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Challenging the Masculine Stereotypes: Representation of Adolescent African Americans in Jason Reynolds' *Long Way Down*

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Abstract: Since 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, there has long been a call in the United States for more diverse representation in children's and adolescent literature. Jason Reynolds, a well-known author of young adult books from the African-American community, is one such writer. His most recent work, *Long Way Down* (2019), tells the moving tale of Will, a fifteen-year-old African-American boy who must choose between life and death. Owing to the overabundance of gang-related activities in his neighbourhood, Will could be seen as impetuous and possibly dangerous, but Reynolds' careful construction of the text encourages the reader to reevaluate this judgement and instead take a more sympathetic perspective toward Will. More precisely, the author uses chronological flexibility, poetic style, and cultural compassion to drive the reader into a greater understanding of the nuances of Will's life. Young African-American readers who want for stories that mirror their lives and that illuminate the difficulties they have as they negotiate the violence that frequently blights urban life will find the main character's humane treatment to be a tale that appeals to them. In addition, *Long Way Down* offers a compelling and realistic alternative narrative to the all-too-common stereotype of violent and dangerous African-American men.

Keywords: Jason Reynolds, diverse literature, verse novel, African-American, stereotypes, young adult literature.

It has long been recognised how crucial multicultural representation is in children's literature since it allows for the negotiation of identities. In order for children to create, shape, and value their own identities, they need to see themselves and their own experiences reflected in the books they read. Literature serves as a mirror for young readers in this way, reflecting back to them the importance of their own lives and experiences. Children's Literature plays an equally important role in giving readers a window into cultures that are different from their own. Botelho and Rudman write about the multicultural representation in the work Critical *Multicultural Analysis of Children's Literature: Mirrors, Windows, and Doors* (2009) as to "go beyond themselves to images, ideas, and cultures that are outside their daily realities and vicariously experience another culture" (265). This allows readers to look beyond themselves to images,

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ideas, and cultures that are outside of their daily realities and to experience another culture through vicariously reading about it. Children who experience cultures other than their own can start to reflect on their experiences, look at power dynamics, and develop cross-cultural competences, which will help them to become engaged, informed members of their communities. Children's Literature both develops from and reflects a culture, but it can also reflect injustice. Particularly powerful writing can drive the reader toward addressing injustice.

Nevertheless, there is still a disconnect between the diversity of texts written for children and the real diversity in the population, despite the significance of multicultural children's literature. For many years, for instance, there were few novels written by and about African-Americans and published in the US. Even in 1985, when more than 10% of the US population was African-American, only 18 of the around 2500 books published for children and youth were authored by African-American authors, according to the Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Fortunately, since then, there has been a rise in the representation of African-Americans in Children's Literature, with over six- hundred books by or about African-Americans released in 2018, a number that better reflects the distribution of African-Americans within the US population.

Undoubtedly, African-American authors are eager to contribute to the subject of children's literature, but owing to a publishing market that largely favours White authors who write about White characters, they run into resistance and struggle to have their novels published. However, a number of black authors have arisen and are becoming more well-known. Jason Reynolds is possibly one of the most well-known black authors of Young Adult literature. Reynolds is a prolific writer who has penned twelve books for young adults in the past ten years. His works have won honours and prizes, including the Walter Dean Myers Award for Outstanding Children's Literature. Reynolds has established himself as a renowned novelist for young teens, particularly those African-American male readers who feel there is little in contemporary fiction that will interest them. Reynolds has made clear contributions to the field of multicultural writing.

A great example of a novel that reflects the lived experience of an African-American youngster who is faced with life-or-death choices is *Long Way Down*, one of Reynolds' most recent book. Although the stereotype of young African-American men living in metropolitan areas is widespread in American culture, Reynolds' poetic narrative offers a deeper view of the problems these young men face on a daily basis. Reynolds transforms a character that initially comes off as rather unsympathetic into a scared, helpless young man who the reader can empathise with. This article's goals are to investigate the techniques Reynolds use to evoke a strongly emotional response from the reader and to make a case for more literature written for underserved audiences.

Will, a fifteen-year-old African-American high school student who lives in a low-income area of an American metropolis, serves as the book's main character and narrator. When the novel begins, Will tells the reader about the previous twenty-four hours of his life, including the shooting death of his brother Shawn. The narrative is told entirely in poetry verse and starts with Will hearing his mother sobbing in the adjacent room as he is in his bedroom on the eighth floor of his apartment building, which he shared with his now-deceased brother. Will acknowledges that he too wants to cry but fights the temptation to lament his sibling. He informs the audience in *Long Way Down*:

I FELT LIKE CRYING
which felt like

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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)

Despite this horrible incident, Will does not show any outward symptoms of sorrow. The three things that invariably occur after a gunshot in his area are screaming, sirens, and police inquiries, which he goes on to narrate in a voice that is remarkably calm. Each of these things, in fact, happened right away after Shawn, Will's brother, who was shot on the street and left to die. Even though these three occurrences are unavoidable, there are other patterns that run throughout Will's life. Beyond these three phenomena are the rigid guidelines that Will discusses in unbiased detail and which regulate people's life in his community in the event of tragedy: Never cry; never inform the police who killed the person; and always seek retribution.

Through these straightforward guidelines, Will explains his own inescapable reaction to his brother's passing: in order to find the man he thinks killed his brother, Will grabs his brother's gun from the bedside cabinet, tucks it into the waistline of his trousers, and enters the elevator. He intends to kill Riggs, the alleged shooter, using Shawn's gun as Riggs exits his house after waiting outside. According to the laws of his society, Will's proposal is an immediate and direct response, a form of vigilante justice that is expected and not wholly shocking. This perspective reduces Will's actions to nothing more than obeying the simple guidelines and rituals that govern his life. However, a mysterious person boards the elevator as it comes to a stop on the seventh floor while Will is still inside. The new passenger's staring at Will makes Will feel more uncomfortable because it's clearly against the elevator's rules, which Will cites as:

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

However, this new person continues to look at Will and even starts a cigarette—clearly a violation of the elevator's rules. Eventually, the new figure engages Will in conversation, and Will realises that the new traveller is really the one who handed his brother Shawn the exact gun he is currently concealing in the waistline of his trousers. Will, however, is perplexed and alarmed to learn that Buck, the man in the elevator, passed away from gun violence a number of years ago. When the elevator doors shut and it lurches to the next floor, Will is still trying to make sense of this bizarre circumstance.

Each time the elevator stops at a floor as it lowers, a fresh spectral passenger boards. Each new passenger represents a person Will is familiar with who passed away as a result of gun violence, and each new passenger has advice to impart to Will. An apparent allusion to the circumstances of her own death, Dani, a childhood friend who was murdered by a stray bullet while playing on the playground, joins Will in the elevator at the sixth level. She asks Will what he will do if he misses when he attempts to shoot Riggs. Will makes an effort to explain to Dani why he must pursue retribution for the murder of Shawn:

DANI WAS KILLED
before she ever learned

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The Rules.
So I explained them to
her so she wouldn't think
less of me for following
them. (141)

Dani nonetheless seems to be against Will's scheme. The party is joined in the elevator at the fifth floor by Uncle Mark, his father's brother. Uncle Mark queries, "Why are you here?" (167). Will now finds it difficult to explain his strategy and can hardly get the words out:

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

Will eventually divulges to his uncle his intentions to exact revenge on Shawn's killer. The father of Shawn and Will, Mikey, is the following person to board the elevator at floor four. When Mikey was alive, he also adhered to the neighborhood's norms. After his brother Mark was killed, Mikey decided to avenge him by killing the culprit. However, Mikey acknowledges that in his quest for vengeance for the death of his own brother, he killed the wrong guy. Mikey responds when Will asks his father why he killed the wrong person:

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

Will uses the exact words 'had to be' as he figures out who shot his brother. Will, like his father, lacks evidence that the person he believes killed his brother was indeed responsible for that murder. Frick follows in the elevator at floor three, and Will learns that Shawn was responsible for his death. Will is confused and insecure as a result of this nested pattern of murders, in which one phantom passenger is accountable for the death of another. He finds it difficult to keep up his cold, calculating facade and even starts to cry a little as he discovers the unpleasant reality about those he used to admire and adore.

Shawn, Will's brother, is the final person to board the elevator at floor two; he cries rather than speaks. The first rule of the streets, which Shawn taught Will when his friend Dani died on the playground, is broken by Shawn's tears. Shawn is the one who asks Will, "You coming?" (Reynolds 322) to conclude the text. Will is faced with a simple decision in response to this succinct but profound question: exact his retribution and become yet another victim of vengeance, joining the others on the elevator, or break the law and stop the cycle of violence. The text suggests that Will will defy expectations and break the pattern of violence that has saturated his existence, even though Reynolds does not let the reader to see him make this choice. The reader hopes that the cycle is stopped because there are numerous instances of rules being broken throughout the narrative, first in the elevator and then by Shawn breaking the first rule - no sobbing.

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The way Reynolds engages the reader in an emotional interpretation of Will's story is arguably what strikes the reader as most remarkable about his novel. Monica Michlin writes about presentation of emotions in literature in her article, *Voices that Move Us: Narrative Voice, Emotion, and Political Thrust in Contemporary American Literature* (2011) as, "expressing emotion and fostering empathy" (82) is one of literature's main purposes. From afar, it is simple to criticise people like Will, who repeatedly commit acts of violence that appear pointless in an effort to establish their strength, respectability, or, at the very least, their willingness to abide by the laws of retribution. However, because of the way Reynolds organised the book, the reader is instead moved to feel sympathy and compassion for little Will. In particular, Wendy Hesford's *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, and Feminisms* (2011) reading of casting Bakhtin's heteroglossia is beneficial in shedding light on the narrative's emotional pull. Will's development is significantly influenced by the polyphony of voices and identities, each of which emerged from a distinct historical and social setting. As a result, it is possible to interpret the text and setting of this story as one continuous unit rather than as two distinct things (11); the two have strong, realistic relationships that highlight the complexity of Will's life.

M. Nikolajeva observes in the work, *Guilt, Empathy, and the Ethical Potential of Children's Literature* (2012) regarding the imaginative nature of Will's story that allows the reader to project their own feelings onto fictional characters and evaluate what they may do in the same scenario, even though the reader may not be familiar with the backdrop of this book (2). According to M.A.Cain in *Children's Books for Building Character and Empathy* (2013), reading fiction "expands our knowledge of others' lives, helping us to recognize our similarity to them. It forces us to engage in mind reading and character construction, thus engendering empathy towards those characters" (69). In the end, fiction has the power to alter people's perceptions of both themselves and others, not just those who are different from them. Therefore, the text serves as a portal for a reader who is unfamiliar with the circumstances surrounding Will's life. More importantly, this book serves as a lens for young African-American men who experience problems akin to those Will faced.

Therefore, the text serves as a portal for a reader who is unfamiliar with the circumstances surrounding Will's life. More importantly, this book serves as a lens for young African-American men who experience problems akin to those Will faced. The cultivation of cultural compassion, the employment of the poetry form, and the development of a flexible structure are three strategies that Reynolds uses to bring the reader into an emotional and empathetic connection with Will.

Reynolds depends on the reader's capacity to grasp the seemingly avoidable actions of the main character, Will, as he pursues retribution for his brother's murder. This comprehension may be unsettling but is justified. Without any knowledge of Will's mental state, the reader may perceive his acts as impetuous and unreasonable. However, the text's smart organisation encourages the reader to feel for Will right once. On the first page, the narrator, Will, says to the reader,

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

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In essence, the reader is invited to travel alongside Will as he narrates his journey in the second person through this narrative's use of dialogue. From the opening lines of the text, this invitation develops a tone that makes the reader want to trust Will, especially as Will acknowledges the dubious plausibility of his story. In reality, Will states on the next page:

> 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).

The reader is warned that they will ultimately comprehend the narrator by agreeing to read the material, which establishes an empathic position at the beginning of the book. As parallel to using the second person point of view, which allows the reader to have a private, intense connection with the primary character, Reynolds also establishes a realistic figure by placing that character in a convincing and realistic cultural context. Will exhibits traits typical of young African-American men living in US cities in a number of ways, but perhaps most prominently through the usage of the dialect known as African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), also known as Black English or Black Vernacular English, on occasion.

However not primarily spoken by African-Americans and not by all African-Americans, AAVE is a dialect that is frequently spoken by adolescent boys who resemble Will and who live in underdeveloped metropolitan areas. As noted by Harris and Schroeder in *Language Deficits or Differences: What We Know about African-American Vernacular English in the 21st Century* (2013), adolescents who speak AAVE acquire the dialect by taking part in "cultural rituals and traditions maintained by specific cultural socialization practices" (198). AAVE is regarded as an adjunct variant to Standard Academic English that is rich in culture. By using a dialect other than Standard Academic English, the author is adhering to Bakhtin's definition of language as "alive and still in the process of becoming" (97) in his work, The *Dialogic Imagination* (1981).

Will is presented as a likeable figure that is well anchored in his town and culture thanks to this use of AAVE. Reynolds leads the reader into a closer comprehension of Will through his proximity to gang culture, going beyond language and point of view. Will is a little surprised to find that Shawn, his brother, was probably associated with a gang, as is the reader. Will first perceives Shawn as a kind brother and a kind son, and he is. In truth, Shawn was coming from the store with a specific cream for his mother's skin condition when he was shot. Will talks about how his brother was dying in the street with the plastic bag containing his mother's medication still in his hand.

This portrayal of Shawn as a loving son and caring brother challenges the stereotype of Shawn as just a gang banger. Reynolds instead uses Shawn to illustrate the richness and nuance of all the people in Will's group. Indeed as a good-hearted son and a member of a gang, Shawn has shot and killed another young guy and suffered the same fate. Will's reaction to the scene of Shawn's death is detached and practical, as opposed to the reader's expectation of an emotional and emotive response. Will does not seem to let his distress out, instead appearing to control his emotions. Armond R. Towns writes in *Ghetto Blues: The Organizational Street Culture of Black "Masculine" Gang Members in a White World* (2007) on production of masculinity in such

communities as, "created and reaffirmed through poverty and violence" (44). Towns claims that this sort of vengeful behaviour is passed down from one generation to the next, with gang members learning from their elders how to behave in the gang and how to handle dangerous circumstances like the one Will runs into. Will's reaction to his brother's murder appears unflappable. In reality, gang members might be obliged to commit certain violent crimes like murder. In gangs, these kinds of behaviours turn into the custom rather than the exclusion, and as a result, they become moral choices. No sobbing, no snitching, always get revenge—these commandments that have been passed down to Will become second nature to him; they are constant and undeniable.

Reynolds goes on to say that he detested reading assignments because, like him, he detested being bored. Reynolds first joined the literary world through rap music, and through rap music, poetry, because the lifestyles of the characters in the novels he read as a child were very different from his own. The void that Reynolds felt as a young person is then filled by *Long Way Down*, which offers a mirror for young African-American guys to see themselves mirrored in an important work of literature. If only the literary works they are interested in resonate with them, young African-American men will engage with them. In addition to using advanced rhetorical strategies, *Long Way Down* is also understandable to the target audience.

Furthermore, *Long Way Down* challenges the conventional perception of individuals like the main character Will, by serving as a window into the lifestyle of young African-American boys in poor urban regions. The text reveals the structural limitations that appear to be unavoidable, such as poverty, the accessibility of firearms, and the appeal of gang culture. The reader can build a more complex and nuanced understanding of others who may be different from them by clarifying concerns. Reynolds challenges the stereotype of young African-American men as cold-blooded killers by portraying them as impressionable teenagers who require assistance, patience, and direction in order to buck possible social norms. They are still young and susceptible to the forming influences of culture.

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