Transcription for Episode 56: Creative Conversations with Renée Watson and Jason Reynolds (I, Too, Arts Collective)

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Ellen Hagan: Renée Watson is the acclaimed author of the teen novel *This Side of Home* and two picture books *Harlem's Little Blackbird* and *A Place Where Hurricanes Happen* which was featured on *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams*. Her middle-grade novel *What Mama Left Me* debuted as an ABC New Voices Pick. Renéehas been nominated for an NAACP award and has performed at the United Nations, Lincoln Center, Schomburg Center, and the Library of Congress. She's the founder of the I, Too Arts Collective.

Jason Reynolds is the author of *When I Was the Greatest* for which he was the recipient of the Coretta Scott King John Steptoe Award for New Talent, the Coretta Scott King Honor Books *The Boy in the Black Suit* and *All American Boys* cowritten with Brendan Kiely. Also the winner of the Walter Dean Myers Award, *As Brave As You*, his stunning middle-grade debut that was a *TIME* Book of the Year and winner of the Kirkus Awards, and *Ghost*, the first book in his middle-grade track series which was also a National Book Award finalist. I feel like even before we go on we should just applaud the greatness. [Applause]

So the work they do bridges and dialogues with the world. They write books we want our children to be reading, books we want our schools to be adopting into the curriculum. As educators and activists their work deals specifically with issues around social justice such as gentrification, racism, police brutality, and at the same time they envision better futures full of joy and push to make our communities and home better. Please join me in celebrating the launch of *Piecing Me Together* with Renée Watson and Jason Reynolds. [Applause]

Renée: Good evening.

Jason: Good evening.

Renée: Thank you all for being here. Thank you Ellen for that beautiful introduction. Thank you, Jason.

Jason: Thank you.

Renée: For being here.

Jason: This is Renée Watson, y'all. [Laughter]

Renée: So we are going to start with sharing some of our work with you. Jason's going to read first then I'll read and then we're just going to talk for a little bit.

Jason: Yeah.

Renée: And then we'll open it up and be in conversation with you all. So if you have questions or anything like that hold on to them and we'll get to that towards the end. Thank you for being here tonight.

Jason: All right, so I know that *Ghost* is on sale but I figure I'm going to try something new.

Audience: New stuff!

Renée: New stuff.

Jason: So here's the thing, I don't know how many of you read *Ghost* but if you haven't read it I'm about to spoil it so . . . [Laughter] I apologize in advance. But I'm going to read the first chapter of the second book in the series which comes out August 29th.

Renée: Woo.

Jason: And it's about Patina, and it's funny because I know – I thought about reading *Ghost*. I was like we're just going to have like a Black girl night.

Renée: Thank you.

Jason: Because I wrote about a Black girl, and I know you write about Black girls. You wrote about a Black girl in this one. I was like why don't we just celebrate Black girls? So if this is whack, this is your moment to let me know. [Laughter] You know what I'm saying? Don't wait until it comes out. Y'all give me the one star on Goodreads. No controversy. Okay, here we go.

Chapter one. And just I guess the only thing you should know is the track series is about a track scene. *Ghost* is the first one – the first book in the series – and Ghost was a young man who ran his first race at the end of the book. And so that's where we're going to pretty much start.

[Reading] Ain't no such thing as a false start because false means fake and ain't no fake starts in track. Either you start or you don't. Either you run or you don't. No in-between. Now there can be a wrong start. That makes more sense to me. Maybe you just start at the wrong time, just jump early, and break out running when no one's there running with you, no competition except for your own brain that swells the people on your heels but ain't nobody there. Not for real. Ain't no chaser. That's what they really mean when they say false start, a real start at the wrong time.

And at the first meet of the season nobody knew this better than Ghost. Before the race me and everybody else stood on the sidelines clapping to hype Ghost and Lu up as they took their marks. This was of course after they had already gassed each other up, talking to each other like there was no one else on the track but them. Funny how they went from mean-mugging each other when they first met to becoming all buddy-buddy like they're their own two-man gang or something, Lu and Ghost sticking together like glue. Hah, glue. Ghost and Lu. Glue. Get it? [Laughter] That could be their corny crew name. Lost would also work. As a matter of fact there

was a moment where I thought that name might even be more fitting, especially after what Ghost did.

See, at first I thought he timed it perfectly. I thought Ghost pushed off from the line at the exact moment the gun went off as if he knew when it was coming, like he could feel it on the inside or something. But he didn't hear the second shot. Well, I take that back. Of course he heard it because it was a loud boom and it was impossible not to hear, but he didn't know to admit that he jumped too early, that he false-started. I mean this was his first race so he had no clue that that second shot meant to stop running and start over, so he didn't. [Laughter] He ran the entire 100 meters. Didn't know that people weren't cheering him on, but were yelling for him to pull up, to go back to the starting line. So when he got to the finish line he threw his hands up in victory and turned around with a smile so wide, then he noticed that all the other runners – his competition – was still up at the top of the track. He looked out into the crowd, everybody laughing, pointing, shaking their heads while Ghost dropped his, stared at the black tar, his chest like someone blowing up a balloon inside him then letting the air out then blowing it back up then letting the air out again.

I was afraid that balloon was going to bust, that Ghost was going to burst open like he used to do when he first joined this team. And I could tell by the way he was chewing on the side of his jaw that he wanted to, or maybe he wanted to keep running off the track, out of the park, all the way home. Coach walked over to him, whispered something in his ear. I don't know what it was but it was probably something like "It's okay. It's okay. Settle down. You're still in it. [Laughter] But if you do it again – if you do it again, you're disqualified." Nah, nah, nah. Knowing Coach, it was probably something a little more deep like I don't know. I can't even think of nothing right now, but Coach was full of deep. Whatever it was, Ghost lifted his head and trotted back to the line where Lu was waiting with his hand out for a five. Ghost was still out of breath, but there was no time for him to catch it. He had to get back down on his mark, get ready to run it all over again. The starter held the gun up in the air again. My stomach flipped over again. The man pulled the trigger again. Boom, again, and Ghost took off again. And it was almost like his legs were sticks of dynamite, and that the first run was just the fuse being lit and now the tiny fire had gotten to the blow-up part. And let me tell you, Ghost? He blew up, busted wide-open in the best way. I mean the dude exploded down the line in a blur even faster this time, his silver shoes like sparks flipping up off the track. First race, first place, even after a false start.

And if a false start means a real start at the wrong time, the wrong time being too early, then I must have had a false finish which also ain't a fake finish but a real finish, just too late. Make sense? Just in case it don't, let me explain. [Laughter] See, my race was up next and here's the thing: I've been running the 800 for three years straight. It's my race. I've got a system. I've got a way of running it. I come off the block strong and low, and by the time I'm straight up my stride be steady but I always allowed myself to drop back a little. You know, you've got to keep it cool for the first lap. You've got to pace yourself. That's where 800 runners blow it. They start out too fast and be rigged by the second lap. I've seen a lot of girls get roasted out there showboating on that first 400.

But I knew better. I knew the second 400 was the kicker. What I didn't know, though, was just how fast the girls in this new league were, what kind of shape they were in. So when the gun

blew and we took off I realized that the pace I had to keep just to stay with the pack was faster than I was used to, but of course I'm thinking these girls are stupid. They're going to be tired in 20 seconds, in 30 seconds, in 40 seconds. Never happened. And instead it ended up being me saying to myself "Oh God, I'm tired. How am I so tired?" As we rounded into the final 200 I had to dig deep and step it up, so I turned on my jets.

Now here's how it went: cornrows, low-cut, pony-tail, and puny-tail in front of me. Chop me down, Patty. Push, push, push, breathe. Cornrows is on my side. The crowd is screaming the traditional chant when someone is getting passed, "Whoop. Whoop." Push, Patty. Push. Stride wide open. Chop them down, Patty. Arms pumping, whipping the air out of my way like water. Low-cut is slowing up. Her little pea head's bobbling like it could snap right off. She's tired. Finally the "Whoop." Got her. Two more to go. Pony-tail can't feel me coming, or maybe she can. She can probably hear my footsteps over the screaming crowd. She knows I'm close, and then she makes the biggest mistake ever, the one thing every coach tells you never to do: she looks back.

[9:45]

See, when you look back it automatically knocks your stride off and gets you messed up mentally. And once pony-tail looked over her shoulder the Woops started back like a siren. "Whoop. Whoop." 50 meters. That's right, I'm coming. Chop them down, Patty. I'm coming. I can see puny-tail just ahead of her, that little twist of hair in the back of her head like a snake tongue. She was running out of breath. I could see that by the way her form had broken down. Pony-tail was too. We all were. And even worse for me, we were also running out of track. I got pony-tail by a nose. Second place, then collapsed. People were cheering all around me, jumping up and down in the stands, quickly becoming the wavy blur of color as the tears rolled. Second place? Stupid second place? No way was I going to cry. I mean trust me, I wanted to, water prickling at my eyelids. But no way, I wanted to kick something. I was mad. Coach Whit came over and helped me up, and once I was standing I yanked away from her and limped over to the bench. My legs were burning and cramping but I wanted to kick something anyway, maybe kick the bench over, kick those stupid orange slices Lu's mama always be bringing. Anything.

But instead I just sat down and I didn't say a word for the rest of the meet. Yeah, I'm a sore loser if that's what you want to call it. To me, though, I just like to win and I only want to win. Anything else is false, fake, but real. So real. So real I didn't even want to talk about it on the way to church the next day. Not with no one. Not even with God. I spent all morning braiding Maddi's hair in the same way Ma used to braid mine when I was little, only difference is ma got fat fingers and used to be braiding like she was trying to strip my edges and make me bald, talking about got to make it tight so it don't come loose. Right.

But I don't even do Maddi's that tight, and I can knock out a whole head full of hair in an hour if she sits still which she never does. "How many more?" Maddi whines squirming on the floor in front of me. "I'm almost done. Just chill out so I can . . ." and then I pick up a can of beads and I shake them in her ear like one of those Spanish shaker things. And just like that she calms down and lets me tilt her head forward so I can braid that last section, the bit of curls tightly wound at the base of her neck. I dip my finger in the gunk on the back of my hand and massage it into

Maddi's scalp. Then I stroke grease into the leftover bush ball, tugging it straight, then letting it go, watching it shrink back into dark brown cotton candy. "What colors you want?" I ask, separating the hair into three different parts.

"Um . . ." Maddi put her finger to her chin acting like she was thinking. I say acting because she knew what colors she wanted. She picked the same color every week. As a matter of fact, there was only one color in the can. [Laughter] "I want red," we both said at the same time, me of course with a little more pepper and a little less pep. Maddi tried to whip around and give me a funny face but I was mid-braid. "Uh-uh, stay still." Then came the beading. Today, 30 braids, so three red braids on each braid, 90 beads. I used tiny bits of aluminum foil on the ends to keep the beads from slipping off even though I knew they would anyway, but who's got time to use them little rubber bands? Not me and definitely not Maddi. When we finished Maddi did what she always did. She ran to the bathroom and I followed her like I always did and lifted her up so she could see herself in the mirror. She smiled, her mouth like a piano with only one black key, one front tooth missing. Then Maddi ran back to the living room and blew a kiss at a picture propped up on the table next to the TV, the same picture every time of me at her age – seven – with a big cheese and the missing front tooth and braids and red beads and aluminum foil on the ends.

I do Maddi's hair every Sunday for two reasons. The first is because Mamali can't do it. If it was up to her, Maddi's hair would be in two afro puffs every day. Either that or Mamali would've just shaved it all off by now. It's that she don't care; she do. It's just she don't know what to do with hair like Maddi's, like ours. Ma do, but Mamali? Nah. She never had to deal with nothing like this before and there ain't no rulebook for white people to know how to work with black hair. And her husband, my Uncle Tony, he ain't no help. Ever since they adopted us, every time I talk about Maddi's hair, Uncle Tony say the same thing: "Just let it rock," like he's going to sit in the back of Maddi's class and stink-face all the six-year-old bullies in berets. Right.

But luckily for everybody, especially Maddi, I know what I'm doing. I've been a Black girl all my life. The other reason I always do Maddi's hair on Sundays is because that's when we see Ma, and she don't want to see Maddi looking like she never been nowhere. So after Maddi's hair get done we get dressed, as in dressed up, all the way up. Maddi put on one of her church dresses, a white pair of leather shoes that most people only wear on Easter Sunday, but for us, for Ma, every Sunday is like Easter Sunday. I put on a dress too, run a comb through my hair until it cooperates, ugly black ballerina flats because Ma don't want me looking fast in the house of the Lord. Then Mamali drives across town to Barnaby Terrace, my old neighborhood. And Barnaby Terrace is fine. I don't really know what else to say about it except for the fact that there ain't nothing really to say about it. Ain't nobody rich, that's for sure. Ain't nobody poor either. Everybody's just regular. Regular people going to regular jobs having regular kids who go to regular schools and grow up and be regular people with regular jobs and on and on and on.

And I guess everything was pretty regular about me too until eight years ago. Me and my dad were having one of our famous invisible cupcake parties, kind of like how you'd be seeing little girls on TV shows drinking fake tea at tea parties but you know it don't never be nothing in the cups? Like that, except I don't have no tea set and my mom wouldn't let us use her real teacups which were really just random coffee mugs. Plus my dad always said tea don't even drink good enough to pretend to drink it. [Laughter] He also said tea – he also said that tea and eat be made

up of the same letters anyway, so pretending to eat was pretty much the same as pretending to drink. And what better thing to pretend to eat than cupcakes? And that's what we always had, imaginary cupcakes.

But on this night my mother cut the party short because it was a school night, plus she was pregnant with Maddi at the time and needed my father to massage her feet. So he whispered in my ear "Sl, sl, sleep tight sweet pancake. Your mama and the waffle needs me." Then he kissed me goodnight, first on the forehead, then on the cheek, then on the other cheek. I don't know what happened next. My guess is that after rubbing my mama's feet he kissed her goodnight too. And Maddi, the little waffle who was probably being all fidgety in ma's stomach, I bet dad pressed his lips right on the belly button then rolled over and went to sleep and never woke up, like ever. It's crazy.

And if we had been allowed to drink pretend tea in my mama's real cups they all would've been shattered the next morning when she woke me up, her face wet with tears, and blurted "Something's happened." I would've smashed each and every one of them cups on the floor, and I would've smashed more of them four years later when my mother had two toes cut off her right foot and even more six months after that when she had that whole foot cut off and six months after that – three years ago – when my mama had both her legs chopped off which I'm telling you would've left the whole stupid cabinet empty, broken mugs everywhere, nothing left to drink from.

But I didn't. Instead I just swallowed it all, wished this was all some kind of invisible pretend something. But it wasn't. And to be clear, it's not like my mom just wanted her legs cut off obviously. She got the sugar. Well, it's really a disease called diabetes but she called it the sugar so I call it the sugar. Plus I like that better than diabetes because diabetes got the word die in it and I hate that word. But sugar broke Ma's lower extremities which is how doctors be saying legs. It just went crazy all in her body, stopped the blood flow to her feet. I used to have to rub grease on them at night just like my dad used to do and it was like putting lotion on two tree trunks, dry and cracked, swollen and dark like she'd been standing in coal. But at some point she just couldn't feel them no more and I went from moisturizing them to trying to rub them back to life. And after that they were basically – I guess the best way to explain it is to say dead. Her feet had died. Like I said, I hate that word but there ain't no other way to say it. And I guess death can travel, can spread like a fire in the body, so the doctors had to go ahead and cut her legs off. They call it amputate which for some reason makes me think of something growing, not something being chopped just above the knee to keep my mom from dying.

Maddi was only four at the time and ever since she was born I've been helping out the best I could with her. But with mom losing her legs, helping out became straight up taking care of. I'm talking about keeping lists of things in my head that I had to take care of, like to do, make sure Maddi gets up for school; to do, make sure Maddi got breakfast; to do, make sure her backpack is packed and organized; to do, everything. So my godparents, my dad's brother, Tony and his wife Emily, stepped in and took over as our sole guardians which is kind of like a soul guardian which is kind of like a guardian angel. And I bet Uncle Tony and Auntie Emily who Maddi used to call Mommy Emily, which became Mamali, had no idea that when they said they would be our godparents that they were inheriting all this drama. I bet they just thought they'd give us

some random gifts on random days, days that wasn't our birthday or Christmas; slip us ten dollar bills just because; stuff like that. Not take care of us all the way. That's a lot.

But they always acted like they were cool with it, like this is what they signed up for. And we're grateful even though I've still got to look out for Maddi because, you know, I just do. I still keep a list in my brain. Plus Mamali can't do black hair for nothing. Why am I telling you this long story again? Oh, that's right, I remember: because Sundays. On Sundays, like I said, Maddi's hair got to be right for Ma. All right, first chapter. [Applause]

Renée: So good. So, so good.

[19:45]

Jason: Black girls. I love Black girls. Y'all a specific bunch. [Laughter]

Renée: What is that?

Jason: In all the best ways.

Renée: Okay, add on to that.

Jason: Because when I was writing it – we'll talk about it.

Renée: Okay. [Laughter] All right, I'm also going to read about a Black girl.

Jason: Woo!

Renée: Jade. And I'm reading from *Piecing Me Together*. I'm starting very early in the novel so there's not much to setup.

Piecing Me Together. I wake up before the sun, so early that only tracks and people up to no good are on the streets. There's nothing in the fridge but baking soda in the way back and half-empty bottles of ketchup, barbecue sauce, and mustard on the door. I drink a glass of water, take a shower, get dressed, and leave by 6:30 so I can get to the bus. I arrive at 35 through a maze of houses that all look like one another like sisters who are not twins but everybody thinks they are. Living here means when people ask "Where do you live?" and you say "The New Columbia," they say "You mean The Villa?" and remind you that your neighborhood used to be public housing for World War II shipyard workers. And they remind you how by the '80s a lot of those apartments were run down and how really they were just the projects with a different name. At least that's what my mom says. She's always telling me "I don't care if they give the hood a new name or not. It's still the hood."

Lots of people can't find beauty in my neighborhood, but I can. Ever since elementary school I've been making beauty out of everyday things, candy wrappers, pages of a newspaper, receipts, rip-outs from magazines. I'd cut and tear, arrange and rearrange, and glue them down, morphing them into something no one else thought they could be like me. I'm ordinary too. Nothing's

fancy about my life but my name, Jade. But I am not precious like the gem. There is nothing exquisite about my life, but it's mine though so I'm going to make something of it. Not only for me, but for my mom too, because she's always saying "I never thought I'd be here forever but that's how things turned out." And when she says this I know that what she means is that if she hadn't gotten pregnant when she was 16 she would've moved away from Portland, would've had fewer struggles.

She never outright blames me for making her life harder than it needed to be. Instead she pushes me hard, "Because no one pushed me," she says. One of us has to make it out of here and I'm her only child, her only hope of remaking herself. Dad saw a different future for himself too, but unlike mom I think I changed him in all the best ways. He's always telling me how I made him settle down and get himself together. "And just because me and your mom didn't work out doesn't mean I don't love you," he tells me. He lives with his girlfriend who I actually like even though I'd never tell my mom that.

Mom never talks bad about her, but I know I'm not supposed to like this woman who knew my dad had a girlfriend, a daughter, but flirted with him anyway. This woman who was white and everything opposite of my mom with her college degree and good-paying job. I try to stay out of any talk about dad, his girlfriend, and what happened with him and my mom. At least he's in my life. A lot of my friends can't say that. Dad calls me his queen, says I am the best thing that happened to him. I think about this as I ride to school, how I am someone's answered prayer but also someone's deferred dream.

So Jade gets to school and she's super excited about a meeting that she's having with her counselor because she thinks she's about to be given an opportunity to go study abroad, but instead she's given an opportunity to join a mentoring program so she is not happy about it. She gets this mentor and she doesn't really connect with her right away and she feels like all this woman wants to do is change her and talk about superficial things: how to wear your hair, how to get a guy to like you, and all those kinds of things. And so she's really disappointed in the woman-to-woman program, and she's just left a meeting and she's thinking about these women and how they're talking to them and trying to raise them to be women. And she's questioning what it means to be a woman, and she stops at a Dairy Queen on the way home.

The line at Dairy Queen is backed up all the way to the door and it's hard to tell who has ordered already and who hasn't. There's a woman holding on to her toddler's hand while fussing with her other child who looks about five telling him to stop touching the dirty table that's coated with days-old catchup. A group of boys are sitting at the table all spread out and loud like they are eating at home or in their dining room. "You order yet?" a man asks me. He counts the single dollar bills in his hands, looks at the menu, and then counts again. "Not yet," I tell him.

I order my meal and step to the side so the man behind me can order. I hear the boys at the table laughing and talking about who they would date and who they wouldn't. The guy in the light blue shirt says "What about Mercedes?" and the rest of the group laughs and shakes their heads in fits of protest. One of them says "Man, Mercedes' breath smells worse than your shoes." Then the one wearing the green hat adds "And she got too much attitude." They go on with their whatabouts, naming girls who are nowhere in sight. But then they start pointing at women who

are in the restaurant. “What about her?” green hat says. “Oh, she’s a ten. Perfect ten.” They all agree that the girl next to me is a seven. And just when my order is ready I hear one of them say “What about her?” I know he is pointing to me, which means they are all looking at me from behind. Not good.

The man at the counter calls my number and gives me my food. The boys behind me assess me. One of them says “I’ll give her a five.” The other “A five? Man, she’s so big she breaks the scale.” Another voice, “Man, fit girls are fine. I don’t know what’s wrong with you.” “Well if she’s so fine why don’t you go talk to her?” A man behind the counter looks at me, shakes his head, and says “Boys.” I force a smile. “Have a good evening,” he says.

I wonder if any of these boys ever sit in a room for boys talk night and discuss how to treat women. Who teaches them how to call out to a girl when she’s walking by, minding her own business? Who teaches them that girls are parts? Butts, breasts, legs, not whole beings? I was going to eat at Dairy Queen but I don’t want to sit through the discussion of if I’m a five or not. I eat a few fries before I walk out. “Hey, hold up. My boy wants to talk to you,” green hat says. He follows me, yelling into the dark night. I keep walking. Don’t look back. “Oh, so it’s like that? Forget you, then. Don’t nobody want your fat ass anyway. Don’t know why you up in Dairy Queen. You need to be on a diet.” He calls me every derogatory name a girl can ever be called. I keep walking. Don’t look back.

When I get on the bus it is fuller than I expected it to be. I want to eat but I decide to wait. Who wants to see a big girl eating fries and a burger on the bus? By the time I get home my fries are cold but the burger is still good. I don’t throw the bag away. I’m going to use it tonight. Tear it up and make it into something. Maybe a dress for a girl more confident than I am who doesn’t feel insecure about eating whatever she wants in public. Maybe I’ll morph it into a crown for the queen dad says I am. The crown in the center is not a princess crime, not dainty and sweet. In the background the names he could’ve called me emerged: daughter, friend, scholar, artist, dreamer.

So this is a scene where Jade is in one of these women-to-women meetings and they just asked all the girls to write down a question to put in the question box and they’re going to pull the questions and have discussions. And Jade is trying to think of what her question is.

There are 12 girls who have been selected for the women-to-women mentorship program, 12 seeds, 12 prayers, 12 daughters, 12 roots, 12 histories, 12 reasons, 12 rivers, 12 questions, 12 songs, 12 smiles, 12 yesterdays, 12 tomorrows. Sabrina ends the night with a talk about following our dreams and believing in ourselves. You have to believe that you are worthy of love, of happiness, that you are worthy of your wildest dreams coming true. When she says this so many thoughts rush through my mind. I am thinking about how mom had plenty of dreams and EJ is not short on self-confidence and Lili has known that she wants to be a poet since we were in middle school. So it can’t just be about believing and dreaming.

My neighborhood is full of big dreamers but I know that doesn’t mean those dreams will come true. I know something happens between the time our mothers and fathers and teachers and mentors send us out into the world telling us “The world is yours and you are beautiful and you can be anything,” and the time you return to them, something happens when people tell me I had

a pretty face ignoring me from the neck down. When I'd watch the news and see unarmed Black men and women shot dead over and over it's kind of hard to believe this world is mine.

Sometimes it feels like I leave home a whole person, sent off with kisses from mom who is hanging her every hope on my future. By the time I get home I feel like my soul has been shattered into a million pieces. Mom's love repairs me. Whenever mom's cooking is simmering on the stove and EJ's music is filling every inch of the house and I am making my art I believe everything these women are saying about being worthy of good things. Those are the times I feel secure, feel just fine. I look in the mirror and I see my dad's eyes looking back at me, my mom's thick hair, thick everything, and that's when I believed my dark skin isn't a curse, that my lips and hips, hair and nose don't need fixing, that my dream of being an artist and traveling the world isn't foolish.

[30:20]

Listening to these mentors I feel like I can prove negative stereotypes about girls like me wrong, that I can and will do more, be more. But when I leave it happens again, the shattering. And this makes me wonder if a Black girl's life is only about being stitched together and coming undone, being stitched together and coming undone, being stitched together and coming undone. I wonder if there's ever a way for a girl like me to feel whole. I wonder if any of these women can answer that.

So I'm going to close with a poem that Jade's best friend writes. There's an incident of police brutality in the book and Jade is very troubled by this and she wants to do something and she's kind of found her voice through her art. Her collages stop being just about her processing trauma and start to be about what she can make to bring healing to other people. So she's making art. Her best friend Lili is writing poetry. They have an open mic to raise money to give to the family. And this is a poem that Lili performs at the open mic.

Black girls rising, our Black bodies sacred, our Black bodies holy, our bodies our own. Every smile a protest; every laugh a miracle. Piece by piece we stitch ourselves back together, this Black girl tapestry that gets dragged out of school desks, slammed onto linoleum floor, tossed about at poolside, pulled over and pushed onto grass, arrested to never return home. Shot on doorsteps, on sofas while sleeping and dreaming of our next day.

Our body's a quilt that tells stories of the middle passage, of roots yanked and replanted, our bodies a mosaic of languages forgotten, of freedom songs and prayers. Our bodies no longer disregarded, objectified, scrutinized, our bodies our own. Every smile a protest, every laugh a miracle. Our bodies rising. Our feet marching, legs dancing, our bellies birthing, hands raising, our hearts healing, voices speaking up, our bodies. So black. So beautiful. Here still, rising. Rising. Thank you.

[Applause]

Jason: I told her she should do her own audiobook, yeah?

Audience: Yes!

Renée: [Laughs] So Jason and I have been talking very casually about how because we are Black writers oftentimes the types of questions we get, you know, it's about us being Black and about, you know, what is it about diverse books and things like that? And while we are passionate about those things and clearly proud to be who we are we were talking about wanting to talk about craft too and talk about being a writer. So maybe we can just start there.

Jason: Yeah.

Renée: Like I want to know about you as a writer.

Jason: As a writer?

Renée: Yeah. Why do you write and when did you start writing?

Jason: So I didn't – it's a tricky story. I mean I wasn't a reader.

Renée: Right.

Jason: I didn't start reading sort of novels until I was seventeen-and-a-half, almost eighteen years old, before I read a novel. And the reason why is as I'm sure many of you may remember if you grew up in the '80s, especially if you were a Black kid in the '80s and you were growing up in a community that was lower-income or an urban environment, if you were in any city or any hood as we colloquially say, there were no books that were sort of outlining what was happening in your life. Right? So for me growing up in D.C. during that time, I mean there are three things that categorize – the negative things that categorize my childhood. There are a lot of positive things of course, but the negative things that categorize my childhood and the childhood of most people of my generation is crack cocaine, the beginning of what we now know as HIV and AIDS, and then from those things there was a positive thing, right? Which was hip-hop music, which was a direct answer to those things.

And so I look back from like 1980 to 1998 or '99 before let's say *The Coldest* came out, right? So before then there's no real story documenting that era for teenagers who were living it. It's a strange thing. There's no book I can hold up to say like "Yo, this is what it meant to be a Black kid in the 1990s or in the 1980s." My mom's got those books. My dad – we had Walter, right?

Renée: Right.

Jason: We had Walter. And *Scorpions* was probably Walter's closest book to that, I think Scorpions was, because the rest of Walter's books for the most part are rooted in the '70s. All right? So still a bit too far removed. They worked but they were a bit removed.

Renée: Right.

Jason: And so it took me a while to grab a hold, but what I did love was rap music. Queen Latifah was my hero.

Renée: Yes!

Jason: I idealized Queen Latifah, and I tell kids all the time I wanted to be Queen Latifah. [Laughter] I thought that Queen – I thought that was good. U.N.I.T.Y. was like a Negro spiritual. [Laughter] It was like a Negro spiritual, you know what I'm saying? It was like gospel music. And the way she looked, right? I remember seeing her. You'd see her on TV and it's like oh, Latifah's 6'2". She used to wear them crowns and the gown and the medallions. And I'd always tell the kids when I'd talk to kids about this, I'd always say Latifah looked like she could give you the best hug of your life and then bust you in the face, right? [Laughter] And that's every woman I've ever loved. My mom, my aunties, right? Like that's the way I like it, you know what I mean?

And so, you know, so I started to study Latifah lyrics and rap lyrics, 2Pac. And that was sort of – and so from there it became like poetry. How come nobody ever told me that *Ladies First* and "Phenomenal Woman" was the same thing?

Renée: Right.

Jason: Right? And creating these connections. And so that was it. I fell in love with poetry and I decided that that's what I was going to do. I was going to grow up and be this hybrid between Langston Hughes and Queen Latifah. That was sort of it for me.

Renée: I love it.

Jason: And I stuck to that for a very long time.

Renée: So I remember – I know you've said before that you weren't a reader but I didn't know that we had the same thing. For me it was poetry that got me reading because of that same thing. I grew up in Portland, Oregon, and I say this a lot, I loved the Ramona series. I love Beverly Clearly, like really love, and know all those books. And it was about my neighborhood. You know, she's writing about Portland. And I know those – yeah. Ramona lives in Portland, Oregon folks. [Laughter] And she's walking around the neighborhood where my aunt lived. I know those streets that are named in those books.

Jason: That's crazy.

Renée: Except there were no Black people people. And so I was like this is Portland, yes, but I'm not in . . . and I didn't know how to articulate that and say that when I was younger, but I felt that. So when I started reading Langston, Lucille Clifton, you know, just like – I was like "Oh, there are people writing for us," where I could see my reflection. And I fell in love with the written word because of poetry.

Jason: But how do you go – how do you make the jump? All right?

Renée: To writing prose?

Jason: Prose.

Renée: I think I made the jump. Well, when I was seven years old I wrote a 21-page story and I turned it into my teacher.

Jason: Overachiever. [Laughter]

Renée: And she was like "Uh, I think you might be a writer one day." I have been writing for real like my whole life.

Jason: Gotcha.

Renée: But it started out of necessity. So my family didn't have a lot of money growing up and I would want to give birthday gifts and Christmas gifts for friends and I couldn't. My mom was like "We don't have money for that." We would pull names within our immediate family and that was it. And so I would write poems and give them as gifts, and I used to be embarrassed and really ashamed of that. But then people would come and say how touched they were and they were going to save it and frame it and all this stuff. And I was like oh, words have power, and I have a talent to move people with my words.

So I was hooked at a really young age to write, to tell stories. So it's always been something. The two of them have always informed the other. Yeah, and even now, like when I'm writing prose I read a lot of poetry and then when I'm working on poetry I read a lot of narrative work and prose. I don't know, they just feed each other for me.

Jason: What do you think? What are the devices that you think?

Renée: Yeah.

Jason: We're going to talk craft for a minute.

Renée: Yeah.

Jason: So what devices do you think strengthen . . .

Renée: I am – okay, so sensory detail obviously, right? When I'm teaching poetry to kids I'm always like "Let's just start with that." Like paint a picture with your words. Don't tell me anything. I want to feel it. I want you to let me smell something, taste something, have a vivid image and all that. And so when I think about images and words coming off the page for me I'm thinking of writers like Sandra Cisneros who is a poet but also writes prose and when you read her work – especially her prose – for me anyway it's like, I don't know, like velvet.

Jason: Yeah. Yeah.

Renée: It's beautiful language. Her sentence structure is sometimes really short and I think that's from her poet background. But she has a line in The House on Mango Street about her father's records being – like something in his eyes or something like that. And I don't know, you don't usually see that in a novel, like that kind of writing.

Jason: Yeah.

Renée: Those kinds of metaphors are like personification that's like calling something something else and letting a whole paragraph pretty much be a poem. Like you could break up her paragraphs in House on Mango Street into lines and I think they would read like a poem, and I think that's beautiful. I like work like that.

So I'm always attracted to writers who mess around with chapter length and just play with language. I think writing should be fun and you can, like we tell the kids, you can break the rules once you know that.

[40:50]

Jason: Once you know that.

Renée: You can break the rules. And I like that she does that. I feel like she does that in her work a lot. So that's someone I look to who is like craft-wise somebody who I study and read and re-read to figure out how is she doing this? How is she making a chapter be a short story on its own but also be a part of a whole novel? How does she do that?

Jason: She's a beast. [Laughter] The answer is . . .

Renée: I'm not asking you to answer it. I'm just saying that's what fascinates me about her work.

Jason: Nah, I'm with you.

Renée: And likewise it fascinates me when a poet can have – well, you're doing one, a novel in verse, which I think is extremely hard to have the verse work on its own and read almost like a poem without the rest of them but also fit into a longer narrative and tell a story. That is hard to do. And I won't – yeah, I won't say that part. That's hard to do. [Laughter]

Jason: It's hard. It's hard. I'll tell you I think that there are – my wish, honestly at this point, I wish that every writer, every prose writer, had to study poetry. I think the hat trick at least for me is my background in poetry, and I didn't think it would be. I thought it would be a hindrance. I mean I didn't even want to write prose. I literally was like I'm going to be Langston Hughes. I'm going to change the world. I'm going to show everybody.

And I had my moment to do that and that was fine, but I swore off prose writing because I was intimidated by it. Then when I finally started to write it at 26 or 27 years old the poetic chops became my greatest weapon. I don't have a lot of education; I've just got a whole bunch of

intuition, and poetry is the extra sort of motor that's there that can drive some of that intuition onto the page to make something different. So I don't know how to think of a book outside of it being an elongated poem.

I remember when I went to Germany to do some book stuff and the German people were like "Yo, do you know how hard it is to translate your stuff because it's all written in blank verse?" Which no American has ever said. No one here has ever called it out. I know that but no American has ever said "Yo, man, everything you write is in blank verse." And the only reason why is it's the only way I know how to do it. It's sort of the only – that's the way my gut tells me to do it, right? I only write for it to feel good.

Renée: Yeah.

Jason: Right? It's less cerebral for me and it's more about what feels good? Can you start a story "Ain't no such thing as a false start because false means fake," right? Can you do that just like that? Can you put the words on the page fresh off your tongue and allow them to sort of live on their own and grow legs on their own without the rules coming in and manipulating those things? Is it possible that the reason we love the Langstons and James Baldwin and Walter Dean Myers is because they understood – and Zora Neale Hurston, right?

Renée: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

Jason: Is because they understood gut in a way that I'd like to believe Black people just got in them, if I'm going to be honest with you. I'm going to be honest with you I'd like to believe – we talk about soul all the time, and some of it is there are intangible things that happen. There are ways that they're textured to our culture and if language is the cornerstone of culture it only makes sense that when that culture is put on page for that texture to still exist.

Renée: Right, exactly.

Jason: If it's authentic, right? And that's how I think I feel and I approach all of it.

Renée: Yeah, which is why it's really hard for me to teach craft. Because for me so much of the craft is writing is also that emotional stuff that you're talking about, and there are some stories that I wouldn't have been able to write had I not been through some of the things I've been through or lived this life seeing what I'm seeing. And I can't teach that. You know, not just the pain, but just like witnessing life. It doesn't have to necessarily be it happened to me.

Jason: Yeah.

Renée: But knowing that it happened. There's a knowing, I think. You mentioned gospel music earlier and I think about the gut feeling of gospel music and the Black church and how that, because I grew up in that, shows up in my writing. And I have very like – it's instinct; it's call-and-response; it's repetition.

Jason: Oh my god, rhythm. It's rhythm, right?

Renée: And so, yeah, all of that shows up in my writing because I grew up that way. That's how I . . . I mean from the time I was born there was always some record spinning in the house and it was usually gospel music or R&B and then later hip-hop. So there's always been music too and I think that's a big influence. So there's that part of it that just shows up on the page and I don't necessarily know that I'm doing it at the time.

Jason: Yeah. It's the best part.

Renée: And there are things about my writing that I don't know that I do until someone says to me later and I'm like "Oh, yes." And you try to act like oh, yeah, I planned that.

Jason: Exactly. You're welcome, you know what I mean? [Laughs]

Renée: I don't know. Yeah, so I think that's interesting the things that just come natural to you that you do and then people want you to explain how you do it. And sometimes it's like I really don't know.

Jason: Yeah, I don't know, but I'm glad it's there. [Laughter]

Renée: Yeah, well I'm glad it's there. And I'm just writing from a place – I don't know, a story that feels like it just needs to come out and be told, and not necessarily drafting. I don't know if you do that.

Jason: No.

Renée: But I don't plot in the beginning and outline and all that. I just let the story be what it needs to be for a minute. And then, yes, there's a point where, you know . . .

Jason: The mechanical stuff. Yeah, yeah.

Renée: You've got to print that out and make it work and make the plot and all that. But in the beginning, and I mean the first 60 pages, I am just writing. I'm just getting it out and seeing what is happening in the story and just letting it be what it is.

Jason: So I want to ask because both of our stories that we shared tonight at least are talking about Black girls.

Renée: Yes?

Jason: And for me as a Black man who is a visitor to – like the reality of the matter is I have an amount of privilege as a man. I'm approaching a young woman character as a protagonist for the first time, right? And it's been an incredible experience for me but it's also been one of empathy and one of discovery because I've had to process and synthesize my reaction and relationships with Black girls my whole life and I've learned so much that I've never thought about. And one of those things you mentioned a lot you mentioned in Piecing Me Together. I never realized until

I started writing this book that all of my home girls and my mama and my aunties and every Black girl in my life – Black girl and/or woman in my life – has had to carry an astronomical amount of responsibility, right?

So I'm thinking about myself as young Jason, right? Little Jason. Because Patty's eleven years old, right? So I'm thinking about eleven-year-old Jason who is interacting with his eleven-year-old homegirls and I'm going back to that time in my life as I'm writing Patty's character because I want to make sure – because there are certain things that I love. There are a lot of things that I love about Black girls. There are very specific things that I remember growing up that I just love. I love – I remember watching my sister get her hair braided and I used to be like this is the most amazing thing in the world. [Laughter] And everybody would be like – you know what I mean? And the smell of . . . I mean growing up in a Black household before. Like things are different now.

Renée: Yeah.

Jason: But, you know, you put that comb on the stove. You're busting naps out and the smoke be smelling like hair now. And these are things I value.

Renée: Saturday mornings, yeah.

Jason: These are sensory details that I value. I mean I can smell hair. You always know the smell of hair, right? You always know.

Renée: And hair grease.

Jason: And hair grease, whether it be that Pink Lotion or that Blue Magic or all that . . . [Laughter] These are things that we all know.

Renée: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jason: Right? And so I wanted to hit all these things and I wanted to make sure that we celebrated these parts of our lives that other cultures get to coopt and turn into some new stuff. Sorry. I'm sorry. You invited me here – I don't know . . . But on the flip side, beyond all of these details that create this magic that we always talk about, there's also the reality that Patty's got to take care of everything.

Renée: Yeah.

Jason: Patty's got to take care of her little sister. Patty's got to make sure this is taken care of, her mama's taken care of. And I'm thinking about the girls in my neighborhood. When we're out in the street laughing and joking they're like "Y'all out here being young," right? "We've got to go in the house. I've got to make sure there's dinner ready for my shorties, for my little brother and sister, because they've got to eat." Right? Y'all out here – that's why we don't like y'all, because y'all too insecure. Right? You're too young for me. I'm out here trying to figure out how

I'm going to get a job, right? I'm 12 years old and I'm thinking about how I'm going to make some money to help my mom out.

[50:05]

And I think about this all the time and I guess I just – and I'm bringing it up because I'm working through these things in the story and in my life. I'm like whoa, I hadn't even thought about this because I've been a boy my whole life. But I guess I just wanted to ask you what you – I don't know, just what you think about that. I mean as you're writing about it, like yo, how she feels, right? And not just with familial responsibility but even just making sure that she's responsible for her own body and how everybody does everything they can to take that.

Renée: I mean that is the story. I think – I don't want to speak for all Black women.

Jason: But you are.

Renée: But I do find something in common with a lot of my friends who are Black and a lot of the students that I mentor that there is that feeling of when you're with your people you're fine, you know? Like there is something about – and I don't necessarily mean your birth mom, but I just mean your people, whoever that is for you, right? So you're beautiful. You can be anything, and we've got you, and we're this tight-knit community. And then you go out into the world and you realize I'm only beautiful if I'm thin and if I'm light-skinned Black and if my hair is straight or the pretty kind of curly but not the real deal I just washed it Black girl hair.

Jason: Yeah.

Renée: You know, like that. Oh, I'm smart but only if I can dumb down a little bit for the Black men in the room. There's just so much negotiating our brilliance and our beauty and our power and always having to be mindful of not intimidating or not being too strong and then not feeling weak because you've got to be a strong, Black woman. So there's all of this how do I just be who I am for me and not for other people. I think women in general, but especially Black girls, are taught from a very young age to take care of everyone.

Jason: Everyone.

Renée: And to carry the burden. We are the prayer warriors at church. We are the ones bringing the food to the sick. We are the teachers. We are the women voting for a president, right? We are the ones who are always in the trenches doing the work and most of the time the ones being neglected and abused really. And not just the physical abuse but the emotional abuse that it is to hold a people up, to hold your family up, to hold young people up, and then not get credit and not get taken care of in return. It's hurtful.

So when I think about Jade and that whole thing about being pieced together and coming undone, like it's a constant struggle to feel intact and to feel whole. And I think though that that is also the power of being a Black woman is our friendship and that the women who you align yourselves with become your healing bomb. Like that's where you get your strength from. You

go out into the world and all kinds of crazy stuff, microaggressions, this kind of . . . you know . . .

Jason: Macroaggression.

Renée: Macro, micro, and everything in the middle is happening all the time. And then you find your people again and you love on each other and you cry and you pray and you talk about it. There's nothing else to do but to go out and keep living. So yeah, there's that hardship, right? But then there's the beauty and the joy of it. I don't want it to sound like it's just so sad being a black woman. It is hard and there's a lot, right? But I mean there's such a legacy of strength and overcoming and power and I want to own that. And that's also why I think it's important for us to talk about not just the pain, right, of our experience but the joy of it. Yeah, so I'm always trying to think about well yeah, it's hard, but it was hard for my mom and her mom.

Jason: Yeah.

Renée: And somehow they still were laughing gut-wrenching laughs.

Jason: All the time.

Renée: And having joy and raising brilliant, beautiful, and amazing young children and those children going on. You know? So I feel like I've inherited both of those things, the pain of it and the joy of it, and that that's just what life is.

Jason: I feel like – and I always, you know . . . and it's because of my own biases, but I just feel like Black women are the most whole people, right? And I think that we often look at Black women as if they're less than whole because of all of the stuff they have to endure. But I think actually it creates more of a whole picture because they're experiencing all of the humanity.

Renée: Yeah.

Jason: All the different humanities, right? Happening at . . . I want to say my mom always used to say, you know – my mom would always say "You know, people always talk about attitude." And she's like "First of all . . ."

Renée: First of all.

Jason: First of all. [Laughter] My mom's like "First of all, grow up. Get yourself together, right? And stop crying all the time about attitude. If it's hard for you, work hard at it, right? If you feel like I'm giving you a hard time do better." And she'd also say "Second of all, you don't know what it feels like." She makes it very clear to me all the time. She's like "Look, from the age of 13 to maybe the age of 45 and maybe even longer than that every time you leave your house men who look just like you, acting crazy, calling me out, trying to touch on me . . ." Right? I'm 13 years old. She's like "Imagine what happens over time when it comes to trauma if every time you leave your house you know for a – it is certain that that is going to happen."

Renée: Yeah.

Jason: Right? And she said "Imagine what that feels like. And imagine over time when it compounds itself, what it looks like by the time you're 35 years old and you walk up to me talking crazy and then you get mad that I've got a problem with it." And it's been 20 years of this already.

Renée: Yeah.

Jason: Right? And it's something that I'm always talking to my – I have brothers and we always are talking about this because I'm like "Look, we all have to make sure we're holding ourselves accountable not just for our mother, but because we're human beings. Do better for everybody." You know what I mean?

Renée: Right. Yeah.

Jason: But it's something that I always think about. And then on the flip side my mom went through all this stuff with my dad. All that. As a matter of fact, just like in your book, my daddy . . . my dad ain't never going to watch this so it don't matter. [Laughter] My daddy – my father . . . my story's out and everybody knows. My father left my mom, marries a White woman, and I remember I was like 15 years old or 16 years old. This is the interesting thing because I love my step mama just like in the book. It's like oh, she's cool with me. Then I go home and I'm like "Yo, just saw pops, you know what I'm saying? He married. You know he's married, right?" My mother's like "He what?" "He married. Sweet, sweet lady, man. You know what I mean? Nice lady." But I'm a kid. I don't know.

Renée: Right.

Jason: I figured she knows already. I'm like "Very nice lady, White lady." And my mom, you know, there's that moment of like "Wait, what happened?" And I'm telling her the story. And I don't think I've ever seen a person break in half like that. It's an interesting thing. And then two days later it's Saturday night, and you know in my house we do Saturday Night Dance Fever. That's on a radio station. They play James Brown and Funkadelic and all that kind of stuff. My mom turned it on. It's party time, right? She's cutting it up in the kitchen and we're getting it in.

Renée: Yeah.

Jason: And it's all good with the belly laugh.

Renée: Exactly.

Jason: And the liquor store, you know what I'm saying? And that's how we do it. [Laughter] Shout out to the Black girl. It's a real thing. It's a real thing.

Renée: I want to make sure we leave time to conversate with you all so we can open it up and talk with you. You can ask us questions about these books or just our lives as writers in general or anything we were just talking about. Or we can keep talking. Yes?

Audience: When you start writing a book is it because you have to start writing a book? Or do you find inspiration through your life to start writing?

Renée: Both.

Jason: Yeah. Thank you for your – I can't see you. There you go. Why didn't you tell me there was a child in here? You got me talking crazy like that. [Laughter] You've got to give people like me a warning, you know what I mean?

Renée: For me it's both. I feel like I have to write. If I was never published I would still be writing. I need to write. So there's that part of it of just I'm always thinking of the next story but not necessarily to get published but just to write. And then, yeah, I'm absolutely inspired by my world. I'm constantly thinking about the young people I've worked with over the years like at Dream Yard and Community Work Project. When I lived in Oregon, you know, thinking about those young people in my early years when I didn't know nothing about being a mentor. This book is absolutely influenced by all the young people that I've worked with and got it wrong with and hopefully got some things right with. I've been in mentoring programs where someone came to fix me and some of them got it really, really right. Some of them got it really, really wrong. So yeah, the book is definitely pieces of all of those moments and stories, even though it's fiction. So I'm definitely inspired by real life, by headlines in the news and everything in-between.

Jason: Yeah, me too. Me too. I mean I'm inspired definitely. I mean there are things – there are my own stories that I'm still sort of exercising, right? Things that I'm trying to work out psychologically, and this is helpful to me to get through some of my childhood stuff. We've all got stuff. I'm working that out. And then the other thing is I just love young people. It's funny, man, because our industry is funny because . . . [Laughter] Because there are a lot of us who write for young people who hate kids, and that's just real. There are a lot of us who write for teenagers who don't want nothing to do with no teenagers. And I take issue with that. I mean it ain't my business but I take a little bit of issue with it.

Renée: Yeah.

[1:00:25]

Jason: I think that we're servants, right? And we have to be of service to those we claim we want to serve, and that takes interaction. That takes empathy. That takes a listening ear. That takes some discomfort sometimes because teenagers are obviously different than we are which is a good thing.

Renée: Right.

Jason: Don't nobody want to raise the same people. Things better be changing, hopefully. And so I'm inspired also by young folks like yourself and your generation. I think you all are brilliant. I always tease my little brother, I say "You know, we all tell you that social media is going to be the death of you." They told me hip-hop was going to be the death of me. My grandfather told my mama Dr. King was going to be the death of him. All right? So at the end of the day your thing is your thing and we're not supposed to understand it. But 20 years from now we're going to look back on text messaging and we're going to realize how brilliant you all were to create a transient language that you all understood.

Renée: Right.

Jason: A coded language that shifted constantly, right? And then the next time you talk to your mama or your grand mama, ask them about shorthand. We already did it. [Laughter] But they'll be acting like we didn't. So I've got love for the young folks. You guys inspire me for sure.

Audience: Yeah, I have questions about – and maybe this is for both of you – where craft was diametrically opposed to the commerce of what you do. Like the process that you go through when you're framing a story, the way that you work something, is not working well with this product that has to be sold for X amount of dollars and has to move X amount or it may be difficult making another one.

Jason: Yeah. That's a good question. What you keep looking at me for? You keep – I want you to answer. I want you to answer. [Laughter]

Renée: I answered first last time. You can answer first this time.

Jason: But this is Renée Watson day. We're celebrating Renée Watson.

Renée: Who is in celebration with Jason Reynolds. [Laughter] And as a Black woman in the room . . .

Jason: You're right. I've got it. [Laughter] I've got it.

Renée: Sometimes I've got to be like sister . . .

Jason: You've got to lean. You've got to lean on me a little bit.

Renée: I've got to lean in on you sometimes. Just go on and answer the question. [Laughter]

Jason: So do I – all right, just so I'm making sure I've got the question right, has there ever been a moment where the way I wanted to write a book hasn't fit with the fact that we sell a product?

Audience: Yes.

Jason: Okay, here's the truth. I know people that it has. In my particular situation, my particular instance, I've been really, really lucky because I have an editor who trusts me and I trust her.

And there are certain things that she knows that I do not know, and there are certain things that I know that she does not know. And we have a working relationship and it's a really healthy one. And so if I tell her that this is the way I feel it has to go then she'll figure out a way to edit me within the framework of the work I've given her and will make the best of the situation for me.

Renée: For me not so much with the writing aspect. I mean I think an editor – my editors, I've had several, and all of them are so different. So there's always been the disagreement of something, but usually the content of what I want to write is okay. But covers are a thing for Black children being on covers and looking like how they're described in the story. So I'm very grateful. Like before it even was an issue I just knew. I already knew that it was going to be really hard to find a dark-skinned, thick, big girl with natural hair. That was going to be really hard to find. It's not clip art but whatever the like, you know . . .

Jason: Yeah, yeah.

Renée: So I just proposed, I was like "Can we just have an artist create the cover?" so I don't have to negotiate about I don't like this cover. She's too light, or she doesn't have – and I don't want to compromise on any of that. And they were open to that. So I mean out of all of my books I'm proud of this because I feel like she actually – she looks like how she describes herself, which I know. I mean I can say "Well obviously," but that doesn't always happen, especially in children's lit. So I was very proud that I got to do that. And I do think that the reason why it is a battle to fight is because the assumption is that if this is on a cover people won't want to purchase it which is why I bring it up as an issue of thinking about well, do we want to make money or do we want to stay true to the story? And how do we make the cover reflect the story but also be a marketing tool? And that whole conversation is very frustrating as a writer.

Jason: Yeah.

Renée: Because, you know, you want to be true to your story. Especially when I'm writing for young girls who don't often get to see themselves on covers or in art or in the world, like reflect it back to them in a beautiful way. So I wanted to advocate for that before it was even an issue and it worked out. Bryan Collier did the cover for this.

Jason: Hey, shout out to Bryan.

Renée: Who I love and respect.

Jason: Absolutely.

Renée: Yeah, he's a dope artist. So yeah, those conversations come up all the time. But I feel like writers have to have – we have to advocate for ourselves and make sure that the publisher's doing right by the stories we want to tell.

Jason: I think isn't it funny that there's this concept that if you put a black kid on a book cover your book won't sell? As if there's any art medium in the world that Black people are on that don't sell. Because they all do sell, by the way.

Renée: Right. Yeah.

Jason: You put a Black person in it . . . let me tell you something.

Renée: Yeah?

Jason: Music?

Renée: Right. Check.

Jason: We're out here. We own Broadway now. [Laughter] Own it.

Renée: Yeah.

Jason: I don't know if y'all have been paying attention to the movie world. Own it. Clothing? Every single fashion has to come through us. Historically, right? Think about it. Tommy Hilfiger and Ralph Lauren owe me so much money. [Laughter] They came through the hood. Seriously, they came through the hood and we chased his . . .

Renée: I know. And he had the nerve to say he wasn't making it for us!

Jason: We changed his entire enterprise, right?

Renée: Right.

Jason: So I just think it's funny that in the book world it's like "I don't know." And I'm like "No, I'm pretty sure it's almost a fail safe." I'm going to bet – I'm going to bet, right? It's just a funny thing. It's weird.

Renée: Yeah. Funny, not so funny.

Jason: Funny, not so funny.

Renée: Someone else had a question. Yes?

Audience: Have you ever had a moment where you've been dissuaded from writing and if so how did you work through it?

Renée: Yeah, you know, when I was younger a lot of people when I would tell them I wanted to be a writer they would just laugh and go "It's so cute." Because, you know, they would say writers don't make a lot of money, it's really hard, and all of that. So they would discourage me from doing that. And I did it anyway. I mean really there was no moment in life where I was like "I can do this." I just feel like for one I had support from my mother who believed in me and would always encourage me to do it. But I also just felt like writing for me was survival

personally so I needed to do it so why not make money doing what I loved? So I figured out a way to make it work.

And it has been hard, but I think any career is challenging. There is no easy adulting. Being an adult is hard, so you might as well as much as you can do the thing you love to do while living in this hard world. I encourage you to do that if writing is what you want to do, or any artform. A lot of people discourage – especially, it's interesting – people of color from pursuing art as a career. I think there's just a lot of fear about not having enough and you don't want to struggle. But I just was like well, I'd rather struggle doing what I love than have a lot of money and be depressed and sad and angry and bitter because that's what I would be if I wasn't creative and if I wasn't doing what I want to do. So that's what I did, yes. People discouraged me but I did it anyway.

Jason: I think for me, you know, so I have this weird – there's a mole right here, right? And I only know it's there because my mama told me it's there. But when I was a kid I used to always try to see it, but in order to see it I had to close the eye, right? So I'd be looking in the mirror and I could never kind of get a glimpse of it. My mom would say "Just trust me. It's there. There's a mark there that you can't see but you have to trust what I'm telling you." What I had in my life was I had a few people who when I wanted to quit, because I did quit – I quit when I was 25. No more writing for me. I let it all go and I worked in a clothing store for years and I was going to do that. I planned to work in a clothing store for 40 years. I was going to do this for the rest of my life. I made good money. I worked in SoHo. I had a good time. I liked to get dressed. It was all good for me, right?

But I had people in my life that could see things that I could not see, could see things in me that sometimes I could not see. One of those people, my good friend Christopher Myers, right? Christopher Myers who is Walter Dean Myers' son. And Christopher was the one who said "Look, kid, I know you said you quit but one more time. Just give it one more shot, all right?" And because I respected him so much, because I believed him so much, I tried another time and I wrote *When I Was the Greatest*. Right? And so I think that some of us have the emotional fortitude that Renée has where it's like I'm good no matter what, but we're all human and it gets tough. And when it does get tough, when you're scraping the bottom, you've got to have a support. Find a support system. Find your sisters; find your brothers, the ones who are like "Look, I don't care what nobody say. I can see it, right? And because I can see it I need you to trust me. I can see it so give it one more swing." Find you a partner. Find you somebody. You feeling me? All right.

[1:10:20]

Renée: Someone down here had a . . .

Audience: Me. Yes.

Jason: Oh, no. Oh, no. [Laughter]

Audience: I had to. So I feel like we stand on the shoulders of giants. I mean we are in the home of a titan. And I want to know when we are old and gone what do you want people to think about you and your work? What is it that you want to leave behind? When people pick up a Renée Watson book or a Jason Reynolds book what do you want them to feel inside? Because Langston when I read him makes me feel a lot of different kinds of things, and Hurston, and all the people who came before me. I'm going to make it real hard for you. [Laughter]

Jason: You only got to tell me one time. You've only got to tell me one more time. Is it on? Are you deferring?

Renée: I wasn't deferring. I really just was looking at you. That's all.

Jason: Okay. Just be scared. I'm shook. I've got a lot of respect, you know?

Renée: Hmm. I don't know. I think I want Black girls to feel seen, validated. To Jason's point earlier about that gap where there's not a lot of literature saying what was happening during those years, the '80s and '90s, I hope that we look back on these years from both of our books and people are saying "Oh, this is what it was like to be a Black teen in America during this whatever," however long my career lasts. That I'm constantly holding that mirror back to the world and that people can see their reflection. And not just what we talk about in children's lit as windows and mirrors but like literally that you can see what is happening, like look at this. This happened.

I feel like so often our stories are erased and our experiences, because our stories are erased, you can feel crazy. Like did that really happen? Or why did I feel this way? You feel something but you don't have the words for it. So I want especially young girls to be able to read my work and say like an amen. Like when the choir is like amen, because you're saying what I'm feeling and I'm agreeing. That exchange? I hope that that's happening, that they're reading and they're like "Yeah, that's real." And because it's in this book now like I can admit that that's how I feel.

Jason: Wow.

Renée: And I want white people to bear witness and to learn how to just be quiet sometimes and really listen. Just listen. You don't even have to say anything back, but like read our books and just listen and take in our experiences.

Jason: I think for me I just want, you know – I just want specifically for Black kids to feel cared for. You know what I mean? I just want Black kids to feel cared for when they read my stuff. And also if one day they read my story or hear my story I want it to feel like music. I grew up in the era of Jordon and Jackson, yeah? Right? We grew up where you could believe in it. You could believe that something was magical and it didn't stop you from trying to do the magical thing. Even if it felt so far away it inspired you to want to make magic yourself. There's something about that that drives me – Brandon and I talk about this all the time. I'm like "Man, when it's over for me, I just want people to be like we don't know how it happened. We don't know how he was doing it. It seemed like magic."

Renée: Yeah. Yeah.

Jason: But it's something that I think about all the time. I want people to say "We don't know what the hell was happening but we allowed for it and we saw it happening and it seemed like it was magic and we all felt cared for in the time that this person lived." And that was sort of the last hope, hopefully. I mean that's what they all do.

Audience: Right. They did that for us.

Renée: You know those moments in the room, and my good friend Ellen is here and I feel like we have this a lot, something's happened and you know where your person is in the room and you just do that. [Laughter] You know, you have that moment. Maybe nobody else is getting it but you know what just went down, good or bad. Because sometimes it's not – you know, there's not the pain, right? There's also like "Did you just see . . ." and you want to laugh and talk about it. That's what I want my book to do. I want someone to read this and be like – like in case they don't have that in their real life. They don't have anyone to look at across the room who gets them and is like "Yeah, I feel you and I saw that. Yep." I want that to happen when they read.

Jason: Shared secret.

Renée: Yeah, a shared secret. A shared knowing. And laugh hopefully.

Jason: And laugh.

Renée: I mean I read more of the serious scenes tonight but I also think it is so – and we haven't talked about As Brave As You but I told you that's my favorite book that you've done.

Jason: Thank you.

Renée: And there's so many moments in there where they just get to be young black children being young Black children and not suffering and crying and drama and violence, you know? And so I really – I hope that that's there too, the joy.

Jason: For sure.

Renée: Anybody else? Okay. So we're going to sign some books.

[*Applause*]

[1:16:31]