

# On being human in your work



Writer Jason Reynolds on having a no-nonsense work ethic, not believing your own hype, and why kids make the most honest audiences.

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 3849 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Success](#), [Focus](#), [Process](#), [Promotion](#).

**You're a writer who does a lot of public speaking, and who is a spokesperson for different organizations. How do you find the time to write?**

I'm kind of old school in terms of the way I think about the work that we do. I don't believe in any of the romance involved with being a writer. Writing is one of those strange crafts where everybody romanticizes it. We grow up looking at these images and photographs of our favorite writers, sitting at their typewriters in their offices. The truth is that this is my job, so I find time by making it. I make time.

If that means writing on airplanes, then it's writing on airplanes. If it's writing in the backs of cabs, if it's writing on trains, then that's what it is. If it's writing in hotel rooms, then that's what it is. For me, it's about practice, and practicality. There's nothing to do with any muse or inspiration or any romantic incubator for me to do this work. I make no excuses for myself.

**Do you ever sit down and you just can't come up with anything?**

There are moments of exhaustion, right? But even then, I try to sit at the computer, or sit at the notebook, even if nothing comes out. There's something about being faithful to the process. It's like sitting at an altar, and sometimes there are words and sometimes there aren't. But it's my job to pay my respects, it's my job to sit there and see what happens a little bit each day. Barring a very few days off, I just make sure that I give it a little bit of time.

It's like any other meditative practice. Sometimes you have better days than others. Sometimes you can clear your mind. Or like yoga, you know? Sometimes the body is working for you, you can get your breathing right, and sometimes not. It depends upon what's happening in your life, but it's your job to be consistent with the practice.

**How do you avoid burning out?**

You know what, that's something I've been trying to balance out and work on. I'm not the best at balancing my life. I'm a workaholic, and so I try to figure out ways to give myself a break. Whether it be vegging out on the couch when I'm home, and just laying down for a minute, and giving myself a rest, like a physical and mental break. Whether it be listening to podcasts, or anything, to take me out of this space. Or going to the movies, or going to see my mother, or going to dinner.

**You started writing poetry when you were nine, then you ended up writing novels. You're writing poetry now, too, but what was it about the novel form that came to you, instead of being someone who's entirely a poet? What was it that appealed to you? And when did you realize you were good at it?**

At some point, I think it became about exercising a voice. This idea that, with a novel, I can create dialogue. The dialogue part of it was what drove me. I mean, the rest of the novel, the space in between the dialogue, the rest of the prose and the narrative, the sort of the narrative language, that's the same as poetry, right? What I'm doing in between dialogue, in terms of getting us from one place to the next using descriptive language, is the same thing I learned in poetry. It's just a different form. There aren't the line breaks, and things of that nature, but the language is the same.

But the dialogue felt like a bigger playground. The dialogue felt like an opportunity for me to stretch out in a different way, using voice and language, and embodying human beings in a way that poetry didn't necessarily allow for. I think that's the thing that I really fell in love with. How can you build a character, or build an entire world, using the human voice?

**How did you turn towards writing books for young adults?**

When I got in the industry, 15 years ago, I had no idea that Young Adult literature was a category. I'd just written something with my partner, a buddy of mine, and when we finally made it across the wall, when we finally made it into the industry, they categorized it. I didn't even know it was a thing. It was marketing. It has nothing to do with the way I look at work. I still don't necessarily look at my work as Young Adult.

I'm intentional about the work that I'm making, but I don't necessarily always think the categories are fair. Categories create limitation. A limitation, when it comes to the art, a limitation when it comes to the consumer. You know, all that shit is marketing; it has nothing to do with the literature that we make, it has everything to do with how they choose to sell it. It's all business.

**Knowing that all these kids are reading your work, do you ever feel any kind of pressure? Do you feel pressure to be a good role model on and off the page?**

It's a weight, man, it's a weight. It's one of those things where people don't always understand that just because you write about and for children that you're not a child, and that I live an adult life, and I do adult things.

There have been moments where I've been in public, and somebody will recognize me, but I'm at the bar, or you know, doing whatever it is I do in my normal life. Those moments can be a bit jarring, honestly. It's not because I feel ashamed, or that I feel like I should hide who I am, it's just that I happen to fall into a situation where a lot of people are looking. I'm a public figure now. A lot of younger people are looking. That's a responsibility that I don't take lightly or try to shirk, and so when I am in public spaces, I do try to keep my eagle eye on. Without sacrificing my fun, or who I am as a human being, I'm always cognizant of who's in the room. You gotta be.

It's also a barometer for me, right? It's like, "Yo, you gotta check yourself and know who you are at all times," right? You gotta walk your height and talk it. I can't talk about these sorts of things, the ideas of humility and intimacy and gratitude, and this, that, and the third, and then you see me, and I'm cold as ice, right? You meet me and I'm disrespectful, and inconsiderate. That's just not how I play. I just don't. That opportunity of you meeting somebody is an opportunity that could shape a person. We've all been there, when we've met our heroes, and either they've disappointed you, or they've emboldened you. We have an opportunity to make that happen, and I just would hate to be the person who somebody has a story about, like, "Yo, I met Jason Reynolds once, and he was a complete asshole."

**Since you're writing books that are read by kids, do you feel pressure to stay on top of youth culture?**

Of course. I try to stay up on what's going on. I mean, it's tricky, right? There's a beauty in youth culture, in terms of my relationship with it, because I was lucky enough to be born in 1983. The reason that that year is a funny year to be born is because in 1988, I'm five, from 1992 to '97 I'm like, in middle school and high school, right? And these are the eras where hip hop solidifies, right? It crystallizes. In '88 it crystallized. My older brother was 14. So I was listening to that music coming through the wall. This was '88, so we're talking about Run DMC. We're talking about that whole movement. And then '92, '91, '92, we're talking about N.W.A., and all of

that's happening, this, that, and the third. And then, '93, '94, '95, '96, then we're into 2Pac, Biggie, Nas, Jay, all that's happening. And I'm in high school now.

I say that to say, hip hop started as this thing that was directly connected to Black culture, and then, as I grew, the music grew into what we now could consider youth culture around the world. So my natural way of being, the thing that I was born into, that I grew up with, the thing that was connected to me, culturally, as a young person growing up, and that music being what we claim as ours, is now the world's. And the vocabulary that's used is the vocabulary birthed from that music.

So I got the ultimate cheat code. I'm naturally still involved in that world and in that culture, even as it changes and grows and shifts into all these new movements, and there's trap, and there's drill, and there's grime, and there's all this stuff from all over the world. But it's still a part of who I am, and what I'm interested in. So, by default, I stay connected.

**I read a quote of yours where you said that you don't celebrate your own work, you celebrate other people's work, or other people's awards. And you don't develop an ego, because you're too busy, and too focused on the next project to do that. When you started out, did you have an ego? Is it something you learned to keep in check over time?**

I've dealt with ego in high school, man. High school, college, yeah man. You know, I was never the nerd. I don't know that life, you know what I mean? So the success and the popularity, and all of that that I have today, there was a similar version of these things in high school and in college. So I've had my sort of training ground. I've gone through my puberty when it comes to attention. I learned early in life that I have that thing in me, right? That I could totally become that beast, that monster. But arrogance rests within us all.

And that insecurity that ego feeds on is there. I know it's there. Before I ever made it out of my teens, I had already sort of started to work and chip away at some of those things. I also have a mother who saw this coming a mile away, who always said, "Look kid, no matter what happens to you in your life, no matter how big and bad you get, the only thing I pray for is that you keep 10 toes down," you know? That's always been a big deal for my mom, to always remain myself, remain human. And so that's it, you know? You're never as good as they say you are, and you're never as bad as they say you are. Keep that in mind, and you always fall somewhere in the middle. It keeps you in check.

Also, my mom taught us that you always gotta accept rejection, but you gotta accept it at the same pace that you reject acceptance. And I think that's sort of the way I live my life. You win an award, you thank the people, and you move on with your life.

**Any other things you know now that you wish you'd known when you first started out?**

Honestly, I have to say that my career's pretty much been what I wanted it to be. I do what I want. I make what I want. I write what I want. I think if anything, maybe when I was 21, when I first got in this industry, I wish I would've known that the very thing that everybody was scared of, in terms of like, what's marketable? If I would have known back then that a good story is a good story, and if you're willing to put your feet on the pavement and pound it, if you're willing to get out there and make these books move, you can make anyone a believer.

My journey to success had a lot to do with the fact that I knew that it was gonna be me who had to power this machine. The publishing company wasn't necessarily going to put a bunch of marketing dollars behind me, right? The proving ground was gonna be on my back. And so when that first novel came out, I hit the street, man. I went to every school, and I went to every prison, and I went to every middle school, every alternative school, and every library. I just had to make it happen myself, I had to let people know who I was, and prove that what I had made was honest, and authentic and fresh, and necessary for this particular time.

It won't last forever. But I knew that I was on the pulse of something. I knew that, and so with those first three or four books, there was no way you could've avoided me. I was everywhere. On every newspaper, on every magazine, on every radio station, I was in every school. There was not a space in America that I wasn't touching. And then,

everybody was like, "Man, there's this kid that we keep seeing, we keep hearing his name, we keep seeing his books, we keep ..."

I didn't hit the [bestseller] list until I had five books out. You know, stuff came late, but then the awards would come in every year. At some point people were just like, "Yo, what's happening?" And then, kids took hold. And so the libraries and the schools, people started realizing, "Wait a minute. These kids who don't read anything, for whatever reason, they believe this guy. They believe whatever he's saying, and so they're reading his books." And then you started to see sort of a sea change, when it came to the American school curriculum, and all kinds of other things.

**Is it okay to abandon a project? Do you ever start writing something and realize it's not working, and just say, "Alright, this is not gonna be a book," or do you try to persevere and make things work?**

Naw, man, I let it go. I let it go. There's no point in battling with anything. I think you don't erase it, though. I think you'd be surprised how many times I've gone back and pulled from those scraps. When you're like, "Oh look, here's a character. Here's the character to glue this other project together." Or, in my last book that came out, *Lu*, there's a character in that book that I wrote two, three years ago. In a story called "Bully," that never came out, and I probably wrote 20, 30 pages of it, and put it away. But that character, there he is, right? You make things, and then you let them germinate. I think that's sort of my rule. It's not always about termination, sometimes it's about germination. Let them sit and germinate. Let them grow. Let them take root. Let them figure out who it is that they are. And then you can go back and tap into them later on and say, "Ah, this is what I made you for."

**Do you have favorite words that you use a lot?**

I love to turn nouns into verbs. I love the idea of using language. A lot of my books use language in that way, where you know, if a kid is saying that he's upset, the kid'll just say that he has so much scream in him. That's a thing that I love, love, love, love, love to do. Figure out ways to describe something in the voice of a child, simply due to the lack of vocabulary that the child may have, to create a new, brilliant way of thinking about what that emotion might feel like.

**Do you have any writing habits you have to fight against? Things you find yourself doing over and over, or falling back on certain plot devices?**

Oh god, yeah. For me, it's always about pushing forward. It's hard, though. It's weird. You gotta strike a balance between that which is overused, and that which is signature. So there are parts of my stories where people can read and be like, "Yo, this is a Jason Reynolds novel. I can tell by the language, I can tell by certain repetition and literary devices that he uses in all the books as a way to nail down the characters and their voices." Some of that stuff I'm okay with. It's a thing. It's like, this is what I do, this is what I use. Like James Baldwin and the run-on sentence. He wrote these really long sentences, and that was okay, because that was his way.

There are those things. But then there are other things where you're like, alright, I know that I love "Aha!" moments with characters that you don't think are important, but are actually important, and they show themselves at the end and you're like, "Oh, snap! That was the whole thing," right? But you gotta be careful because then people start looking for it, and they're like, "We know that this character that we just kind of breezed by, we know that this person's probably the key to the story." You don't want people to think like that.

I have to push against some of those inclinations, which is tough for me, because I really believe in human connectivity. I really believe that all of us know everybody, if we were to just think about it. I believe that the degrees of seriation are actually pretty slight, and that the beauty of a community is that we're all connected, we just don't always know it.

So it makes sense, that these characters who seem arbitrary show themselves in certain ways to be interconnected, because that's really how life goes a lot of the time. But for stories, and for as many books as I've written,

you just gotta be careful to not fall into cliché.

**If you write these books and you get awards, but the kids don't read it, then it's not successful. Kids won't be afraid to tell you if they don't like something, and won't do something if they don't like it. If they accept it, that seems like the major success.**

Yeah, that's it. That's it, man. Kids call bullshit faster than anybody. So, if they believe you, and they think that what you're making is for them, and that it's written for them, and with them in mind, and that you actually know who they are, then they'll ride with you. Kids are simple. All they want is a little authenticity, a little honesty, and for you to really know. Not to project, or pretend to know, but for you to know, for you to care enough to get to know who they are. And if you can prove to them that you've done that, and that you are that person, it's no different than when we were younger. Look, 2Pac could've made candles, and I would've bought 2Pac's candles. Right? Because I believed him. That's it. It's simple. It's human.

#### **Jason Reynolds recommends:**

Have your tools with you. I always have my laptop or my notebook with me, at all times. If you want to be a writer, have your tools all the time. Carry a backpack, whatever, but keep your tools on you.

Find your bible. What I mean by that is, everybody has a book, a book that they didn't write, that they wish they wrote. A book that they go back to, read it once a year. A book that sets the bar for them, in terms of what perfection is. For me, at this particular juncture of my life, it's *Salvage the Bones*\*, by Jesmyn Ward. To me, that is the closest book I've read to perfection, maybe in my life. That's where I want to be. That's a book that I study. I study the language, I study the plot structure, I study the character development. That is my bar. That's the thing, we all need to make sure we have our bar.

Have a routine. W. H. Auden, the poet, says that to discipline your passion is to discipline your time. What does that mean? That means that if you really want it to become a part of your life, then you gotta create a routine. It's about habit. Habits can be bad, and habits can be good. And good habits are what you want when it comes to being a writer. Don't make excuses for yourself. Excellence is a habit, everything is a habit. There's a theory that says that if you get up and you do your work at the same time every single day, you'll never have to struggle, because your brain will know what to do. It's muscle memory, right? So, routine, routine, routine, routine, routine. I firmly believe that. A lot of writers dispute it, because everybody has their own process. But for me, I firmly believe in routine.

Other art. Good writers cannot spend their lives only reading, no matter what anybody says. Reading is a part of it, a huge part of it, right? The biggest element of your job, other than writing, obviously, is reading. But the truth is, the real gift in being an artist is experiencing and exploring other art. Be open to movies. Be open to music. Be open to dance and theater. Be open to visual arts. Figure out how to find the narrative in all the things. View all the arts through the prism of literature, and writing, and figure out how to find narrative. It's always in everything. Figure out how to find narrative in anything.

Make time to laugh. Writing is a very, very, very, lonely, lonely life. It's a lonely craft. You're alone in your thoughts, you're alone in your head, you're alone in your home, in your office, wherever you are. To be a writer is to be alone a lot of the time. And so, it is incumbent and imperative for your mental state, and your ability to continue to make work, that you find time to laugh with other people, to laugh with yourself. Give yourself an opportunity to feel joy, and to feel ease. The visceral beauty of laughing is you have no control, right? The visceral freedom to let yourself have a good, hard, body, full body laugh, as often as possible...

#### Name

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#### Vocation

Writer, Poet

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