

# Books

Edited By | TINA JORDAN @EWTINAJORDAN



A WRITER WE LOVE

## YOUNG ADULT'S BRIGHT PRINCE

He says he didn't finish a book until he was 17, but now **Jason Reynolds** is one of the hottest authors around—and determined to show kids it's cool to read. **BY ISABELLA BIEDENHARN**

**HIS LONG HAIR IN DREADLOCKS,** his tattoos unfurling beneath a fashionable T-shirt, Jason Reynolds strides into a vegetarian restaurant in the West Village. His presence is so magnetic—crackling with intensity and wit—that it's easy to see how he can step into classrooms, like he does every week, and hold kids spellbound.

REYNOLDS: KIA CHERELLE

### BETWEEN THE LINES

- **Jane the Author** Simon & Schuster will publish *Snow Falling*, the romance novel Jane writes on *Jane the Virgin*.
- **Big Deal** National Book Award winner Jacqueline Woodson has signed a two-book deal with Riverhead Books.

In between discussions about leaving New York (the 33-year-old recently moved from Brooklyn to D.C., where he was raised) and the literary genius of hip-hop artists like Queen Latifah and Tupac, he recounts what school visits are like. At a recent one, a young boy approached him and said, "Yo, I'm not gonna lie to you, man. I didn't even know that authors could wear leather jackets."

Reynolds is used to reactions like this. "To them, I represent possibility," he explains. "It matters that all I have on is a short-sleeved shirt. It matters [that kids say], 'Oh, he's got tattoos?' Yes, I look like your favorite rapper. Now you know there are other options—that reading and writing can be cool in a very real way."

It also matters that Reynolds' novels are some of the best reads for young people today, shedding light on the struggles—and triumphs—of kids in communities long ignored in literature except by writers like Walter Dean Myers (*Monster*), a mentor to Reynolds before his 2014 death. In fact, it was Myers' son Chris, a close friend, who suggested he try writing YA when Reynolds' dream career in poetry wasn't taking off.

So he wrote his first novel, *When I Was the Greatest*, before and after his shifts at SoHo clothing store Rag & Bone in 2012, and it was published to acclaim in 2014. "I had never written anything in my own voice," he recalls. "I thought, 'You mean to tell me I can put my natural voice on the page, the one everybody has called improper English, and it'll

give texture and authenticity to the story? I didn't know.'"

Fast-forward three years, and Reynolds' books have found their way into classrooms and onto award ballots and the *New York Times* best-seller list. His 10th, *Long Way Down*, is a marvel: It plays out in just 60 seconds as 15-year-old Will, who's on an elevator, has to decide whether he'll follow the unspoken rules of the community and avenge his brother's murder—or put the gun away and return home.

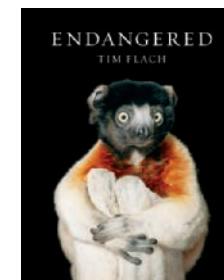
Like most of Reynolds' books, inspiration came from real life. "I lost a friend to murder when I was 19," he explains. "That night, all of my friends and I were at his mom's house, and I remember the feeling of the room, which was this thickness. It was like the room was catalyzed." He knew that any of them could walk out the door and murder the killer, but his friend's mother urged them not to let any other parent feel her pain. "I'll never forget the feeling of time suspended," he says. "I knew I wanted to tell a story about a kid who has every reason to do this, and every reason not to do this."

Ideas for future books bubble out of Reynolds: He describes at least four upcoming projects, a couple of which he's not supposed to talk about. When people ask how he can possibly be so prolific, he cites the advice Walter Dean Myers once gave him: "Five pages a day, five days a week, that's a book every three months, that's more books than anyone will ever be able to publish. If you do it this way, you will not fail."



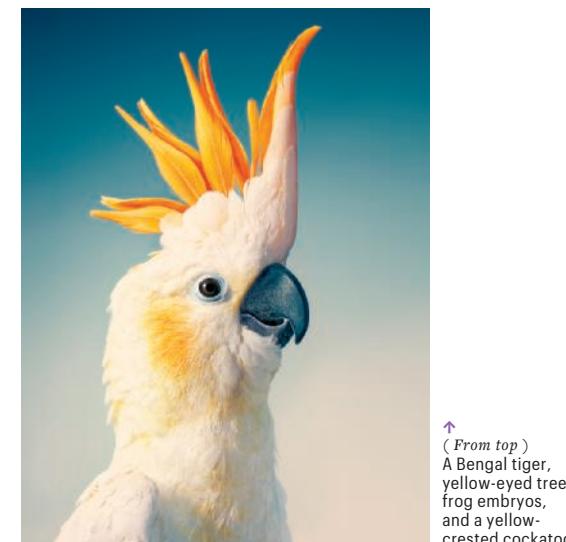
**YES, I LOOK LIKE YOUR FAVORITE RAPPER. NOW YOU KNOW READING AND WRITING CAN BE COOL."**

—JASON REYNOLDS



## READY FOR THEIR CLOSE-UPS

Nature photographer **Tim Flach**'s remarkable new book showcases threatened animals and ecosystems



↑ (From top) A Bengal tiger, yellow-eyed treefrog embryos, and a yellow-crested cockatoo