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Long Way Down: Making Space for an Empathic Understanding of African-American Adolescents through Literature

Abstract: There has long been a call for more diverse representation in literature for children and adolescents in the United States, for children who read multicultural literature can both see themselves reflected in the literature they read and be exposed to authors from diverse backgrounds who can serve as role models for them. One such author is Jason Reynolds, a prolific African-American author of books for adolescents. His most recent book, *Long Way Down*, is the poignant story of a fifteen year old African-American young man named Will who must make a life-and-death decision. While Will could be viewed as impulsive and potentially violent due to the saturation of gang-related activity in his neighborhood, Reynolds' crafting of the text compels the reader to reconsider this assessment and instead take a more empathic stance toward Will. More specifically, the author's compelling use of cultural compassion, poetic form, and time flexibility combine to draw the reader into a deeper understanding of the complexities of Will's life. This compassionate treatment of the main character creates a narrative that is appealing to young African-American readers who thirst for books that reflect their lives and that unveil the challenges they face as they navigate the violence that often plagues urban life. *Long Way Down* also provides a meaningful and realistic counter-narrative to an all-to-widely accepted view of African-American males as dangerous and violent.

Keywords: multicultural literature, African-American, adolescent, *Long Way Down*, Jason Reynolds, poetry

INTRODUCTION

The importance of multicultural representation in children's literature has long been established, for it is through representation in literature that identities can be negotiated (Botelho and Rudman 2009: 265). Children need to see themselves and their own experiences reflected in the literature they read, and through this reflection they come to define, shape, and value their own

identities. In this way, literature acts as a mirror for young readers, reflecting the value of their own lives and experiences back to them. Equally important is the role children's literature plays in providing readers with a window into cultures that differ from their own allowing readers to "go beyond themselves to images, ideas, and cultures that are outside their daily realities and vicariously experience another culture" (Botelho and Rudman 2009: 265). As children encounter cultures that differ from their own, they can begin to reflect on their experiences, examine power differentials, and build cross-cultural understandings and competencies (Botelho and Rudman 2009: 266), leading them to become active, informed members of their communities. While children's literature both emerges from a culture and reflects that culture, it can simultaneously reflect injustice, and especially strong literature can point the reader in the direction of redressing injustice.

Yet, in spite of the importance of multicultural children's literature, there remains a gap between the diversity of texts produced for children and the actual diversity in the population. For example, for decades there was a dearth of books by and about African-Americans published in the United States. According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, even as recently as 1985, only 18 of the approximately 2500 books published for youth and children were written by African-American authors, despite the fact that more than 10% of the US population was African-American at that time. Fortunately, since that time, representation of African-Americans in children's literature has increased, with over 600 books published in 2018 by or about African-Americans, a number that more accurately mirrors the actual distribution of African-Americans across the US population.

Undoubtedly, African-American authors are eager to contribute to the field of children's literature but encounter resistance and difficulty getting their books published due to a publishing industry that heavily favors White authors who write about White characters. Still, a number of African-American authors have emerged and gained in popularity, and perhaps one of the most popular African-American authors of books for young adults is Jason Reynolds. A prolific author who has written twelve books for young adults in the past ten years, Reynolds' books have received accolades and awards, among them: the Coretta Scott King Honor Award, the Newbery Honor Book Award, the Michael L. Printz Honor Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature, the Kirkus Prize, the Schneider Family Book Award, The Walter Dean Myers Award for Outstanding Children's Literature, and the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work for Youth and Teen. Reynolds' clear contributions to the field of multicultural literature have distinguished him as a notable author for young adolescents, especially those African-American male readers who believe that there is little of interest to them in contemporary fiction.

Long Way Down, one of Reynolds' most recent books, is an excellent example of a text that captures the lived experience of an African-American teen who is confronted with life and death decisions. While young African-American men living in urban environments is a common trope in American culture, Reynolds' poetic narrative brings a nuanced understanding of the everyday dilemmas that confront these young men. Reynolds takes a character who, from the outside, appears somewhat unsympathetic and shapes him into a vulnerable, frightened young man with whom the reader connects emotionally. The purpose of this article is to examine the strategies Reynolds uses to elicit a decidedly emotional response from the reader and to issue a call for publishing more literature geared toward otherwise disenfranchised readers.

PLOT SYNOPSIS

The main character and narrator of *Long Way Down* is Will, a fifteen year old African-American high school student living in a low income neighborhood in an urban city in the United States. As the book opens, Will describes the past twenty-four hours of his life to the reader detailing the shooting death of his brother Shawn. Told entirely in poetic verse, the story begins with Will in his bedroom on the eighth floor of his apartment building – a bedroom he shared with his now-deceased brother – hearing his mother weeping in the next room. Acknowledging that he wants to weep as well, Will resists the urge to mourn his brother. He tells the reader:

> I FELT LIKE CRYING
> which felt like
> another person
> trapped behind my face
> tiny fists punching
> the backs of my eyes
> feet kicking
> my throat at the spot
> where the swallow starts. (30)

In spite of this traumatic event, Will holds back all visible signs of mourning. He then describes in a surprisingly calm voice the three things that inevitably happen following a shooting in his neighborhood: screaming, sirens, and questions from the police. Indeed, each of these phenomena occurred immediately after Will's brother Shawn was shot in the street and left to die. These three events, though inevitable, are not the only patterns that permeate Will's life. Beyond these three phenomena are the hard and fast rules that govern the lives of people in his community when tragedy strikes, rules that Will de-

scribes in dispassionate detail: No crying; No snitching (i.e., telling the police who committed the murder); Always seek revenge.

Through these simple, streamlined rules, Will describes his own inevitable response to his brother's death: Will takes his brother's gun from the bedroom cabinet, tucks it into the waistband of his jeans, and climbs into the elevator to find the man he believes killed his brother. His plan is to wait outside the home of the suspected shooter, Riggs, and then kill him with Shawn's gun as Riggs leaves his home. Will's plan represents a quick and direct response, a kind of vigilante justice that is expected and not entirely surprising according to the rules of his community. In this way, Will's actions are framed as nothing more than following the straightforward rules and routines that define his life.

However, as the elevator carrying Will stops on the seventh floor, a strange individual climbs on. Will grows increasingly uncomfortable because the new passenger stares at Will, a clear breach of elevator rules, rules that Will describes as:

> No talking.
> No looking.
> Stand still,
> stare at the door,
> and wait. (73)

Nonetheless, this new passenger stares at Will and even lights a cigarette, another clear breach of elevator rules. Eventually, the new character talks to Will, who comes to the realization that the new passenger is actually the man who gave his brother Shawn the very gun he now has tucked into the waistband of his jeans. However, Will becomes confused and disturbed because this man in the elevator, Buck, died a number of years ago also from gun violence. How, then, is he in the elevator with Will? Will is still grappling with this fantastical situation when the elevator doors close, and the elevator lurches to the next floor.

As the elevator descends, it stops at every floor, and at each stop, a new ghostly passenger climbs on. Each new passenger is someone Will knows and who died as the result of gun violence, and each new passenger has words of wisdom to share with Will. Dani, a childhood friend who was killed by a stray bullet while playing with Will on the playground, joins Will on the elevator at the sixth floor and asks Will what he will do if he misses when he tries to shoot Riggs, a clear reference to the circumstances of her own death. Will tries to explain to Dani why he must exact revenge for Shawn's killing:

> DANI WAS KILLED
> before she ever learned
> The Rules.
> So I explained them to

her so she wouldn't think
less of me for following
them. (141)

Still, Dani seems to disapprove of Will's plan. Uncle Mark, his father's brother, joins the group in the elevator at the fifth floor. Asks Uncle Mark, Why are you here? (p. 167). At this point, Will struggles to articulate his plan, barely able to say the words:

MY MOUTH
dried out,
words phlegm
trapped in my throat,
like an allergic reaction
to the thought
of it all. (179)

Will eventually tells his uncle of his plans to seek vengeance for Shawn's death. The next passenger climbs onto the elevator at floor four: Mikey, Shawn and Will's father. Mikey also followed the rules of the neighborhood while he was alive, and after his brother Mark was killed, Mikey set out to kill the man who took his brother from him. Mikey admits, however that he killed the wrong person as he sought revenge for his own brother's killing. When Will asks his father why he killed the wrong person, Mikey replies,

I didn't know
He wasn't the right guy. . .
I was sure that he was Mark's killer.
Had
to
be. (220)

This phrase "had to be" is the exact phrase uttered by Will as he determines who shot his brother. Yet, like his father, Will has no proof that the man he suspects of killing his brother is actually guilty of that crime. Next on the elevator at floor three is Frick, whom Will learns was killed by Shawn. This nested pattern of killings, with one ghostly passenger responsible for the death of another, sends Will into confusion and self-doubt. He struggles to maintain his hard, calculating exterior and even begins to shed a few tears as he learns the difficult truth of people he once admired and loved.

Finally, the last passenger to climb onto the elevator at floor two is Will's brother Shawn, who does not speak, but rather cries. Shawn's tears break the first rule of the streets, a rule that Shawn taught Will when his friend Dani died on the playground. The closing words of the text are uttered by Shawn, who asks of Will, "You coming?" This short but poignant question presents Will

with a clear choice: Exact his revenge and join the others on the elevator as yet another eventual victim of vengeance, or disobey the rules of the street and interrupt the cycle of violence.

While Reynolds does not allow the reader to witness Will's decision, the text implies that he will not follow the rules and will instead stop the cycle of violence that has permeated his life. The regular breaking of the rules throughout the text, first in the elevator and then through Shawn's breaking of the first rule – no crying – provide evidence to indicate that the cycle is broken, at least the reader hopes it is.

EMOTION IN LITERATURE

What is perhaps most striking about Reynolds' book is the way he draws the reader into an emotional reading of Will's story. Indeed, one primary use of literature is to "express emotion and create empathy" (Michlin 2011: 82). From a distance, it is easy to judge individuals like Will, people who perpetuate seemingly senseless violence in order to prove that they are strong, or worthy of respect, or at the very least, willing to follow the rules of revenge. But due to Reynolds' structure of the book, the reader instead feels empathy and compassion for young Will. Hesford's (2011) casting of Bakhtin's heteroglossia is especially helpful in illuminating the emotional pull of this particular narrative. The polyphony of voices and identities play an important role in Will's growth, with each of these voices emerging from a specific historical and social context. Thus the text and context of this narrative can be viewed as a cohesive whole rather than separate entities (11); one influences the other in powerful and realistic ways and reveal the complexities of Will's life.

While the context of this novel may be unfamiliar to the reader, the fantastical nature of Will's tale allows the reader to project their own emotions onto fictional characters and consider what they might do in the same situation (Nikolajeva 2012: 2). As Cain (2013) notes, reading fiction "expands our knowledge of others' lives, helping us recognize our similarity to them. It forces us to engage in mind reading and character construction, thus engendering empathy towards those characters" (69). Ultimately, fiction can change not only what people think about others who are different from them, but also how they think about others (Cain 2013: 69). This text, then functions as a window for a reader who is not familiar with the context of Will's life. More importantly, this text functions as a mirror for young African-American men who find themselves in dilemmas similar to Will's.

An examination of Reynolds' masterful structuring of this narrative reveals three approaches that invite the reader into an empathetic and emotional connection with Will: the establishment of cultural compassion; the use of the poetic form; and the creation of a flexible time structure.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF CULTURAL COMPASSION

Reynolds relies on the ability of the reader to come to a perhaps uneasy but justifiable understanding of the seemingly avoidable actions of the main character, Will, as he seeks revenge for his brother's murder. Without some understanding of the emotional state of Will, the reader can easily cast his actions as impulsive and indefensible. However, the careful structure of the text invites the reader to lend Will empathy from the first page, when Will, the narrator, addresses the reader directly saying,

> DON'T NOBODY
> believe nothing
> these days
> which is why I haven't
> told nobody the story
> I'm about to tell you. (1)

This second person narration draws the reader into dialogue with the narrator and in essence, invites the reader to accompany Will as he retells his story. This invitation sets a tone that creates a desire in the reader to believe Will from the first lines of the text, especially because Will acknowledges the questionable believability of his tale. In fact, on the following page, Will says:

> because after I tell you
> what I'm about to tell you
> you'll either want to be my friend
> or not
> want to be my friend
> at all.
> Either way,
> you'll know me
> know me. (2)

By agreeing to read the text, the reader is put on notice that they will, in the end, understand the narrator well, so an empathetic stance is established at the start of the novel.

In addition to the use of second person point of view, which invites the reader into a personal, intimate dialogue with the main character, Reynolds creates an authentic character by anchoring that character to a cultural landscape that is both believable and realistic. Will embodies the characteristics attributed to young African-American males in urban areas of the US in a variety of ways, most noticeably through the occasional use of the dialect African-American Vernacular English (AAVE, also referred to as Black English or Black Vernacular English). Although AAVE is not used exclusively by African-Americans, nor is it used by all African-Americans, it is nonetheless a dialect

closely associated with young men who are similar to Will: African-American adolescents living in poor urban areas. Children who use AAVE learn the dialect through participation in a wide range of familial and community activities, thus AAVE is grounded in "cultural rituals and traditions maintained by specific cultural socialization practices" (Harris and Schroeder 2013: 198). AAVE is viewed as a culturally rich dialect that supplements Standard Academic English (198).This use of a dialect other than Standard Academic English reflects Bakhtin's description of language as "alive and still in the process of becoming" (Bakhtin 1981: 97). AAVE emerged in the United States as the result of a long contact history between the languages of African slaves and people using colonial English. AAVE is viewed in the US as a grammatically consistent dialect that is governed by clear rules and usages (Wolfram 2003: 311). The use of AAVE by Will gives the reader a window into Will's life and creates Will as a three-dimensional, consistent character who emerges from his unique cultural context.

In addition to the use of negative concord[1] as illustrated in the above quote (i.e., Don't nobody believe nothing), other characteristics of AAVE are evident in the text, such as habitual be, as found in this excerpt:

> I DON'T KNOW YOU,
> don't know
> your last name,
> if you got
> brothers
> or sisters
> or mothers
> or fathers
> or cousins
> that be like
> brothers
> and sisters
> or aunties
> or uncles
> that be like
> mothers and fathers… (5)

[1] There are many unique characteristics of African-American Vernacular English, including: Absence of copula (e.g., He tall rather than He is tall); Habitual be (e.g., He be at the store, which means that he is usually at the store); Stressed bin (e.g., She bin married, meaning she has been married a long time and is still married); Completive done (e.g., He done did his homework, meaning He has already finished his homework); Absence of -s tense inflection (e.g., He go home late every day rather than He goes home late every day); and Negative concord (e.g., Can't nobody make none rather than There is no one who can make that)(Rahman 2008: 146). These consistent patterns in the dialect define AAVE as a rule-following, grammar-driven dialect and as such, it is viewed as an alternative to Standard Academic English rather than as a lower form of grammar.

This use of AAVE frames Will as a believable character who is deeply rooted in his community and culture.

Beyond language and point of view, Reynolds invites the reader into a more intimate understanding of Will through his proximity to gang culture. The reader learns that Will's brother, Shawn, was most likely affiliated with a gang, news that is somewhat surprising to Will. Will initially sees Shawn as a caring sibling and thoughtful son, and he is. In fact, when he was shot, Shawn was returning from a store with specialized ointment for his mother's skin ailment. Will describes the plastic bag holding his mother's medication, still clutched in his brother's hand as he lay dying in the street. Will says,

> IN THAT BAG,
> special soap
> for my mother's
> eczema.

This casting of Shawn as a kind and thoughtful son and caring brother troubles a unidimensional view of Shawn as a gang member. Reynolds instead shows the nuance and complexity of all members of Will's community through his characterization of Shawn. Shawn is both a kind-hearted son and a gang member who has shot and killed another young man and met the same fate himself.

After Shawn is killed, Will describes the questions from the police, the yellow crime scene tape surrounding Shawn's body, and the immediate aftermath of the shooting:

> Shawn was zipped into a bag
> and rolled away, his blood added
> to the pavement galaxy of
> bubblegum stars. The tape
> framed it like it was art. And the next
> day, kids would play mummy with it. (28)

Will's response to the scene of Shawn's death is dispassionate and pragmatic, not emotional and reactive as the reader would expect. Will seems to keep his feelings in check, not allowing himself to express the anguish he feels. As Towns (2007) notes, masculinity in gangs is "created and reaffirmed through poverty and violence" (44). As the story unfolds, Will attempts to assert his own dispassionate masculinity by avenging his brother's murder. Although he is only fifteen years old, Will takes on the cloak of masculinity by taking his brother's gun and seeking justice by killing the person he believes killed his brother. According to Towns, this type of revenge behavior is passed down from one generation to the next, with gang members learning from their elders how to act in the gang and how to deal with violent situations like the one Will encounters (46). Will's response to his brother's murder seems matter-of-fact.

In fact, certain violent acts such as murder may be required of gang members. These types of acts become the norm rather than the exception in gangs, and as such, become ethical decisions (47). The codes that have been passed down to Will – no crying, no snitching, always get revenge – become second nature to Will; the rules are ever-present and unquestionable. In this excerpt, Will describes the No Snitching rule:

> IN CASE YOU AIN'T KNOW,
> gunshots make everybody
> deaf and blind especially
> when they make somebody
> dead.
> Best to become invisible
> in times like these.
> Everybody knows that. (25)

Still, the reader can feel Will's hesitation as he comes to terms with what he is planning to do. For instance, when the ghost of his Uncle Mark steps onto the elevator, he asks Will what he intends to do with the gun in his waistband. Will struggles to tell his uncle of his plan to avenge his brother's death, barely able to choke out the words. In fact, as his uncle describes how the scenario may play out, Uncle Mark shouts at Will, "Finish it!" insisting that his nephew speak the words attached to his intended revenge. Still, Will cannot utter the words until after his uncle does:

> (he) finished it for me,
> said it slowly,
> dragging out the
> *shhhhhhhhhhh.*
> Then I could
> finally
> painfully
> hack it up.
> *And shoots.* (180)

Through this particular dialogic exchange, Will is seen as a frightened young man, not a hardened adolescent full of bravado. As the elevator descends to the street, Will learns the truth about his father, uncle, and brother, each of whom has shot and killed another person. They have all followed the rules, yet none of them appear proud of what they have done.

When Will first steps onto the elevator, he feels righteously justified in what he is about to do; however, as he encounters more and more ghosts from his past, he begins to question his own notions of justice. By the time he leaves the elevator, Will is questioning himself and trying to rationalize his decision to seek revenge. This shift in his thinking occurs over the sixty-seven seconds in the elevator, a brief period of time but enough time to provide Will the oppor-

tunity to consider pushing back against the culture that has taught him these iron-clad rules.

By describing directly and indirectly the world in which Will lives, Reynolds brings the reader into an uneasy but undeniable understanding of why Will feels compelled to take his revenge. It appears to the reader almost inevitable that the cycle of revenge will continue, yet throughout the text, Will's tough exterior is peeled away bit by bit to reveal a more vulnerable and empathetic character giving the reader hope that Will will resist revenge.

The reader finds themselves trapped in the elevator with Will and must, along with him, confront the realities of Will's life. Through the brief but poignant journey, the reader comes to see how Will's life is tied closely to his environment and his familial history. This understanding creates an emotional attachment to Will and causes the reader to hesitate to turn the page, fearful that he will make a fateful decision that will send his life on a dead-end trajectory.

THE USE OF THE POETIC FORM

In addition to creating a personal connection with Will, Reynolds' use of a poetic structure rather than prose creates space for the reader to empathize with Will. The sparseness of the dialogue reflects the impulsive thinking of Will and gives the reader a glimpse into Will's mind. Will is clearly hurting and is ready to visit his searing pain onto someone else – the man he believes killed his brother. The poetic form provides snapshots into Will's mind without belaboring his thinking or responses. For instance, when Will first holds Shawn's gun, he says:

> I HAD NEVER HELD A GUN
> Never even
> touched one.
>
> Heavier than
> I expected,
>
> like holding
> a newborn
>
> except I
> knew the
>
> cry would
> be much
>
> much much
> much louder. (59)

These small, sporadic reflections of Will's thinking lull the reader into thinking as Will does. The reader feels the flashes of logic through Will's mind and begins to understand why he feels compelled to obey the rules that have been passed down to him through generations. The poetic format facilitates this understanding and, through its sparseness, invites the reader to fill in the gaps (Botelho and Rudman 2009:196). As Will's story emerges, the gaps the reader fills in become more generous and compassionate. In fact, Reynolds demands resistance to objectifying Will as just another wayward adolescent, and instead pulls the reader into an intimate understanding of Will as a young, frightened young man who is trying desperately to navigate an unspeakable trauma that has been visited upon him at far too tender of an age.

Beyond its poetic form, *Long Way Down* can be categorized as a multimodal ensemble (Serafini 2014:12). Serafini defines a mode as "a system of visual and verbal entities created within or across various cultures to represent and express meanings" (12), such as written language, film, music, or photography; a multimodal ensemble is a text composed of more than one mode. *Long Way Down* is such a multimodal ensemble. On each of the pages there is a subtle but noticeable light gray background image. At times, the background appears to be a random speckling of light gray ink which creates a gritty appearance; on other pages, a clear woodgrain emerges, similar to the walls of the elevator on which Will is riding. As the elevator arrives at each floor, a page is inserted into the text that shows a grainy image of elevator buttons with a large white number indicating the floor where the elevator stops next. This multimodal structure adds to the credibility of an otherwise unbelievable story that borders on magic realism.

Even the structure of the text on the page serves an important purpose. At the start of the book, Will tells the reader about his brother's killing:

> because the day
> before yesterday,
> Shawn was shot (3)

This statement is left open-ended in the middle of the page, but upon turning to the next page, the reader encounters two words:

> and killed. (4)

This layout of the print on the page creates a hesitancy in which the reader is reluctant to turn the page and learn the painful truth that Will's brother has died.

Describing his reaction to Shawn's death, Will writes:

> I'VE NEVER BEEN
> in an earthquake.
> Don't know if this was
> even close to how they
> are, but the ground

defi nitely felt like
it o pened up
and ate me. (13)

The configuration of the text comes close to concrete poetry showing in the spaces the crack from an earthquake and how Will feels upon seeing his brother dead in the street. In this way, the configuration of the words on the page supplement the emotions Will is feeling. Even the imagery of the elevator implies that Will is trapped, perhaps in his own coffin, a coffin that is slowing being lowered to the ground. This image of the coffin-like elevator serves as an additional mode that contributes in a powerful way to the multimodal ensemble of the text. Indeed, the elevator holds the ghostly passengers of Will's life.

Each mode – the words, the spacing of words on the page, the background images – has its own "affordances and limitations" (Serafini 2014: 15), but together they coalesce for form a complete whole. The images "work alongside written language and design elements" (12) allowing the reader to read across these various components and make sense of them as a whole. Furthermore, these various aspects of the text contribute to the reader's understanding of Will's emotional state. The emotion ekprhasis or emotion discourse is multifaceted yet cohesive (Nikolajeva 2012: 3) and depicts and defines the plot and characters.

THE CREATION OF A FLEXIBLE TIME STRUCTURE

Further, while the entire elevator ride takes only sixty-seven seconds, the text describing this fateful ride spans 235 pages. Each time the elevator doors open to admit a new ghostly passenger, there is a timestamp at the top of the page letting the reader know that only a few seconds have elapsed since the last stop. These timestamps serve to stretch out time in the plot. While it may take ten minutes to read one chapter represented by one floor, the actual elapsed plot time is perhaps only seven seconds. This stretching out of time stands in stark contrast to the impulsivity demonstrated by Will as he decides how to respond to his brother's death. By slowing down time, Reynolds allows the main character to think more intentionally and more clearly about what he is about to do.

A defining characteristic of young adolescents is impulsivity (Sadowski 2008). Because their brains are still developing, young adolescents often use the emotional centers of their brains rather than the executive function centers of their brains to make decisions. In fact, young male adolescents under stress may have more difficulty understanding the consequences of their decisions (Stankovic, Fairchild, Aitken, Clark 2014: 29), and there is no doubt that Will is under considerable stress. In everyday situations, few young adolescents are given the time or skills they need to think through their decisions logically. In *Long Way Down*, Reynolds stretches out time for Will and affords him the

space and guidance he needs to make a better decision. Through the slowing down of time, Reynolds asserts that young men are indeed capable of making well-reasoned decisions but need the time and space to do so. In this way, Will is cast not as a future gang member, but rather as a still-developing adolescent who needs support. This stretching out of time also allows Will to revisit the past: the distant past with the death of his childhood friend seven years prior; the recent past with the death of his father; and the near past, with the death of his brother. Through the poetic structure of the text, this wide span of time can be traversed in much shorter order. Thus, time is both condensed and elongated, stretched and compressed, and through this time-bending process, Will is better positioned to make a rational decision.

As Michlin notes, empathy can arise through the conjuring up of physical and psychological pain from a character's past, and in this text, "the pathos of being haunted functions as a reflexive image for reading" (Michlin 2011: 84). The traumatic past, a past of which Will was blissfully unaware, comes hurtling into Will's life and changes how he views his own life and loved ones. This in turn changes how the reader views Will as the reader sympathizes with Will and begins to understand how Will's environment has created near-inevitable decisions for him.

CONCLUSION

Jason Reynolds has created a book that he might have wanted to read himself as a young adolescent. According to Reynolds, he was a reluctant reader because he did not see himself or his experiences reflected in the books that were made available to him. He says, "I know there are a lot – A LOT – of young people who hate reading. I know that many of these book haters are boys. I know that many of these book-hating boys don't actually hate books, they hate boredom" (jasonwritesbooks.com). Reynolds continues to share that he, too, hated being bored and so hated most of the books he was required to read. The characters in the books of Reynolds' youth had lives that were far removed from his own experiences, so rather than entering the literary realm through books, Reynolds entered through rap music, and through rap music, poetry.

Long Way Down then fills a gap that Reynolds experienced as a youth; it provides a mirror for young African-American males to see themselves reflected in a meaningful piece of literature. Young African-American males are ready to engage with literary works if only those works resonate with them. *Long Way Down* not only employs sophisticated rhetorical devices, it is also accessible to the intended audience. Its authentic portrayal of Will's dilemma would no doubt resonate with many reluctant readers.

Additionally, through its function as a window into the culture of young African-American males in low-income urban areas, *Long Way Down* challenges

the accepted narrative of people like the main character Will. The text unveils the systemic constraints that seem to be inescapable, systemic constraints like poverty, the availability of weapons, and allure of gang culture. By illuminating these issues, the reader can develop a more complex and nuanced view of people who may be different from them. Reynolds pushes back against a narrative of young African-American men as heartless killers and instead paints this population as young adolescents who need support, time, and guidance to reverse the negative trends that may surround them. They are still young and malleable to cultural forces that shape their lives. Reynolds' book *Long Way Down* brings the reader into an empathic understanding of the complexities of these young men's lives and in so doing, challenges the negative narrative that too often goes unchallenged.

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