



# Reginald Betts

Poet & Prison Reform Advocate

A Voice for the Incarcerated

## Lesson Introduction

**Interview Log: Interviewed on September 15, 2022 by Noah Remnick**

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

## Learning Objectives

### Social Studies Focus

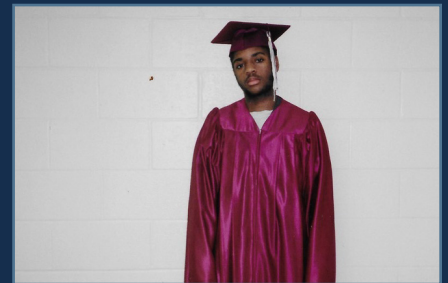
- Examine mass incarceration and the Eighth Amendment through the story of Reginald Dwayne Betts
- Explore Supreme Court cases as they pertain to juvenile incarceration (*Graham v. Florida*)
- Connect one life story to the issues of punitive and restorative justice

### English Language Arts Focus

- Inspire students to tell their own coming-of-age stories
- Examine perspective taking from the point of view of one poet and reform advocate
- Explore the idea of purposeful work and a meaningful life
- Use Reginald Dwayne Betts' episode as evidence to write a rhetorical argument, commentary, or synthesis essay

## Episode Overview

Reginald Betts recalls spending nine years in prison starting when he was 16. He examines the impact of incarceration on creativity and what led him to become a poet. Betts discusses the harsh realities of the criminal justice system from his perspectives as a felon, and then as a law student at Yale and a public defender.



## Biography

Reginald Dwayne Betts is a poet and lawyer who is the founder and executive director of Freedom Reads, a not-for-profit organization that provides access to literature in prisons through the installation of "freedom libraries" across the country. In 2019 Betts won the National Magazine Award in the Essays and Criticism category for his *New York Times Magazine* essay that chronicles his journey from prison to becoming a licensed attorney. For over 20 years he has used his poetry and essays to explore the world of prisons and the effects of violence and incarceration on American society. He has transformed his latest collection of poetry, *Felon: Poems*, into a solo theater show that explores the post-incarceration experience and the lingering consequences of a criminal record through poetry, stories, and engaging with the timeless and transcendental art of paper-making.



## Teaching Tip: First Take

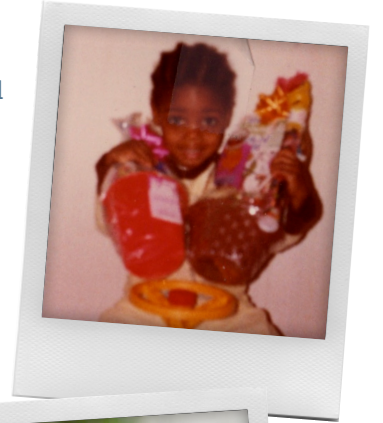
A **First Take** is a warm-up writing or conversation exercise created uniquely for *The Thread* that strengthens media literacy skills. Like an opening song in a musical, the first stanza of a poem, or even the first impression one person makes on another, the First Take asks students to reflect and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

### Suggested Steps

- Read the opening of Reginald Dwayne Betts' episode aloud to students.

"I saw nine years in prison. The judge told me, "I'm under no illusion that sending you to prison will help." I think we ask the wrong questions. We ask, how do we feel about violent crimes and nonviolent crimes, as opposed to how do we feel about the fact that we have a system where a judge sends a 16-year-old kid to prison and says, 'I am under no illusion that sending you to prison will help?'"

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



Photos: Dwayne, Easter, 4 years old. (top); Dwayne, 7 months. (lower)



## Teaching Tip:

# ***THE THREAD* Up Close**

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

- ▣ How do you interpret the title “A Voice for the Incarcerated”?
- ▣ What did you learn from his life stories?
- ▣ If you were interviewing Betts, what question would you ask?

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

Here is an example of ***A Thread*** connection: If you are exploring the power of poetry, share this excerpt from Betts’ interview:

“I’m 17, I’m in prison and got no love story to tell. And I get introduced, though, to that book, to Langston Hughes, to Claude McKay. I get introduced to Sonia Sanchez, to Lucille Clifton. And it radically changed my life. And the reason honestly, I’ll tell you this, the reason is because it was this cat named Etheridge Knight that was in the book, too. And Etheridge Knight had their time in prison, and he was writing poems about prison and so all of a sudden, I had this medium that I could write about a whole world in 15 or 20 lines.”

### Connections

- ▣ What does the title “A Voice for the Incarcerated” mean to you after watching this episode?
- ▣ What do you think Reginald Betts means by the phrase “a landscape of what was possible”?
- ▣ What emotion describes what Betts still feels today about the crime he committed? He said, “I think some of us, you know, we spent a whole life trying to work our way away from that moment that you can’t say.”
- ▣ After hearing this episode, what role has poetry played in Reginald Betts’ life?
- ▣ Do you agree or disagree with sentencing juveniles to prison for felony offenses? Why or why not? How did Betts’ story shift or affirm your point of view?
- ▣ What new insight did you learn about (yourself, your community, your world) from his stories?



## Activity: A Voice for the Incarcerated

Reginald Betts poses many questions that are rich for student exploration.

“What would be a better way for you to pay what you owe to society, to your victims, to your community? What is motivating the prosecutors and judges who make those decisions? What would it mean for people to actually pay what they owe? What does it mean to profoundly figure out how to hold ourselves to account for what we do?” He also recognizes the need for “some kind of system as a counterbalance that could be not a factor of despair and sorrow, but a place where you could go to create that pathway towards redemption.”

Read and discuss student responses to [“When I Think of Tamir Rice While Driving.”](#) by Reginald Dwayne Betts. This is an emotionally difficult poem so it is important to have a classroom environment where norms of trust and emotional safety have already been established and students have the maturity to process it after reading.

After some discussion, have students share their perspective on what they believe a pathway towards redemption looks after a crime is committed. Their piece can be a video, a poem, letter, song, or essay – it is up to them to choose which format most persuasively supports and expresses their point of view. Students can use anything from Reginald Dwayne Betts’ episode to support this work.



### Additional Resources

- ▣ [Reginald Dwayne Betts](#) - official website
- ▣ Learn more about Betts’ current work at [Freedom Reads](#) - official website
- ▣ [Poetry Foundation](#) - Reginald Dwayne Betts
- ▣ Books: [Felon](#), [Bastards of the Reagan Era](#), [A Question of Freedom](#), [Shahid Reads His Own Palm](#)
- ▣ Dive a bit deeper into the advocacy work to end life sentences for juvenile offenders by reading the Equal Justice report: [All Children are Children](#)

