what to order at a restaurant. That's a that's a, you know, maybe a business meeting. Right. Let me show you sort of what spoons do, what what folks do, what more than



I know. How would she have known, right? How to go from the outside in a way which water is yours? Right. All of these things. And my mother learned all that and brought all of that home. Right. Make sure that we got all of that. All that game, how we can put ourselves in whatever environment without telling us that who we were naturally like it was never like you had to be somebody different. It was like, Look, man, different places got different rules, but you get to be you all the time. Just know that this book is for the salad. If for some reason you're throwing a party and and you and you invite somebody over who may not know these rules and they pick up the wrong fork and then you pick up the wrong fork to right, that is now the salad fork. Right? We learn that. We learn sort of how to how to adjust into that and how to, like I said, how to move. And she got that from, you know, the people on her job who saw it, who saw potential and helped her move all the way up to supervisors, to the supervisor position. Right. The first black person, the first black woman to hold that position. Right. Nobody. And now I doing all of this as a super professional woman, she would then come home and like have a whole separate part of herself. Right. It's like, all right, now in the house is going to be meditation is going to be, you know, palm reading is going to be right. We got crystals. We got you know, I always laugh because these days, all of this is so, so in vogue. Right? Everybody's got like, you know, every woman I know is like, oh, yeah, I got my crystal. It's going to be a full moon And I got to do it right. All this stuff, right? Like, I mean, it says I got my not child, but I got my Palo Santo, I got my white seeds, right? And this is stuff. I grew up in a house where my mom was an herbalist. You open up the cabinets and it's just like all kind of flowers, tree barks and all that stuff. Because she didn't believe in she believed in like naturalism was like, Let me go make a stew or I can



make a tea. This one, not that right now. Right. We have all these books like Back to Eden and all these sort of like books of the occult that we grew up around and that were very normal and real for us, right? But she also was like, Don't tell everybody what you see in this house, right? Because not everybody's going to understand that. Like, you know, down at the bottom of our street, there's a woman down there cooking up stews. And since you had a little pot, you know, nowadays we just like the sage. He's walking around with the bundle, right? She she bought Sage loose. And so you would take a couple of leaves and you put it in a little frying pan, maybe this big. Right. And she would like the frying pan up and walk around the house and smoke the house up. And, you know, she was so much the house. Now my friends are sleeping over and my friends are like, I think I'm up smoking weed, man, and I'm not smoking weed. Man's like, this is just a thing we do. Like, this is how she she's just like, you know, recalibrate the energy in the space. But back then, energy conversations weren't like, It's so weird how. No, it's also colloquial. But in this time, which is the eighties and the early nineties, my mom, my mom was on all the day. She learned stuff from the sixties, right? Like she learned all that that very early and had meditation circles and and psychics and and you know a numerology books and like all this stuff that know. People believe in or don't. Right. But it was just she was interested in all those things. And so our household was full of all of it. I tried to get me to meditate. You know, she will leave the house. She would say, take the light, which, you know, nowadays it's not. So it's you know, everybody's got loving light these days, right? It's everywhere. It's almost like a slogan. It's like T-shirts, right? But like, as a kid growing up, a teenager, I'm leaving the house to go party. Hey, you going out, Emma? I'll see you later. Listen, take the



language you write. It's a thing. It's. And it was. Now I realize just how special that was, how cool it was to live in a house where things were being done differently, how cool it was to be around somebody who really carved their own path when it came to spiritual practices, when it came to parental practices. Right. She really was just on her own wave and in her own bag. And I, I always was. And still at 78, 78, tomorrow or Wednesday. Wednesday. Yeah. She's 78 and and still she's like you don't have to thinking about this that and the third or you know got new thoughts on the afterlife if it's a thing or you know the thing about learning this right and I am inspired because I know that as I age I want to be a person who is constantly unfolding myself. And and that's what she's done. She's constantly peel back layer after layer after layer. Every year, every decade, a new layer and something fresh being exposed underneath that even as she's entering into the winter of her life.

00:38:24:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Yeah, I mean, I know it's not all peaches and cream, but it sounds like the environment that you grew up in was like an incubator for free speech, for learning unconditional love, you know? And that just that's that's the seeds that births births. Empathy and compassion in individuals is would you say that your mom's is your North Star?

00:38:42:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

I would say my mom is definitely my my, not my North star. And I would also say. You know, my father, he's. He's he's he's he's not too far behind, you know,



I think I don't talk about him as much because we there was a gap in our relationship. Right. But. I could. I hit the parental jackpot like the coolest parents, you know, God bless the dad. He's no longer with us. But I knew he was different, man. They were different. My dad. I mean, I grew up with a bad boy father. Like in the eighties and nineties, it seemed like the bad boy Father. Today looks just like me. The bad boy father In the nineties, we're talking about a man who was, like, outside in, like, tight jeans, in a t shirt or ripped t shirt covered in tattoos, aviator sunglasses on. You know, I mean, always like a cigar in his mouth or something like that. Motorcycles, calendars, a women in the go like this. He was a wild guy, right? And it was the coolest person in the world. I would wake me up in the middle of the night and come with my older brother, sleep my mom's sleep because he's not of the motorcycle. Harley-Davidson rain, the loudest motorcycle on the planet. He would watch this. He's not the motorcycle that got me on the back of it. And we will ride around the neighborhood. He would see the lights turning off, everybody waking up upset. Right. And he loved it just to do it right or like he it was homecoming one time. He's like, John would take you would take He gave me this amazing. I still had its Harley Harley-Davidson motorcycle jacket. Right. They put this on for this. I put his boots on. Right. And then we pulled up on the back of the hall. It's a homecoming, right? It's like he made me come. Right. And so I think my mom always said, my mom is who taught me how to view the world, how to view life. Right. She gave me the perspective. Right. My father is really, really who taught me as I got older, who taught me how to move through the world. Right. He taught me like charisma. He taught me. I feel like he gave me magnetism in a particular way because he was one of those guys like you walk in the room, temperature changes. He ain't got to say



nothing, right? That kind of like he had like a thing that I think hopefully and I think is what I have My mom does necessarily had that person. She has a presence, but it's a very different kind of presence. She had the presence, whereas like she must be important, but like, I might not want to talk to her yet. My dad had a presence was like, I don't know who he is, but I definitely need to know. Right?

00:41:12:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

So definitely Girl But though that's my uncle, the way he described it is now with his 77 Dodge Dart.

00:41:18:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

I drive a push now because I grew up watching my dad drive Corvettes. Like that's what we grew. My dad was always about like he was just a fly guy, right? Fly suit. Go watch is go bracelets, right. Diamond ring, right. He was one of those guys. He'd look like a hustler. Any move like. Like a hustler. But he was nothing but a gentleman. He was nothing but a gentleman who just believe that, like, look, I know I'm. I'm aware that I'm the coolest person in the room all the time, Right? That's my dad. And I think he gave me some of that. And it was like just the perfect amount of ego, just just enough where he was. No one would ever call my father arrogant. But everyone knew that. It's like, Oh, now he knows that. He knows who he is.

00:42:01:00



MATTHEW HENDERSON:

What was school like for you, growing up? You can paint it with a broad stroke, but elementary through college. Like, did you excel, did you struggle?

00:42:06:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

You know, I was good until middle school. I skipped second grade. I was I was starting off. I mean, I was I was fresh out the gate. I came on the gate like I'm rocking and rolling. Right. And this is because I remember my parents treating me in the household, you know? I mean, we were have a whole conversation, you know, how this goes and you have the conversations. And I wasn't babied very much. It was a sort of like, hey, you know, these are the things we're expected to do. This is how we talk to you. This is you know, my neighbors were all it was. I don't know. I was more like a little man. They sat me at the table with everybody. I didn't handle Hatched right. And said, Jason, right here with the rest of us. And I would just sit and listen and and observe and watch. And I had a little rocking chair with my mom will be in the kitchen cooking, and I would sit right at the door in my rocking chair and just observe. Right. Like I was sort of always a bit older. And so elementary school seemed like a breeze. I felt like I was too old to be there. Right? And second grade, I was basically doing poorly in the teachers club. My parents, I was like, Look, he's bored to death. He's going to fail unless we move them forward, Right? We have to figure this out because he just this is not enough for him. So they moved me forward to third. It was probably two years behind everybody because I have a late birthday and so everything is fine until it's time for middle school. Now a middle school comes, my parents split so



everything happens. The same time grandma dies, parents split, all kind of stuff. You know, I'm starting to write poetry, right? All of this is happening simultaneously, and I'm going to this new school because my mom then of my dad was gone. My neighborhood school was terrible and is closed now. It was it was my neighborhood. Middle school was like my brother went there. It was like a lean or mean it joint. Right? And so and my and my father was now not. In the house. My mom was like, Yo, I don't know how he managed and neat and he needs a manager if he's going to go to school, right? And so we're going to figure out something else. And so she sends me to Catholic school, man. Culture shock. I wear uniform. I hate. I was away from my friends, away from my neighborhood, every neighborhood. It was it was terrible. Right. I'm ten years old. I'm two years younger than everybody else. So I'm tiny. And I immediately started to do poorly if I, you know, my first ds I coming in D in science D right. Like I'm, I'm upset about my period situation. And then that f it, I began to be manipulative because I knew I could have a good excuse raising. I'm going, my brain's breaking that, right? Meanwhile, I'm just like, not doing anything.

00:44:30:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

And it's not because you couldn't do the work.

00:44:32:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

No, I didn't do the work. I had to do work. I just oil. I could do the work. It was difficult for me, though. I think that gap between us and as well, my emotional



maturity wasn't there. Right. And so, like, I was hitting a ceiling for sure, but I could have done more of the work, I'll say that. And in high school was pretty much the same. I high school I was 12, 12 in the ninth grade. I was a little kid and I did the best I could. There were some moments where I where I accessible. For the most part it was a slog mean. And also I just wasn't interested. I wasn't as interested. I was interested in all the extracurriculars. Every club I was in, every you know, I played sports, I did all the things and I loved all of that stuff. But I, I wouldn't call myself the most studious kid. I wasn't a complete sort of, you know, I wasn't just trying to deaf it, all right? But I just was kind of like me. I just didn't to do enough to get by. All of my Republicans say the same thing is not living up to one's potential rise, that kind of thing, which I have some I mean, for me, it's like, yeah, that's true. But also I'm not sure my teachers were living up to their potential either, and the ones that were I perform for.

00:45:35:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Tell me about some of those that that pushed you.

00:45:38:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

Miss Blois, whom I love and still talk to. To this day, Miss Black, Blackface was my 10th grade English teacher. Couldn't stand it. She was probably 25 years old. I couldn't stand it. She was coming from Yale or something like that, right? It was kind of like, you know, when you're a kid, you just like, if you're hard on me, you hate me when you're young, right? That's how you feel.



We're really It's the opposite, right? If you're hurting me, you love me. But when you're young, you're like, Yo, this person hates me. She should. She's being mean for no reason. I'm never going home. You know? You got to get me at his class. You got to figure this out. My mom was like, What are you talking about? Day one? And my mom, this person, she hates me. She can be mean. She got me. They're showing me that my mom was like, You don't have to deal with this kid. And throughout the year, she was the first teacher to ever notice and acknowledge that, that I could write that there was something happening. I wasn't getting good grades per say. I wasn't like knocking it out of the park. I would get to see I would get a D sometimes. But she was the first person to be constructive to say like, Listen, you got it. You just work out. This will work out that or pay attention to read to the instructions, write follow directions. Right. But so much so that she went to my mom and was like, Hey, you need to figure out if she's going to go to college, try to find a good program with the writing program like he's got. He can do something, He's got something. She even started a creative writing class, right? That I was able to she was able to sort of put me into this little small cohort. And I learned sort of all the poetic forms. Right. This is a person who really invested in me. The first teacher, I would say, that really invested in me. And then and then I also had, um, and I had well, I was in eighth grade. I had Miss Jones, Miss Jones Middle School. I don't know that I feel much about Ms.. Jones as teaching, but Ms.. Jones was like a grandmother figure is I know Ms.. Jones loved me and she understood me even in the midst of all of my antics. Right? I knew she understood me and I knew she could see me, which mattered a great deal. Right? Mr. Williams my senior year. He taught a class called Global Studies, and I really I always say, you know, Mr. Williams



taught me how to be a person. He was almost like the glue between my parents. It was like, All right, My father gave me these things. My mother gave me these things. My friends gave me sort of a force feel right to be safe and creative in myself. But Mr. Williams, at the time in which he came into my life, he gave me just a little bit of like tether. It's like a little bit of glue that kind of makes all of this stuff work, right? And for lots of reasons. But one, he got to knock down stereotypes. And I grew up in a black neighborhood, man, which means I grew up in a homophobic environment, especially back then, especially back then. And Mr. Williams never came out to us or anything like that. But we all knew that Mr. Williams was a gay man and we teased him for it and said, You. Got in this class. And when you got in his class, he had a way of breaking it off. You couldn't help but love him. You couldn't help but see him, right? You couldn't help but. But. But want to know more about who he was. And he was very secretive. Right. But to know more about who he was and where he'd been and what he'd experienced, that he'd seen the world he traveled all over the world. He had artifacts in every place in the world. I mean, from from I mean, from the deepest Bush in Africa to the major cities in Africa. Right. To, you know, Mexico and volcanoes and all of I mean, all over the world. This man had traveled and had documented for us to see. Most of us hadn't left our neighborhoods. And he was showing us like, the world is yours. You had the opportunity, depending upon, you know, your work ethic, depending upon your consistency, your ability to manage difficulty, your passions, your imagination. You have the ability to see the world. And he was the first person to show us that. He also taught us taught us about sacrifice. You know, there's a there's a story that I've told a million times about this face, there was one day we came to class, Mr. Williams says, I have a fish that I



bought for you all. It's going to be a class pet, but we're all seniors, so of course we like growing ingrown. Who cares? And he puts it in his tank and aquarium. He says, Listen, you can feed the fish every day. You come the class. I need you to name the fish. And the only rule is you can't touch the fish right now. If I see you with your hands in the tank for any reasons, if for any reason, your fingers or anything grazes the fish, don't try to lift it up out of the tank. Don't play around with it. Right. And if I. If I see you do that, then I'm going to stinking. That's it. You're going to. You're going to be in trouble. Cool. Time passes and we're feeding the fish every day. And one day we come to class and Mr. Williams takes the fish out of take and puts it on the floor. We all gather around. We're confused and mortified as the fish is flapping and flapping and gasping for air. Finally, two young ladies run over. They pick the fish that the fish back in it saying Save the fish's life. And Mr. Williams says, Grab your backpacks and head on down to the principal's office. You're suspended. The rules are the rules, right? Of course they're upset. We're upset. Everyone's upset. And he's like, I told you that if you touch the fish, you'll be suspended. I told you this was non-negotiable and you touch the fish, and so unfortunately, you're suspended, and so your parents will call. It's fine, but you are suspended. You get to zero. I'll see you on Monday. And as they're leaving the classroom, he says, But hold your heads up because you did the right thing. But sometimes doing the right thing has consequences. I had to then sit down and for the rest of the class I had to sort of wallow in my cowardice. And in that moment, I made a decision to, you know, to save the fish every day. It's a thing I think about once a week, probably, you know, like, am I am I willing to go the extra mile? Am I willing to throw my body at it, Think through my mind that I think that my voice that something that could



be that that might not be beneficial for me, but for the betterment of our children, for the betterment of our elders, for the betterment of somebody who's less fortunate. Or do I have it in me? And every day I check myself to make sure that I do. And that's all because of what I was taught in that class.

00:51:41:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Yeah, that's a tremendous lesson and I think the fruits of what you learn from that lesson is what you strive to pour into your work, you know, to create that response in people when everybody is standing around, are you going to do the right thing because you know it's the right thing. I'm curious, you mentioned that, you know, the to the teachers. Mr. Williams they saw you You've spoken about this before, but I'm just curious, you know, what's the reason why you didn't connect with the material that you're reading? Is it because you didn't see yourself in the material.

00:52:06:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

Because it was boring? I mean, like, Oh, I you know, my senior year we were reading like Chelsea. And look, I'm not I'm not here to listen. I'm I'm one of these people. I actually don't necessarily think that the classics are bad. I, I just sometimes think the classics are misplaced. I think that if the classics are truly classic, then they'll be there for us and we're ready for them. And I don't always think that high school students are ready. I think maybe some are right, but I think the majority are in the world that we live in. I think young people want to feel attached and connected to something, and if they don't



feel connected to it, they don't have a lot of time for it, you know, And and so I think that and that's not new. That's been the that's been the case since I was a kid. It's been the case is not. There was a kid, right? It's a guy, right? We're reading. We're reading Melville and Steinbeck. And by the way, some of those books I really did enjoy at the time, Right? I mean, when I. I read the CliffsNotes, but, you know, reading between them now, rambling. Oh, yeah, I can see why this would be entertaining or but I think we we just needed it. We needed an icebreaker. We need we needed something to set the palette. And I think it's unfair that the way we decide or the way we build palette is by giving young people classics when So, like, the equivalent would be this, right? Let's imagine it. Let's imagine you're a little kid. You're two or three years old. Well, they say you're five. I say you're five. And we've gotten over this sort of like you need nutrients part of your life. You're like five years old. It's the equivalent of saying like, all right, five year old, the first thing I'm going to get, the first thing you're going to have is a medium rare steak, right? going to we're going to give you this fancy French dish as that this is how you're going to eat. Right. And it's like a kid is like, yo, I really just want some Cheetos. And I think Cheetos are okay, right? I really just like, I'm okay with this, but like, dad, can I get, like, candies? Delicious, right? Like, potato chips are delicious. A juice box is amazing, right? I mean, a lunchable will do the chip. Gimme, gimme, gimme a sandwich. Right? I just want a sandwich. Peanut butter and jelly is the greatest thing ever invented. And this could be the thing that we use to begin to build my palate. We don't have to start at 100. We can start with the PB and J so that I can understand that my palate understands that the savory and the sweet can go together. We can start here, right? And I think for us in school, it's like, yeah, you get to high school, like



now it's time for chocolate. Right now it's time for luck in Pope. It's time for right, It's time for Keats. It's like, go every low, Jason Reynolds, get my palate developed. All right, we you read a little, right? So I'm just. I want to build my palate, and we don't have to stay there. But I think that this is a good especially since right now, they they've been eating junk food their whole lives. Everyone's been trying to force veggies down their throat. Another example is this. I tell you this all the time, and I'm for the I'm for all of it. I love Shakespeare. I just think that we got to think out when it's the right time. Right. And if we can if we actually had the resources and the time to teach it. Right, Right. And so a prime example is brussel sprouts. Brussel sprouts. When I was growing up, Vanessa, this was the one thing you hoped your mother never cooked. Right. Anything but this. You can give me anything, right? But just do not give me brussel sprouts. And then the year 2000 happened, and for some reason in the early aughts, somebody really should track down who this was. By the way, some genius was like, Yo, you know, we could do we could deep fry or roast these brussel sprouts and we can create sauces. Well, Brussels sprouts right now, some might argue that that would mean that Brussels sprout is now less nutritious. And I would say, does it matter if it changed the way we think about Brussels sprouts? And that's the way I look. That's the way I think about my work. And I need it. I need the new versions of Brussels sprouts when I was a kid and they kept giving me the old version of Christmas sprouts and so I refused to eat. Yeah.

00:56:12:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

You got introduced to poetry through music.



00:56:15:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

That seventh grade year. Right. As life is turning upside down Pop is that mom and pop splitting grandma is dying and eventually does die. And then I am forced to reckon with the sounds of my mother crying. Right? What a strange thing we talk about. Sounds, this idea of the soundscape. It's the thing that has stuck with me for 30 years, you know, because it was the first time. And I think that anybody who's ever seen or heard their mother crying like the first time is a wild experience because this is your giant. Right. You only know them as that in a particular way. And I needed to figure out a way to make her feel that I couldn't live, which is a whole other thing I couldn't live with knowing that she was in pain and I couldn't do anything about it. So I had discovered just just before this, I discovered liner notes. My older brother love music. I love music. My parents loved music. I grew up in this household with that were there was a lot of music, but I never owned any of my own. My older brother had everything. But, you know, he's an older brother. And so it's not like I can use any of his writing. It's not like he's letting me borrow anything or listen to anything until I save up my money and I buy Queen Latifah's black ring. This is the album with you, and that's why I want it. You know, we can love classic, erotic, iconic, right? And we first of all, I can just take one quick moment to say that Queen Latifah is that we should be putting much more in life and the legacy of Latifah. Honestly, I think that one of the greatest rap stories ever told is the story of Queen Latifah for another time. But that is, I think that she she deserves one of the brightest stars in the constellation of hip hop. And I don't think that we really understand exactly



the force that she has been and continues to be. A case in point, what she did for my life. And I and I and I read those lyrics and those liner notes, and I realized that this was poetry. I realized that, you know, I'm reciting it, too, in class, right? I am the doctor. Read that right, Langston Hughes. And you realize that like, oh, this is the same thing, right? Looks the same. Right? It may sound a little different, but this is the same thing. Perhaps all these rappers are writing poetry. Perhaps if I look at all the words, I can see it differently. And that's how I was introduced to poetry. So then Grandma dies and Mama's crying, and I do the only thing I know to do at that time, which is to write a few words, not a rap. Just trying to do just trying to figure out how to write something that makes me feel the way Queen Latifah makes me feel, or the way Tupac makes me feel like Slick makes me feel. It's making my mother feel a little better.

00:58:49:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Remember the poem?

00:58:51:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

No. We can't find it cause she printed it on the funeral program. And so no, but one of these days we'll find it.

00:58:58:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

So. So essentially, that was your first published work?



00:59:00:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

Essentially, that was my first published work. And it was. It was my first public work. Right. People got to see their my family and got to see that and got to engage with it and then let me know how they felt. Oh, man, this really made me feel better. Oh, man. Those words you say that you wrote really made me feel something. And then, you know, as a young person like, Oh, wait, you mean to tell me that I have power? It's all I need it, right? I have power because I have language and language has power. And now that I know that, you know, I can I can wield this sword and shield in a very different way. Yeah.

00:59:36:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

I'm curious. Why do you write?

00:59:41:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

For a lot of reasons. You know, I think I write to try to understand myself. You know, I think that's why I started just trying to figure out where do you put it. You know, I think you go through you go through life. The biggest misconception is that is that we walk through life in and and sort of slickers. And what I mean by that is as if nothing kind of sticks to us. And the truth is, everything does. Everybody sticks. Every experience sticks. It all sticks. It may not be top of mind, but it all lives in your subconscious. Every person you



meet, every conversation you have, every story you hear, every time someone tells you a secret or or confides in you, it's all in your body, you know? And and I was trying to figure out as a young person where to put it. Got to get it out of my body. Right. I don't have the capacity to hold it all. And I'm an anxious child at that point. Right. And I don't have the capacity to carry all of this. I don't have my my body is filling up. My mind is filling up. I don't know if I'm going to be able to manage. And so it it came at the right time and it gave me an opportunity to just sort of excavate and exercise some of my thoughts and feelings, which we all need. Right? That's the first reason I still do it for that reason. The second reason, though, is because I think I also realized that I am of service. My mother taught us that as kids that, like everybody's purpose in life, is the same, and that is to be of service to your fellow man. The tricky part is everybody's vehicle is different. And I felt my vehicle and because I found my vehicle of service, then I then I do my job because it is what I meant to do, right? My job is to make somebody else's life a little better. My job is to leave the world a little better than it was when I got here. And the way that I choose to do that or the way that it's been that it's sort of come on to me, is through this, through storytelling, through language, through through and through whatever sort of, you know, iteration of wordplay. I know what it's for. It's not it's not for you. I take it very seriously. I think there's too much power to play around with it. At the same time, I think in the playing of it all, you discover new things and new powers. Right. But it's too. It's too important to take lightly. It's too powerful to take lightly. I think people are a little a little a little cavalier about language. And the truth of the matter is, as far as I'm concerned, it's almost like casting spells, Right. And that in a sort of huge sense. Right. But just in the sense that like, you



know, whatever you say and whatever you write could very well. Teachers know this better than anybody could very well turn a child into a giant or turn that child into an end. Right. All based on what you say. Right. What you say, the words that you've formulated. And so I know that going into and so I think about all of those things. And now I think it's just it's my life. My lot in life is to be of service. This just happens to be the vehicle. And when I feel like my time is it, the writing will continue. The profession may change, but the writing will always be the way that I just try to learn myself, try to understand the world around me. You know, it's a life saver. Saved my life in a real way.

01:02:53:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Your classification of the types of books that you write for under young adult fiction, do you think you know, when your your mother and father propped you up at the big boy table, you know, to hear those conversations, do you think that helps you speak in a sympathetic voice that kids are able to hear? How are you able to connect with your young readers?

01:03:10:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

I think what it has to do with is my mother and father acknowledging the fact that I was a person, even as a child. And they modeled that. They modeled that I bring home and see my father sitting at the table, isn't it? Did you try your best to tell me the truth? Right. Would you tell me to choose the right? Don't lie to yourself. So tell me the truth. Did you try your best? Sometimes



I'd say yes. Sometimes I'd say no. But then they upon the truth. Right? And if I would say no, he would say, Well, since you didn't try your best, there has to be some sort of discipline. You have to have some sort of punishment here. And you remember that you had to hold you accountable. Right. And so we need to figure out what ways are we going to make sure that you understand that it doesn't bother me, you letting yourself down. You're not pushing yourself to do your very best is something that isn't that is unacceptable because life is coming right and you can't let you down. You don't have to get a knee, but you always have to put your best foot forward. Right. And in the moments where I said I did do my best, he was saying, let's work a little harder next time. Good job. Which is working through hard next time. That's it. Right? It's a very different way to sort of like instead of being like a is the only way, it was sort of like, let me talk to my kid and figure out where he's right. My mother, too. Right. How are you feeling? I'm mad about this. I'm upset about this. You said this to me. You hurt my feelings and I just don't think I deserved it. My mother was never the type to be. Like I say what I want you because you, my child, right? My mom was like, Oh, if I hurt your feelings, I apologize. I meant what I said, though. I meant what I said. You know, when you wrong, you wrong. But at the same time, she could Own That. Like, perhaps she went too far. So when I sit under the page, I'm looking at these young people. This is people right? When I go and see them at the schools and libraries and community centers and all the other places. The one thing they say to me most often is man thinks we're just talking to us like people, right? Care to them is pejorative, right? Because to them they're saying like, man, you know, they always remind us that our brains aren't developed. Imagine what it feels like to be a kid and people would look at you



and say, like, you know how you feel because your brain develop. Meanwhile, the child is like, but I but I do know how I feel and I'm telling you, and I'm even vocalizing to you how I feel. And what you keep saying is, no, you're not saying you're just hungry. There's nothing more frustrating than being dismissed that way. And adults know that more than anybody. And yet we do it to these young folks. Right. And my job is to say, like, I'm never going to do that. I can't if you feel it, I know you feel it. And I'm gonna write in the book, right? I'm not going to dismiss your feelings or your experiences. I'm not going to dismiss even some of the confusion that does exist in your brain. All of that's still very real, right? That exists in your body. And it could cause some anxiety. It can cause mistake making. It can cause all sorts of things. So let me honor that by putting it on the page in the way that my parents honored it, by allowing me to sit at the table and have some discourse without just assuming they knew everything about me. Right? They asked me, tell me what's going on, and then will adjust accordingly. So I think it comes from them.

01:06:08:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

I'm interested in your process. Do you start by putting pen to paper or do you start on the computer with a blank screen? You know, how do you approach into work?

01:06:16:00

JASON REYNOLDS:



This pen and paper is pen to paper, But but more importantly, I approach it with the person. You know, I if most of my books, they're not very plot heavy. And the reason for that is because I truly, truly believe that people invest in people. I don't think we invest in plot lines or product or even profit. I think we invest in people. Right. I always tell young people this. I say, look, if you think about your best friend, your very best friend, you can sit with that person for 8 hours, 9 hours and do nothing and have a wonderful time. Because you've invested in that person. You believe that that person's that that person's presence is enough, Right. To bring enjoyment here like we all do this. You did it with the partners. You did this with a parent, Right? Is like just sitting down and kicking it. We got to do a whole lot. It doesn't need to be an explosion or a roller coaster. I just want to be around you. So my job is to create characters that people want to just be around for 200 pages. And if I can do that, then I'm already halfway there. The rest of it is just complicating your life, right? But first, I is a people first.

01:07:24:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

And are you listening to music? Do you go away? Do you write in the same place every time?

01:07:29:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

And definitely no music unless. Unless it's instrumental. Me singing and rapping made it all just be woven into the story. So I can't I can't do the music thing. I can do voices, though. So I do a lot of podcast when I'm working



because I think that the the, the white noise of other people can help me quiet the white noise in me. I can hear my voice clear with other voices as well. We all work in coffee shops, right? It's like it's a weird sort of it's a there's a deafening of all of the voices that I need to quiet down so I can hear the important one. As long as there are other voices. Sort of. Right. It's an interesting sort of thing. And I can work anywhere. I'm not like ladies, you know, I'm not that ritualistic or that I'm ritualistic in that I work every day and I work for a huge chunk of the day every single day. But it can be on an airplane, it can be in a hotel room, it can be in the lobby, it could be in my house, it could be in a coffee shop in my office. Right. Like I am. Cool, man. As long as I got my tools, I can get it done with you.

01:08:25:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

You don't stray away from the complicated or the uncomfortable conversations. Are you ever afraid of what is going to come out of your mind onto the page when you start a work?

01:08:35:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

Okay. Well, I'm always afraid. Is it? If I'm not afraid, I won't. I won't write it. Everything I've ever made escape and everything I've ever made is, as you know, challenged me. Towers. My insecurities made me wonder about the things that are living inside me. But that's okay. At the end of the day, I'm still an artist, right? Like, I still make art. So? So even though it has all these other functions and I'm thinking about all the things, I'm still an artist who wants to



make art. I want to be creative. I want to push myself to get better. I want to push myself to see just how far narrative can go and what worlds can we really create, right? Like, or how can we show this world in a way that feels more magical And at the same time, I'm never really worried about the tricky stuff so much like the complicated conversations that necessarily bother me because I've been around kids long enough to know they can handle them. It's just about how I'm articulating them. That can be a little scary, right? How are you going to do this in a way that feels that that holds up the artistic integrity, but also can connect to your population, to your audience, you know, that can get a look and also pulling them along with you, like meeting them with where they are, but also pulling them along. Because, as I say, we are the tastemakers, we are the people who are building the palette, right? So in order to do so, the work has to be sophisticated and layered and complex, not just the issue of the work itself, right? The literature has to be sophisticated and complex and layered and and, you know, I'm always like, did I go too far or is this a little too much? But it is what it is at the end of the day. And the kids always meet me where I am, too.

01:10:12:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

there's the they that have said that you've gone to them, you know. Why do you think books are banned?

01:10:21:00

JASON REYNOLDS:



You know, You think you know. I think. I think books are banned. And I think the fear of books is that books can be ruminated upon. Books can be studied. I think the fear and reason I say the reason why that's an X factor is because kids play violent video games. They have YouTube, they have books. And if anything, this is the least that they where they should be. Your kid is simulating war every night with his friends. No one seems to care. Ray, your kids, your kids are doing all kinds of things every day. You have no idea why your kids are on Twitter looking at porn and you have no clue, Right? And yet you're concerned about the fact that I've written in a book. You know, something that actually something that actually humanizes all the things that they're seeing and clips, something that actually fleshes out and makes real all the things that they're seeing in clips. Right. All the things that are being perverted in clips. And so for me, I think that like I think that the fear is that there was a book you can revisit and you can start to formulate constitutions. And I think that people are afraid of their kids. My mother was never afraid of me coming home and say, I disagree. And I think most parents are. And I think that most parents are afraid for their children to disagree with them because they're not always sure that they're going to have the response when their children ask the difficult questions and instead of is humbling yourself and saying, I don't know, let's figure this out together. Right. Like, instead of knocking yourself down a peg, I think it's easier to just to eradicate the option. You know, and that's unfortunate. You know, like I always say, people who people who steal from people steal because they do not have. So if you take the opportunity for for intellectual edification, for for for mental freedom, it's because it was not afforded to you. Yeah. And I really believe that. You know, I also will say that I think that it is a shame in that we have



entered into a really strange space if what we are now using as the bargaining chip to have our complicated conversations of here, our politics in this country, our children, the one thing that we have been able to agree upon. I think we're in a tough place. Everybody wants the best for for the babies. They are the ones who are most vulnerable and yet the ones who are the most human amongst the humans. Everybody wants their children to be safe, to get education right, to grow into whole people. Everybody. Right. And so to use them as the new bargaining chip, to use them as the new leveraging point, I think is is despicable on so many levels.

01:13:19:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

You wrote a book, all-American Boy, with Brendan Kiely. That was banned.

01:13:26:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

Yeah.

01:13:27:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Why was it banned? And what was that collaboration like?

01:13:30:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

The collaboration was amazing. One of my best friends, you know.



01:13:33:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

And Justin, give me the one liner on the book.

01:13:36:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

The one liner is is Rashad and Quinn, a black boy and a white boy growing up in the very same neighborhood to go to the same school. And they even had the same set of friends, but they do not know each other. And on Friday night, Rashad is accused of stealing in a grocery store and is abused by a police officer and Quinn witnesses and knows the cop as his father figure. And then he sets off on these two weeks where the two of them are trying to reckon with this experience. Right. That we were that book was banned 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. And furthermore, nobody wants to complicate the argument. It's not we're not even saying, like this book is about how this cop was a good man to this boy and did a bad thing. So then the question becomes, who is who is he in this space and how do we grapple it? And Rashad has a police officer, a former cop, father who has also done a bad thing. It is not to say that we are you know, I think people listen, we have a hard time. I think we live in a country that is unfortunately has become anti intellectual, perhaps because we're not reading anymore. And I think that the easiest thing to do for all of us is, is to simplify our arguments when what's necessary is for us to constantly be complicating our arguments. Right. And this book works to help complicate the argument, while also bringing light to the fact that, like



police abuse is a real thing. Always has been a real thing, by the way. It's not a new phenomenon, always has been a real thing. And it's affecting a lot of people every day in this country. That's it. I mean, that's it, right? I think I think for parents of a lot of places, like we don't want our kids to see officer friendly as any. Other than officer friendly. And it's like, well, I think the real question is, do your children know that officer friendly as a human being? And if he's a human being, that means that he comes with all the things that human beings come with. The only difference is he's been given an outsized amount of authority. So he has all the same mess that we have. And a gun and a badge. That's it. It just which complicates all of our relationships around it. Right. And we should probably okay with B, okay. Or get okay with engaging in having discourse around what that actually means and what that looks like. The other guy does it, man. But.

01:15:55:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

You know, for an artist who's poured his work into a book, how does it feel for someone to not discredit it, but in a sentence, yeah, but by banning it in certain industries, if.

01:16:03:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

It was disrespectful to the kids. Well, if it hurts my feelings. But it's disrespect to the children. It hurts my feelings because it makes me feel like people think that I'm out here to try to harm children. But I think it's disrespectful because what it says is that adults actually don't respect the intellectual capacity of



young people as if they don't already know, as if they're not already having these conversations. They have the Internet, right. They have think it's that's my that's the part that I'm most confused about. I'm like, you do know that they know that they are already wrestling with this. It's like saying like, don't write a book about gun violence. Don't write a book about school shootings the way you do know they do school shooter drills. So I don't know why this would be a complicated conversation. They don't read a book about sex. You do know there are there are people being pregnant in their schools now. You know they're having sex, right? Anyone who believes that the teenagers are not having sex is like, I don't know. We are. This is a human experience. This is a human experience. I'm just trying to create a place for them to lay in so that they understand what it is that's happening to them, what's happening around them. That is our actual jobs, right? My job isn't to be the captain of a ship. My job is to be the lighthouse, right? I'm not. I'm not trying to man nobody's boat. That's for them. It's their lives. My job is to point in the direction that is safe. That that way is the journey. Right? We're going this way. But not to teach you, not to tell you how to row. That's all you do when that water and the water gets deep. I'm just telling you which way safety is. That's all right. If you start to veer off the lighthouse, that's all I'm saying. But I'm right. That's and that to me, that's what our job is, to teach them which way to go, but not to teach them how to go there. Everybody's afraid of it. And I get all kind of nasty comments and it is what it is, man. I'll tell you what. I'll tell you what I'm most exhausted about. I have to talk about this all the time. And what I would rather put my energy in is talking about all these librarians and teachers who are fighting on the other side, who are putting their lives at risk, their jobs at risk every day to make sure that books like my stay in the



bookstore, stay in the library and stay in the schools. They really are the ones who deserve to be sitting in front of this camera and telling you what's really going on. Man, I'm going back to my ivory tower so I can be an artist. But they're are real lives, real human beings who are not famous, who are fighting on behalf of my children every day. Yeah.

01:18:20:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:
Why is literacy important?

01:18:21:00

JASON REYNOLDS:
The literacy is important because It's The mere act of reading. And the act of it teaches discipline, persistence, Consistency broadens the vocabulary. The more words you have, the less violent you need to be. It teaches you how to listen to yourself and it keeps your imagination stoked. Which is to say that literacy is important because it is the very thing that could that keeps us free.

01:18:44:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:
When you look at the global landscape of of especially the genre of writing that you do like, are you encouraged by what's happening outside of the United States? And would you like to see some more of that come into the landscape here? Are people brave or are there are is there are?

01:18:58:00



JASON REYNOLDS:

I mean, yeah, it's hard to say. What I want to say, though, is that that there's a lot of beautiful stories being told around the world and that America is the only place that doesn't read them right. We don't do the trades. We don't do much translated work here, and we should write. We need to build that part of ourselves that we're limiting ourselves from knowing more about the world because we don't read the world stories. What? They read our stuff, by the way.

01:19:23:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Yeah, yeah. You've said this before, that your look is intentional, the way you present yourself, you know. Do you also feel the same way about what you write and the spaces? Like, you know, when you walk into a space, you command a certain, you know, people, people are going to gravitate towards you, that you're like, you're dad. That's the do it. I want to know, do you want your books? And. You feel like your books are doing the same thing in the spaces that they aren't?

01:19:45:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

Always, Always. I think from the very beginning of my career, I wanted my books to serve as objects that kids were interested in. Right. So the story comes second. I wanted to make sure that when I can't see somebody else with that book that like it, was that where I was, that they see my name and then I go, Was that you know? And then they get into the story. I think I think



just thinking about that has been a huge shift in a way, in a way that I make stuff and make them make books and present for them. Any book covers, everything is a part of it. Yeah.

01:20:15:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

You have accolades and I'm not even going to start to name you know, but one of them which you just vacated your position just not too long ago was the ambassador of literature. of all of the accolades that you've been able to to to receive, what what does it all mean to you?

01:20:28:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

Not much.

01:20:29:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Nothing? No.

01:20:31:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

Well, I won't I won't say nothing, because I think it's a little dismissive of all the wonderful committees who have done the work of choosing. But those the medals and the plaques that all underneath my couches and boxes.

01:20:42:00



MATTHEW HENDERSON:

And because it's a conversation I'm talking about, like New York Times Bestseller Carnegie Medal Winner Newburn Newbery Book Honor. Printz, Winner of Coretta Scott King Awards.

01:20:52:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

Yeah, Yeah. I mean, you know, you know what it is? I listen, don't get me wrong, it feels amazing to have been acknowledged right many, many times over at this point. I'm so, so, so grateful. But I can't continue to do my work if I sit in amongst the shrine of myself. And so every day is the day I get up and pretend that none of that ever happened. The same kind of hunger, the same thirst was there. That famous boxer who said, it's really difficult to get out of bed and run 50 miles, me climbing out of silk sheets. Right. I need to stay hungry because our children are I need to stay thirsty because our children are. And so it's been a blessing, man, to be able to to have seen the things that I've seen and be honored the way that I've been honored. But there's work to do. And it's the work is that when it's all over, when I just had to put the pin down or move on, then I pull them all out and really have a good cry. But until then, you know.

01:21:49:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

What haven't you said yet? You know what's sitting deep in your soul that you're like, Hmm, I got to get this out.

01:21:55:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

All right, So I'm not supposed to talk about this, But but, but I do want to document it because it is coming. You know, I've always wanted to write about the interior lives of black boys and boys in general, specifically in this particular in this particular context, heterosexual boys, the interior life of them just before they lose their virginity. I think that unfortunately we are turned into fallacies, farts and too early animals far too early. We are expected to know how to do everything in. The truth is, we don't even talk about it. I don't know. Have you ever thought about this? I want to ask you. It's interesting because the truth is, if we were all being honest, we are anxious and nervous. We have body image issues. We we are confused. We're excited. We don't we don't know what to expect. All these things are happening inside of our bodies before this huge transformative moment. And we never discuss it. It's never it. Most of us have already lied a million times before it before we get there, right? Like, we don't know. I mean, like and so I wanted to write a story to help. Parents had this conversation, but also for young boys to know it's okay, bro. It's that most of us had been unfortunately had had older women be inappropriate. All this is this is real, right? And so I'm like, I wanted to write a book and have written a book that says it's okay. It's okay to be scared, it's okay to be nervous. Maybe all of us, all of us are going through it in this moment. Just none of your friends are willing to say this time. And so I'm getting ready that all are you off the hook? It's called 24 seconds from now. And so we'll see. You know, I mean, you want to see some banning. It's coming back, but the book is necessary.

01:23:51:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Why is storytelling important?

01:23:53:00

JASON REYNOLDS:

Storytelling is important because as far as I'm concerned, this is this is the the most valuable of the human technologies. This is the most human thing. We have to offer one another to be better. Human beings are most influential to other human beings. Nothing influences us more than each other. And so the more we share our stories, the more whole we will be collectively and will realize that we're not actually that different.

END TC: 01:24:25:00