

Episode 136: Interview with Jason Reynolds

Episode Duration: 49:55

Jennifer Baker

Hello and welcome to the 10th anniversary year of the Minorities in Publishing podcast. I'm your host, Jennifer Baker. The Minorities in Publishing podcast first aired on August 14, 2014, and this year, I'll be celebrating with new guests, return guests, and some book giveaways for new and returning listeners. You may know you can find the podcast at minorities in publishing dot com, as well as on Twitter and Instagram at minoritiesinpub. You can also sign up for the monthly MIP newsletter for info on new episodes, guests and industry news as well as job or writing opportunities. Minorities in publishing is available wherever you listen to podcasts, including Spotify, Apple podcasts, Google podcasts, TuneIn and iHeartRadio. It's also available on the podcasting hosting server, Libsyn—l, i, b, s, y, n. Thanks so much for listening, and hope you enjoy this episode. [music fades out]

Jennifer Baker

Hey, I'm so happy to welcome back Jason Reynolds. It's been a while!

Jason Reynolds

It has been a while, but I'm happy to be back.

Jennifer Baker

I'm so happy to be able to talk to you about *Twenty-four Seconds From Now*, your latest young adult book, which is, as your publisher puts on the cover, a love story. And I think you agree with that, right?

Jason Reynolds

Look, here's my theory on this whole love story thing. Even though I know the book is being called a romance, I don't think there's anything more radical than first love. Because I think that it's like a raw example of what those feelings are. You kind of crash into each other, and you feel everything so deeply, right? The highs are the highest they'll ever be, and you feel like you might just lift off the ground. The lows feel like, you know, you'll never be able to eat a meal again. Or, you know, you go through such extremes that it, to me, it feels so radical, and because it's so intense, the way that it plays itself out oftentimes has an effect in the way we carry out relationships for the rest of our lives. So I call it a love story because I think that there's nothing more powerful than the concept and the energy that love brings to any situation. So much so that we have to be responsible with it, so that our shorties can grow up knowing that love is a beautiful thing, though, the risk of it is always grief, is always pain, is always fear. Is alright. That the risk of it to really give yourself over like that emotionally can be a bit complicated, and it's but it's always worth it regardless. You know?

Jennifer Baker

Yeah, and I feel like that's such a through line through all your work, because it was so funny to look at your website and see all the stacks. I don't know if you look at your website.

Jason Reynolds

No.

Jennifer Baker

Like the stacks on stacks of books. It's like, wow. The past decade, you've been really at it in terms of, like, just producing these wonderful stories, these layered stories, these different stories, each and every time. And for me, who's read the majority of your catalog, like I'm sure a lot of people have, love is always apparent in your book, whether it's a picture book, whether it's a graphic novel, whether it's middle grade, whether it's young adult, whether it's your poetry, whether it's your film, you know it's like, it's consistent.

Jason Reynolds

I've been kind of screaming this for the last couple of weeks, because I think that a lot of people have maybe, like people who have interviewed me so far have not read my catalog, and so it's like, this is your first love story? And I'm like, No. I don't think so, right?

Jennifer Baker

Not at all.

Jason Reynolds

Yeah, I think it's the first time my book has been sort of marketed as a love story, perhaps, right,

Jennifer Baker

But it's on the cover. Let's on the cover.

Jason Reynolds

It's on the cover. But, when I think about *The Boy in the Black Suit*, when I think about *As Brave As You*, and I think about *When I Was the Greatest*, there's always, I mean, when I think about *Miles Morales*, right? There's always sort of an example, or some sort of portrayal of love in many different ways, right? It isn't always a romantic love, but sometimes it is a romantic love, and sometimes it's familial, sometimes it's friendship, sometimes it's trying to figure out ways to love oneself. And it's always interesting that people are like, man, first foray into a love story. And I'm like a first foray into whatever version of a love story you think is a love story. But for me, all of these books are in some way, shape or form. Are, in fact, love stories.

Jennifer Baker

Am I accurate? Because it's been a while, *When I Was the Greatest*?

Jason Reynolds

My first novel, not my first book, my first novel. Yeah.

Jennifer Baker

Okay, your first novel. And I never forgot to this day—like that gif of that guy who's like “To this day”—that moment where the young man was asked, if your dad was in front of you, what would you do? And he had the option to punch and he hugged.

Jason Reynolds

Yeah.

Jennifer Baker

I was just like, oh my gosh, yeah. Gosh. Love.

Jason Reynolds

Right, right. I mean, even in *Ghost*, right. When Ghost is like, they're like, Yo, he's trying to explain how he feels about his father. And he's like, you know, there are days that I'm happy he's gone, and there are days that I wish that I could be with him and hug him, and this then and the third, even though this man tried to harm him, right? The complicated nature of these sorts of connections and relationships are something that I think we have to start exploring more often. It's nuanced. It's never quite as simple as we'd love for it to be, you know, right?

Jennifer Baker

So when we have *Twenty-four Seconds From*, we're with Neon and Aria, who's the sweetest couple ever. They seem so mature. Like they communicate. Well, I'm like *goals*. And the beginning is, and I wonder if there's a latching on to the beginning because we're with Neon when he's getting ready for that moment of that first sexual encounter with a person he loves so much. And then we go backwards in time. And you stay with the 24 element of like, 24 days, 24 weeks, 24... But, yeah, they made it through all of that. And we're just constantly with, we're with Neon. It is Neon story, but it does feel like their story, and what's constant is also their love for each other, but also the questions this young man has. And also the beauty of him being able to ask these questions in an environment that is not shutting him down.

Jason Reynolds

Yeah. It was really important for me. We were talking off mic about growing up in the '80s and '90s, and like, what media and cinema and, you know, music and everything else was at that moment where sex was, I don't even know how to describe what, how sex was portrayed, except for...

Jennifer Baker

It felt like a goal post. Like, once you *do it*.

Jason Reynolds

Yeah.

Jennifer Baker

It wasn't really tackling the after of it. It was just the goal. That's how I felt.

Jason Reynolds

That's how I felt too. Yeah, exactly. It's like, this is just what you do. And after you do it, you're gonna walk differently. And it's like, it's like the moment...

Jennifer Baker

[The skies] gonna open up.

Jason Reynolds

The moment you climb out of bed. You way cooler than you were when you laid down, right? It's like all this weird stuff. And to be honest with you, Jenn, I was very fortunate to grow up during that time with parents who worked to fight against it. So a lot of what you see in *Twenty-four Seconds* is really the way that it went for me, as far as my mother, that conversation with the mother at the restaurant is my mom's conversation with me verbatim, verbatim. That's exactly what she said to me at a restaurant when I was a 15 year old boy, right? And I think about it now. We talk about it all the time and laugh about it now because it shaped and changed the way I felt about myself sexually, right? Not just about, sort of my sexual relationships, and sort of me taking making my foray into whatever my sexual life would be. It made me feel okay about even having the desire and not to feel ashamed and to understand how to navigate some of the, some of the dicey current of sexual moments, right? Because it doesn't always go like the... It *usually* doesn't go like the movies. And so I wanted to show for once, right? Because it would have been easy to write like the father who is just don't get just put a condom on. You know? It's like, it's so easy to tell the story of what we think a stereotypical parent and that conversation feels like, but we already know that. And I found it to be a little cliché, because it is so true in our society, it is so pervasive that it's like, Hey, girls don't get pregnant. Boys don't get nobody pregnant. Everybody wear a condom, or don't do it, or watch out for herpes.

And you know, it's like, or, or Jenn, over the last couple of years, thanks to the ME TOO movement, I want to be I want to be clear here, because some people say because of no, *thankfully*, right? Thanks to the ME TOO movement, we have new conversations around consent, but after we've trained and taught young people to offer and ask for consent, then what? We stopped the conversation. We stopped the conversation, right? So just because there's consent doesn't mean that this young man understands tenderness. It doesn't even mean that he understands his own body. Like when do we when are we going to consider all the other moving parts to this experience, except for the fact that one must ask for permission and wear protection, right? And so, the story is meant to sort of provide all of these, this community of people, because we transform through, yes, our individual experiences, but we also transform by community input, right, our environmental input. And so that to build a community around

this boy of knucklehead friends who love him and who don't know, you know, they don't know anything either, but they're trying to sort of suss it out the best they can. An older sister who is old enough to kind of be just doing her thing, shaking and moving and dating freely in the world, and not ashamed or afraid to express that she's just dating right? His parents, who, by the way, are still having sex with each other, because we like to pretend like sometimes in our loving households, not all of us, obviously, but sometimes in loving households, your parents are still making love to one another, and that might roast everybody out, but it also would explain how these particular parents are able to navigate this environment in this conversation, because they are. In the throes of their own passion and their own love, right? And so all of these sort of things are what builds him up, helps to break down some of the fears, some of the insecurities, helps to see him and humanize him as a whole person, as he sort of, you know, teeters on that line of his first sexual experience.

[10:15]

Jennifer Baker

And also be surrounded by these different relationships, right? Like you said, the knucklehead friends who are kind of figuring their stuff out, and some who are fronting a lot. In the case of one, particularly young [man], but also, like, you know, the love Gammy has for Grandpa. The story they're still sharing, you know, seeing those parents work together, you know, like they have their respective roles, the sister too. How she's dating she's dating, and what that looks like for her, that it doesn't look like this very conformed thing that we know is like, you're either with one person, and that it's forever, or and it's healthy and it's open. You know, Neon is like, I don't quite get it. That's you, and y'all seem to be on the same page. So that's cool, in that moment where he gets to talk to, you know, one of her, her dudes,

Jason Reynolds

Yeah, one of her suitors, right? Yeah. And you know that suitor asks him, like, what you going to do when Aria goes away? When she goes to college? Right? It's a very real conversation, and I wanted to make sure, and because in the story, he says, "Oh, we won't talk about it." And the funny thing is, there was a moment when writing the story where I was like, Well should I have them? Should I sort of, you know, lay this all out? And I'm like, you know, the truth of the matter is at that age, you don't talk about it until you have to, until you absolutely have to. It's not a thing, until it's a thing. I don't want to talk about it. Let's just do our thing. And when you go away to school, let's just try to make this work, even though, of course, nine times out of ten it doesn't work. But at that age, you're like, nah, this my girl. We gonna try to figure this out the best we can. I see her during the breaks, right? Whatever it is, I wanted to be honest about the fact that at that age, it's like, Nah, talk about it, and that'd be okay, you know.

Jennifer Baker

Yeah because the goal posts sometimes, and it depends on the story. And I respect how everyone goes about their stories. I remember in the earlier aughts, especially with the fantasy books, and the love stories are like the touchstones for those a lot of the time, along with the adventure, your goals like and

then they get married. But technically, they're teenagers, you know? It's like, y'all legal so you can do it, obviously legal age and whatnot. But it's like, wow, that's a weird goal post to put in, in such an epic story where people are already saving the world and all this stuff, and now it's like *marriage*. And I feel like that's still it, right? Like, even here, the presence of that question that they're getting because they're seniors [and] they have to think about what's next. Aria has pressure on her of like, where am I getting accepted? Where am I going to go? And that pressure is the pressure of the future. Yeah, it's always so present too, and that's not ignored here. But, and I like that, you're like, well, we don't know, but we're in this moment and looking at time, the way that time really functions for us as readers, to be in that moment, too.

Jason Reynolds

Exactly. I hope that when the book is when people finish the book, they feel like this is the beginning of a story, right? Not the end of a story. This is the beginning of the story. The beginning of their lives, maybe together, maybe apart. The beginning of their sexual lives, separately, right? And end together, at least for a while, but separately, more so than that, right, the beginning, all of these like the transformation that they've existed. The other thing that I want people to take from it, Jenn, and something I think about all the time, relationships, whether they are good or bad, but especially when they are good, when they are healthy, are so transformative. So it doesn't really matter what happens between the two of them. The two of them are forever changed. The two of them get to walk away and think of the other with such joy and such peace and some humor, right?

Like I was talking to, she does a lot of work with Tiffany Jewell. She's a lovely person too, does a lot of anti-racist work. And I was having dinner with her one day, and she was telling me about her son in middle school. And she gave him an old sweatshirt to keep in his locker, just in case one of the young ladies came on their cycle. And it happened. And it happened, and he is the one who told her that she had bled through and helped her wrap this sweatshirt around her waist. And she didn't even know what was happening, but he did for the rest of and for the rest of her life, her period story will not be traumatic. She will think of this boy and how kind he was. And that is an important thing, right? Like that is a radical thing, Jenn, because we had those weird that's oftentimes one of the most embarrassing, traumatic moments of middle school life, and he protected her from it. He protected her from it, and that's because his mother talked to him about it. And so what I'm hoping is, at the end of the story, we see how these two lives would be changed forever. And I also hope that everybody who reads the book is like, look, there are some conversations I need to have. First of all, if for the adults reading the book, it's like, look, we need to figure out ways to have these conversations. We really gotta, we kind of gotta get in there and get in the muck of it all so that we can better process and help our babies better process what's happening to them naturally and emotionally. what's happening to them emotionally, not just physically.

Jennifer Baker

Right. And take them out for pancakes or waffles.

Jason Reynolds

And take him out for pancake that helps. And just say that my mom always told me, Jenn, she said, “You know, when I got home, I went in the bathroom and almost vomited.” Right? She's like the conversation, it was one that I had to keep it a straight face for and that I had to make light so that we can really get to it, and so that you understood what the stakes were and what you were stepping into in a healthy way. She was like, but it's not that it wasn't uncomfortable for me, because it was definitely uncomfortable for me, but I needed to create a space for you to be completely vulnerable and completely honest about what you were feeling and what you were and what you had been doing or planning to do, so that you could be safe and healthy in the world. so that the girls that you were dealing with could be safe and healthy in the world.

Jennifer Baker

Go, mom.

Jason Reynolds

Go Mom.

Jennifer Baker

Moms are great. Moms are great. They really are because my mom, there was so much fear in my family, it really was going back to what you said. But please don't get pregnant. But if you do, we will figure it out. So like the you know, kind of adding a shroud of like, I'm not shaming you if it does happen, because we understand how the world works, but please try.

Jason Reynolds

Try your best. Try because it's so easy. It's so easy to not get pregnant,

Jennifer Baker

Because the teen pregnancy was a big thing, especially for the upper grades. In my high school, there was a lot of teen pregnancy, and not so much in my grade and below, but definitely in the upper grades when I came in as a freshman and a sophomore. And yeah, it was very beautiful to see these relationships and new life and stuff like that. And I always wondered about, like, well, what is this like? What are those challenges [gonna] look like? And that's when, you know, watching these movies, particularly about like that, and then going to school and see, you know what I mean, and you're just like, those are, those are your connectors as as a teen in mid-/early '90s. I mean, mid-90s, late '90s, right? Where we're dealing with Netscape, the beginnings of the internet. You have access to it kind of sneakily going to the library in a corner, like covering up the cover.

Jason Reynolds

Like three days to download a porn clip.

Jennifer Baker

Right, it's like, it's all secrets. So funny and shared information. That is that's good. But my mom did give me a book. She threw a book at me on the bed, and she was like, read this. And it was, I forget the name of the book. It was really one of those clinical for kids titles where all the kids

Jason Reynolds

Like 'what's happening to my body?'

Jennifer Baker

Yeah. And all the kids were white. All the illustrations were white, of white kids. And then it's like that chapter that says, touching feels good. You know what I mean? Like these very cringe inducing chapters. Like, I don't want to do it. None of us want to deal with this. This is not happening. So, yeah, book, like, *Twenty-four Seconds From Now*. I just think it's such a welcomed addition in terms of, like, obituary canon, but again, it's just, it just feels right in the roster of books that you've written for various ages of, Oh, yeah. Let's talk about this. Let's, like, dive into this and see how this feels, and talk about it and how and prioritize the team, like you're not prioritizing the adults. You're not prioritizing any other perspective, but that of the teen.

Jason Reynolds

Yeah, for sure. I think that's the best. I mean, the most important part is, I want some kid to read this book and be like he's talking about me, he's talking to me. He's speaking for me, or at least giving me an opportunity to perhaps make it a little easier to speak for myself. You know, around how I feel about all of this, because they feel all of them.

Jennifer Baker

Umm hmm. And Aria we get a glimpse into. It's not necessarily Aria's story, if we think specifically of a narrator, but she is very, very involved. And she is a full-blooded character, as in all your books those represented are. And we know she has her challenges, and we know she has expectations, and that beauty of how Neon sees it, that kind of unspokenness that they just recognize, and also she's one of his biggest cheerleaders too. You know, she doesn't push him in the way that other people, or maybe he feels pushed by external forces. She recognizes who he is and celebrates it like when she busts into the room with his but she's like acting like a proud mama.

Jason Reynolds 19:45

Exactly. I mean, honestly, Jenn, the Black girls in all of my stories are the Black girls that I grew up with. I will never turn my back, ever on Black girls and women and I've said this before. I've been very vocal about this. Like I am grateful for all of the Black girls and all of the Black women that have been my biggest cheerleader, even when I wasn't very good, even when I wasn't very kind, even when I didn't always deserve it. They were able to sort of chastise me and let me know, hey, tighten up, while also being so encouraging. And this is my whole life, elementary school, middle school, high school, college, onto my into my '40s now, right? Like Black women have always been just my vertebrae in lots of

ways. Which is why, almost, actually, not even almost in all of my stories, I hope they feel loved, and there they be, I'm like, yo I hope they're like, this guy loves us and he sees us and he respects us enough to we're not perfect, right, but he loves us enough to show us how we are like. I love the fact that this girl, in all of her brilliance, I love that she's like because I grew up with around the way girls. So like in most of my stories, you notice the girl is never like a girly girl, because this is, I don't know many of those girls. I didn't grow up like that, and so all of my home girls that they were chicken tender and french fry girls, right? It was like, Yo, we chilling. Like, I'm about to put on these sweatpants, put my hand in a ponytail. You can come over here. We could chill right?

Jennifer Baker

Like bra is coming off.

[21:12]

Jason Reynolds

Yeah, exactly. Like, I'm not about to do all this extra right? And I still love that. I love the sort of comfort and the familiarity that Black women and Black girls have at least have had with me in my life. And I wanted to portray that in this book. She's a genius. She's a brilliant girl. She's dealing with a pressured family, a quirky family, a pressuring mother. She loves her little sister. She loves her father. I mean, a lot of my home girls had issues with their moms at that age. You know, she doesn't really understand her mom and they don't really understand each other. She loves her boyfriend. She respects the fact that he's taking a different route, and doesn't judge him for that, right? She's like that's what I'm used to. Those are the girls I know. You know, one of these days I'll write a Black girl who's mean and angry and all, right? But that's just not. Those aren't the girls I know, right?

Jennifer Baker 21:55

And there's still multitudes, even if she is angry,

Jason Reynolds 21:59

Even if, exactly. I mean, even the mom, you might feel away, but then you learn why, and you have to kind of feel for her. She's doing the best she can, but she has stuff that she should not have to carry, but that she does have to carry.

Jennifer Baker

Yeah. One of my favorite female characters [you've written] is Zola.

Jason Reynolds

Oh yeah, boy, I love Zola.

Jennifer Baker

She's adorable.

Jason Reynolds

I love Zola.

Jennifer Baker

She's about business as the kids say. She's standing on business.

Jason Reynolds

Zola. Zola can calm you down or gas you up. Yeah. Shout out to Zola, yeah.

Jennifer Baker

If you also have read the Stuntboy books, no pressure, I do hope they're more but also no pressure. I know that's, yeah, lot of work with graphic I mean, all of it's a lot of work, but graphic novels,

Jason Reynolds

That's a lot.

Jennifer Baker

So wait after *Twenty-four Seconds From Now*, I'm curious about over a decade, over 20 plus books. What changes between each book in terms of process? Has that changed for you, or is it really you kind of come to each one respecting what the book is or will be as you go from there?

Jason Reynolds

Yeah, you know, it's almost like one begets the next. I will say this, it's harder. It gets harder with each book, just because I put a lot of pressure on myself. And I want to make sure that I'm exciting myself, right? I'm the one doing work, so I need to make sure that I'm enjoying the work, which means that I have to make it hard for me, and you gotta talk about it. And I gotta talk about it. So I try to make it difficult for myself so that I can go on whatever adventure needs to be gone on for me to make the thing, and that way I can talk about it like the adventure that it was. And so every book is a little more difficult, but I'm fortunate that I always leave bread crumbs for myself.

So, for instance, right? *Twenty-four Seconds*, I think about Aria and her mother. I'm working on maybe a series we'll see, we'll see. But I'm working on something that's trying to explore how kids and parents the distance is sometimes, can sometimes cause a chasm. The distance and age and experience can sometimes cause a chasm because kids don't know why their parents are the way they are. Yeah, I'm 15,000 words in so I mean, I'm in it at this point, but I'm trying to make something about how kids really get so upset with their parents for being this or being that, or saying this or saying that, or doing this a certain way or doing that. But what if they knew their parents when they were kids? What if they could have a window into their parents lives when their parents were children, and how—

Jennifer Baker

A different type of not Parent Trap. What is it like when they switch the bodies? Oh, God, Freaky Friday. Yeah, Freaky Friday. But different.

Jason Reynolds

Yeah, like, what changes? Right? It's like my mom. My mom and I are so close, and we've been close my whole life, but we're even closer now because I understand her differently. Because she's told me how she was raised, and she told me what happened when she was a kid, and all the things that sort of shaped her—the good and the bad and everything in between. And so, now I have a different level of empathy for my mom because I get it. And I wonder what I would have felt, and maybe I wouldn't have been able to hold that as a young person, or maybe I would have, I don't know, but I often think about like, how much grace I perhaps would have had as a 16-year-old, or maybe even younger, who knows, right?

Kids can do a lot of things right. How much grace I would have had if I would have just known, if she could have articulated, like, man, I'm really dealing with this. Because when I was your age, these are the things that happened to me, right? The reason I'm cutting these coupons is because when I was your age, we were this, that, And the third. The reason that I locked these doors like this is because when I was your age, this, this, and this happened to me, right. And it changes the dynamic. And that comes from writing Aria and her mom, and it sparked sort of another idea that I kind of want to explore in some way, shape or form. I think it's going to be a fairytale, by the way. I think it's going to be kind of like a Black kids in a fairytale situation, like urban Black kids, but like kind of a fairy tale situation, yeah, yeah. So we'll see.

Jennifer Baker

That'll be really great because I feel like that comes up. Do you feel like that comes up a lot when you do visits with young folks?

Jason Reynolds

Yes. And I think also because they're talking to me as an adult, and I'm telling my story that a lot of these kids are like, basically seeing like, oh, maybe this is what my mom maybe this is why, right? When I'm talking about the '80s and the early '90s, and I'm explaining to them what the crack epidemic did, and I'm explaining to them what HIV and AIDS did, and I'm explaining to them what hip-hop was doing for us at that particular time, right? Was it as complicated as it is? Now, of course, it was always complicated. It was always misogynist. It was always...right. Like, yes, those things existed, but it was balanced, and that there was a lot of it that we could listen to that was encouraging and made us feel proud, and was dance music and right, like all of these things. I mean the hits [of] Queen Latifah is like, it's so it was so emboldening, right? And so when I'm talking about all this, you can see the young people realizing, like, this is what my mother keeps saying. When she says, "Our music is different." This is what my mother keeps saying. This is why. This is why my dad keeps saying he don't want to do this, or he don't want to do that, or he think I should toughen up because he had to live through this,

right? Like it changes the way that you you understand it differently. If you're like, look, I only keep telling you that you're entitled because, I mean, it's like, our parents, right? It's like, oh, you mad. You said I had to walk to school five miles in the snow, but there is something to that. There is something to that where it's like, if I understood you, then maybe our relationship would be a little different, right? And maybe it would also help me push to try and understand other people, instead of just casting judgment and dispersion.

Jennifer Baker

And I wonder how much may have actually been seen, especially at the height of the pandemic. You know, when we're all sequestered together. For the most part, I know a lot of essential workers were doing amazing, amazing things and not getting enough money for it, those close quarters too, of 2020, 2021, for kids and parents and to just see the world in a different way, and how that might have brought them closer to understanding or not. I'm not sure.

Jason Reynolds

I don't know either, but I think it's something worth exploring. For sure, it's something worth exploring. And I think like to an extent, right? Because you also are like kids don't have to know everything. They shouldn't know all the responsibilities of a parent. But I do think that there should be more vulnerability, perhaps, right? Not a vulnerability that allows the kid to feel unsafe, but a vulnerability that says you and I are closer to the same than you know. I know that I'm your mom and you're my child, or I'm your dad and you're my child, but if you only knew why, like my mom would never let me leave the house without telling me she loves me and giving me a hug and all this stuff. But I get older, and I realize that she never heard I love you from her parents. She never got that kind of affection, and so for her, it was a big deal for me to know that every time I stepped out of this house that I was walking away with love, that there was love following behind me, there was love protecting me and shielding me and creating a force field around me. She needed me to know it because she didn't know and so when I'm like, "Mom, I'm 17, I don't wanna give you no hug and kiss and say," you know, I mean, she's like, Nah, I need you to understand this. And it has nothing. It has something to do with me, but it also has something to do with her that I now can Can I can identify and can empathize with.

Jennifer Baker

Because those stories are deep too, you know. Like I told you, it's my mom's birthday, and happy birthday to your little brother, Libras. And my mom would tell me stories about, you know, because she's the oldest of six, seven kids. You know, that's a lot pressure, dude, especially in the '50s, '60s. Come on, for Black people. *What?* So, yeah, I think she, she had a lot of she was very close to my grandmother, and that was, like, very hard when you lost my grandmother. But I feel like there's still those discussions that just kind of miss generations. It's like, you know I love you, but we're not saying it. It's in the actions which is very important, and what you're saying is also important too. So even in *Twenty-four From Now*, that is a love story, it's still so present in the actions. And when people say it and don't say it, and I hope everybody's seeing that when they read it, and it's feeling that when they read it.

Jason Reynolds

I hope so too.

Jennifer Baker

Yeah, we've mentioned this a couple times. It's like, oh, we hope the adults and the young people read it. And it really is prioritizing. It's giving agency to the young people who are the center of the book. And I can't keep getting over how much I keep saying I need adults to read some of these books the way I've been on a pulpit pimping *BIG* Vashti Harrison, I cannot tell you the way I've been like, I need all y'all to read this book. I need y'all to read *Don't Touch My Hair* by Sharee Miller. I need y'all to read 24 seconds from that, I need yours to read. And I don't know if you have any thoughts about that or the conversations you're having with multitude of people because it's not as though you're just talking to young people, you talk to adults regularly.

[31:14]

Jason Reynolds

Of course, of course. I mean, I'm with you all away. I think, look, I think that the book categories are all just strange ways to market stories and organize them on bookshelves. But I think books are books in there for all of us, no matter what the age is. Right? Like, there are books that I read that I am certain are for middle schoolers, but I find to be so powerful, and they are right. And I got friends of mine who have children who are like in the seventh and eighth grade, and all they read is Stephen King. So I don't think that there's an actual like I hate that we have boxed in the books in this way, because all books are for everybody, and I think that a kid, and this is what I always hope that a kid, will read this book at 14 and read it again at 21 and it'll feel different, and read it again at 28 and it'll feel different and at 35 and it'll make a different kind of sense, right? And the same way with adults who read it. I'd like for them to read it now while talking to their kid, and perhaps they're reading it with their young person and they're having a particular experience. But I also would like them to read it with their older friends as a book club. That way it's more about reminiscing. It's more about talking about, have we healed?

Have we really thought about I mean, look, Jenn, the reason I even wrote the book in the first place is because I realized, and having conversations with my male friends that no one zero had. None of us have ever been asked about how we felt emotionally just before losing opportunity. None of us ever in life. No one has ever bothered to say, How did you feel, emotionally, right? What about your insecurity, your fear of inadequacy? What about your body image issues. What about the fact that you've already lied because the societal pressure has forced you to have a false ego? What about the fact that you don't know how to take a bra off? You don't know how to put a condom on? You have watched so much pornography that is distorted what sex is supposed to be in the first place? What if you're a late bloomer? Why can't Black boys be late bloomers? Jenn, why can't we be a little a little slower to the party. Why are we assumed to be walking penises? Think about this, the stereotype of the Mandingo, the stereotype of the hypersexual, the stereotype of the aggressor, all this nonsense. And no one, *zero*

people, have asked any of my friends or me, or any male that I've asked if anyone has ever sort of questioned them about what they felt. And when I started to ask my friends, some of them started to cry because they realized that the girl that they lost their virginity to was way too old to be in the room. Some of them started to laugh when they had to reminisce about it and said, "No one's ever asked me, but when I look back now, I wish somebody would have because I felt this way and that way." Myself, I felt ill. I felt like I was gonna be sick in this girl's room, terrified, anxious, not knowing what to do or what I was supposed to do, knowing I wanted to do it. My body is saying one thing. My mind is saying something else. No one is considering it because we don't get to be human beings. We don't get to be that, right? I'm a porn category that doesn't say I'm a man. Doesn't say that I'm a person. It just says that I'm a digit, I'm a penis, I'm a phallus. Like, it's *crazy*, right? So I think ultimately that's what I want. I want adults, adult males and people who identify as male and also all other genders and sexes, all people to really discuss that. Like, let's talk about this. What was going on with you? I mean, I've got enough friends in the LGBTQIA+ community, I'd be fascinated to hear the discourse around this, even though I believe, at least in my homeboys, my gay male friends, I know they've talked about it ad nauseam and they talk about it. They talk about it with me, and you know what I mean, but I think about this all the time. How like my straight friends, they never, even no one's ever said like, Yo, when you came out, what was that like? And then you had your first sexual experience? My gay friends, that's a normal conversation for us. It's like a default icebreaker. But for straight males, ain't nobody ever asked us.

Jennifer Baker

That's gonna be a big conversation.

Jason Reynolds

I hope so too.

Jennifer Baker

And an important one too.

Jason Reynolds

I had a guy tell me in Baltimore when I was just thinking about writing this book, I mentioned it to a guy in Baltimore at an event. I said, Man. Think about writing about sex and about that first time and first love and all of that. And he said, Man, please write about it. He's like because when I was a kid, I was 14 on the streets of Baltimore, no 12 on the streets of Baltimore, and got advice about sex from a 13-year-old, and had a baby at 14 and a half. Here he is sitting next to me. Please talk about it. It's so strange. Laurie Halse Anderson said one time that sex is the only thing we expect young people to know how to do without ever being taught.

Jennifer Baker

It's wild too, because in those classes, right? Like those very much default check a box classes, right? Oh, here's a banana, here's a cucumber. Let's watch this old, old, *old* movie, like this ridiculously dated

movie. I'm like, the bell bottoms or something. I don't know what's going on, and it's all functional. And then the extraction of it, right? Like the states that are saying, we don't even want you to talk about it. We don't want you to just discuss it. We can't even... And then we get into the board and it goes, it goes to what you said it. It's a squid, right? The tentacles reach out, right? It affects everyone in so many ways, emotionally, psychologically. We're not asking young Black boys. We're not making sure those who have uterus have access to be able to get abortions, you know, get help. We don't have access to, like, hormone therapy. We don't have access to all these things because the information is being restricted, because we're not talking about it, we're not asking.

Jason Reynolds

We're not talking about it.

Jennifer Baker

Now we have *Twenty-four Seconds From Now* that gets us a little bit closer.

Jason Reynolds

I hope so. I hope it at least opens up the conversation. You know, I really think that we have to America hates talking about sex and violence.

Jennifer Baker

Seems like we're cool with violence. Violence seems like it.

Jason Reynolds

It depends, right? Because if it depends on it depends on who the perpetrator, right? But we struggle with it. Even in America is run on sex, and like the wild part is America is driven on sex and violence, but it hates to have any discourse around it. And I think when it comes to sex, it's interesting, because I don't always understand why we're so afraid to have these conversations, especially because it's like the most human part of us, if we're speaking just scientifically, this is the part of us that keeps us us. It keeps us going, right? Is but hey, the way, the reason that there are still human beings is because of this thing, this powerful, magical thing, and that it doesn't have to be the boogeyman, that it does have stakes and it requires responsibility, and there are human bodies involved, and so forth and so on. There has to be a way for us to begin talking about this so that we can have less people walking around ashamed of themselves, literally ashamed of themselves, ashamed of how they feel internally, about desire and about wanting to communicate a particular desire in a particular way that is just a human thing. I don't understand it. And I catch flack from people will say I'm sexualizing kids, and this that and the third, when the truth of the matter is I'm not sexualizing them, what I'm doing is acknowledging that they are sexual humans. They're sexual beings because they're beings. What do you want?

Jennifer Baker

Right? Right. It's weird. It's a word that's thrown around a lot. You're sexualizing just literally because sex is mentioned, that's what it equates to. And that is not accurate in any way such a form. I mean, I don't want to spoil it, so let me not say it.

Jason Reynolds

You can say it. I don't even write sex in the book, right? At all.

Jennifer Baker

At all.

Jason Reynolds

Intentionally, intentionally, there's no sex in the book. And then, to be completely transparent, the reason there's no sex in the book, one, because I didn't think they needed to be but two, because it's not about the actual act of sex. But two, because I didn't want to write it. I'm almost 41 years old. I'm not interested in writing 17 year olds having sex. It doesn't make me very comfortable, and I think it's very dicey, and it's a hard thing to pull off. And I step into this space as a cishet male, which colors that entire process differently, even if I were to get it right, it feels gross just because of the energy that I bring to the page and into every room, just because of the way I was born. I'm a cis hetero male writing about a little boy and a little girl having sex, it just don't feel so good. It feels icky. Even just trying to theorize it. And I recognize this. The truth is, is that I think someone who identifies as as women actually could have written it. I mean, Judy Blume did it. But could a male? Could a man write *Forever*? Think about it. Could we have had a *Forever* written that was by a man. And Judy is my people, and I'm grateful for what she made this book is because I was inspired a lot by *Forever* and recognizing that I couldn't write *Forever*, but I could do my version of this kind of thing. But like, I think about that all the time, like, Come on, man, they'd have my head out here. And I couldn't even blame him, because it would feel a little icky. It doesn't feel as safe. So you see what I'm saying? So because I know that, because I try to be self aware enough to know that, then it's like, Cool, we'll start here because I need to honor this boy in this situation, because I want to honor my younger self in this situation. And then we'll move backward. We'll go the opposite way. That way you can focus on who he is internally and not about. Some salacious sex scene that need not even be in the book. Doesn't really matter for the story, to be honest, you know.

[40:05]

Jennifer Baker

And also focus on the understanding that builds the relationship, that builds to want to do this, to get to that point where both Neon and Aria say, "I'm ready." And also see how loving that I hate to say pure, because I feel like that kind of infantilize. I can't with the T's today. But there is something just very, very sweet there is to that, and to be able to see how it came about, to get to that decision, to get to that point, to prep for that moment which is very real, you know, like to be, that's the, you know, like, I can

we talk about just the realness of the before, right? Like, those 5-10 minutes where you're just like, is every, you know, he's in the bathroom, and the guy's like, and like, I gotta give her her fries. I gotta get the chicken wings. I gotta bake, set the mood. You know what I mean, like all those little things of just making sure.

Jason Reynolds

I gotta put lotion on. Black boys, the lotion on my legs. Am I gonna do this? Am I gonna do this? What? What if I can't get her bra off? Are we gonna turn the lights on? Are we gonna keep the lights off? Are we gonna— Oh, stuff, that's how it is.

Jennifer Baker

There's so many elements that just, I was like mess, because my, you know, Grandma watched the stories my aunts watched, and it's so right, it's just so beautiful. It's so big. The lighting is perfect. You just turn over and everyone looks amazing. You just get out of bed. Everything's clean.

Jason Reynolds

You know what my favorite part of like, of like movie sex is other than the fact that no one ever wears a condom, which is wild to me. My favorite part about movie sex is after, after sex be how every time the woman gets out of bed, she takes the *whole* bed sheet, the whole cover, she takes, she takes all of the blanket off the bed to wrap herself in, to go to the bathroom. Even though you've just had sex with this man. So now you're gonna strip my whole bed down. Have you ever noticed that? It's like they get out the bed and take the whole sheet with them? I'm like, oh, oh, I've never experienced what is wrong with you. I mean, I was going to change the sheets, but this is wrap yourself in the sheet and walk to the bathroom. So, and it continued

Jennifer Baker

You just be made like, what is wrong with you?

Jason Reynolds

It's like I was gonna change the sheet but this is crazy.

Jennifer Baker

Into the 2000s too, you know, because I remember there was, like, this one with like, Mila Kunis and Justin Timberlake, and that happened, it's so ridiculous. That's weird.

Jason Reynolds

It's so weird. I remember, I'm like, who gets out of the bed and takes the sheet off the bed?

Jennifer Baker

None of this is real that like you got there's so many things you have to worry about, young people, you will find out the logistics. The logistics.

Jason Reynolds

And in a nutshell, that's what I want to honor, is that young people, you will find out, I want to let you off the hook a little early, so that you know. And this is something that I told my younger brother, it's okay. The best situation is for you to communicate your fear and anxiety and for the both of you to just stumble through this thing together. It'll be a loving and tender and funny and awkward experience. Take the edge off, do away with all the movie romance, and just talk to each other about what it is you want this to be. Talk to each other about what it is you do not know. Talk to each other about all of your fears, anxieties, and insecurities, about yourselves, your bodies, and everything else. This is just about communication. And then, and then, just go ahead and bumble on through it, right? And try your best to enjoy it and try to have fun, try to laugh a little bit. But to the young men, I'm always like, tenderness is a superpower. Not only is it a superpower, it's a necessity, not just in this situation, in *life*. There is nothing wrong with being a tender boy, being a tender man. Nothing is wrong with that. One has to know how to soften, because some things require softness.

There's this weird thing going on. Jenn, I'm watching all these teenagers, right? I watch all these YouTube clips of teenagers hosting game shows in their cars and all this silly stuff, because I wanted to keep my eye on what's going on. And there's a thing that happens during these Truth or Dare games they play on the internet where there's always, inevitably, a moment where the two people that play in the game have to kiss. And 99.9% of the time—this is a first kiss, by the way, *a first kiss*—and 99.9% of the time, the boy reaches out and grabs the girl by the jugular.

Jennifer Baker

Oh no.

Jason Reynolds

Exactly. And this is because they've seen something on pornography, or they've heard something about strangulation or BDSM, or what some women like to be, whatever they think they know that they do not know yet they believe that for a first kiss, this is okay. This is how what I'm trying to say is, nah, it's not. Tenderness is always the way, my G, tenderness is the way. And when you communicate with your partner, as you all continue down there. Within your sexual journey, you will find other points of pleasure that you all will address and discuss and explore, but tenderness is always where you begin. Always.

Jennifer Baker

Yeah, and it looks a lot of different ways, but certainly does not look like grabbing someone from the judge. Apparently, 99.9 percent of the time.

Jason Reynolds

And I'm always appalled. Yo, you just grabbed this girl by her neck, just like, right up underneath her jaw, just grab her and pull her into you. And I'm like, bro, what's happening.

Jennifer Baker

How is she? You know what I mean? Like, she doesn't know how to react to that.

Jason Reynolds

Like so many girls have been raised not to speak up, not to say I don't like that. All of that, like the mom says in the book. I won't spoil it, but people will read what the mom says in the book about that, about like, pay attention, in case she doesn't communicate this, pay attention to her. And so it's going to be look, it's going to be why it's going to be interesting to have these conversations. It's going to be interesting to deal with the backlash, of course. But ultimately, I'm proud of what I made, and I know that there's a place for it in the world, because I was a boy and all of my friends were boys who were trying to figure this out. And nobody has ever cared enough to wonder what it was like trying to figure this out.

Jennifer Baker

So here we are. I have a lot of friends I could give this to. I mean, in general, we're all big fans. Because, again, like, I always say this to Renée Watson too. I'm like, you know, you know a Renée Watson book when you read a Renée Watson book. You know a Jason Reynolds book when you read a Jason Reynolds book, it's y'all imprint is there. And the way that y'all care so much about the people you're writing about and forth is just like imprinted in every word blind page. And so *Twenty-four Seconds From Now* is just another addition to that, where I really do hope people recognize it for what it is, not just for like, this is what I hope, but like, Oh, I see it. I see where this is. And I got 30, 40, 50, you know what I mean? Like, again, I just see the plethora of the ways in which books in general, just really bring us to a better understanding of life and give us a moment to pause and that this is another book that does that, because I just was like, this was sweet. This was a very sweet story. And I really feel like I connected to this kid and understand a way that I would want relationships to go, and that it took me into my 40s to be able to communicate well, to do that. You know what I mean? Like, it can take a while. It can take a while. So why not have more at your disposal to maybe get you to that place earlier?

Jason Reynolds

Yeah, for sure.

Jennifer Baker

Well, thank you so much, Jason, I feel like a lot of people know how to reach you know you're on the internet, but you're kind of not on the internet.

Jennifer Baker

Mr. Reynolds is a lurker.

Jason Reynolds

If you're looking for me, I'm around.

Jennifer Baker

You want to find out about where you're at which of books, if, for some you haven't read the 20 plus book catalog. Jason writes books.com and then you know, you're, you're on the gram, and you're, you're on Twitter, or I still call it Twitter, I refuse.

Jason Reynolds

I still call it Jason Reynolds 83.

Jennifer Baker

Yeah, yeah. Eighties babies, yeah. This has been like the fourth time you've been on the podcast so you understand our MVPs. I gotta get y'all velvet jackets or something.

Jason Reynolds

You gotta have us on here together.

Jennifer Baker

Oh yeah, the last time I had y'all together was because I recorded the Creative Conversation you did when *Piecing Me Together* had come out at the [Langston] Hughes House.

Jason Reynolds

Oh, crazy. Feels like forever ago now, right?

Jennifer Baker

I don't know about you, but it's pre pandemic and the pandemic. That's how I see it.

Jason Reynolds

Exactly. Whatever happened before 2020 and after.

Jennifer Baker

Again, I want to congratulate you on *Twenty-four Seconds From Now* out October 8. And it'll be out by the time this episode's posts. And I know you're gonna be busy, and I hope you get some rest, and I just hope you receive the love for this love story.

Jason Reynolds

I appreciate it. Thank you so much, Jenn.

Jennifer Baker

Thank you so much. Mr. Reynolds, I want to give thanks and acknowledge that this episode was sponsored by Writability, a nonprofit writers guild in defense of the imagination, thanks again for listening to the Minorities in Publishing podcast as a reminder, you can find the podcast at minorities in publishing dot com or on Instagram and Twitter, at minoritiesinpub, and you can sign up for the monthly newsletter. Also feel free to rate the podcast on your listening platform. Take care.

[49:55]