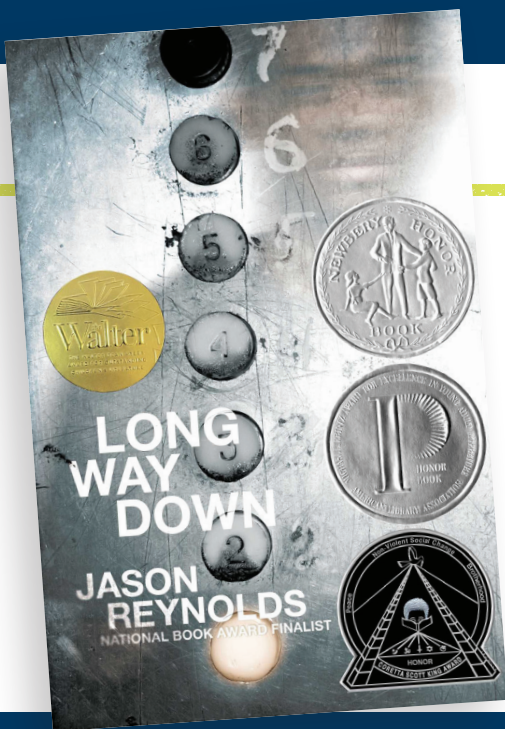


Common Reading

BOOK GUIDE

2019



JASON
REYNOLDS



Northern Vermont
UNIVERSITY

NorthernVermont.edu

Dear First-Year Students:

Welcome to Northern Vermont University (NVU)-Johnson and the NVU Common Reading Initiative, an interdisciplinary endeavor that creates opportunities for engagement through a carefully chosen reading selection that inspires thinking about a unique aspect of North American culture. This year's choice, award-winning *Long Way Down*, uses "ghosts of the past" to tell a story about gun violence, loss of a sibling, and revenge. What makes this book unique is that it is written as a novel in narrative verse, providing an entrée into poetry.

I invite you to take what you have learned from your reading of *Long Way Down* to think about the implications for our campus and local communities, bringing your energy and wisdom to bear on some very important societal issues facing us today. This may mean finding ways to strengthen your social connections through engaging in service, displaying leadership, helping others in need, or supporting a cause that reaches beyond the individual.

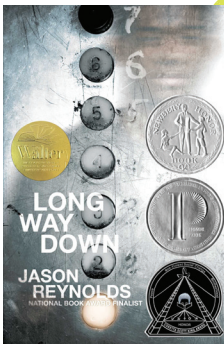
In the fall, you will have many opportunities to discuss this provocative text with your peers, faculty and staff. Additionally, Northern Vermont University-Johnson will be hosting the author, Jason Reynolds, on September 10th. This will be a very special event that you will not want to miss! Please make it a point to review the background material presented in this guide, so that you will be well prepared.

In closing, I look forward to getting to know each of you and sharing this very special learning community. I challenge you to do your best and we will be there to support you every step of the way. Be sure to take advantage of the array of services designed to help you as you adjust to a new learning environment. Again, welcome to Northern Vermont University-Johnson!

Best wishes for a great start,

Elaine C. Collins

Elaine C. Collins, Ph.D.
President



We are immensely grateful to Jane White (JSC Class of '71) for her generous support of the Common Reading Initiative.

NVU's Common Reading Initiative is a program of the Office of First-Year Experience
Dewey Hall | 802-635-1474

Margo Warden, Director:

Margo.Warden@northernvermont.edu

Emily Neilsen, Coordinator of First-Year Experience Events:

Emily.Neilsen@northernvermont.edu

Tammy Johnson, Coordinator of First-Year Support:

Tammy.Johnson@northernvermont.edu

CONTENTS

About the Author and the Book **1**
Events **2**
Facts and Terms **3**



GETTING STARTED

This guide is intended to help us open the door to positive and productive conversations about race, gender, socioeconomic status, cycles of violence, and incarceration, among other topics. By reading this book, engaging in discussions, and attending events on campus, we hope to:

- Cultivate open, honest, and respectful conversations about multifaceted and challenging issues
- Raise and increase awareness and understanding about the topics listed above, among others
- Promote and increase empathy
- Inspire and sustain action and activism directed at creating a better campus climate and society

The topics explored in this book are complex and multilayered. We chose *Long Way Down*, in part, because we believe that Jason Reynold’s fictional portrayal is layered and compelling, and because it raises a host of questions worth considering.

In approaching this text, we intend to bring our best selves to create a space for dialogue that is constructive and unifying, regardless of differences of opinion. In order to do this important work, we look to our core

values for guidance. At Northern Vermont University-Johnson, we believe the success of a community depends on a shared commitment, and each member’s sense of responsibility to our Community Values.

Demonstrated through our actions and beliefs we are committed to...

- A community where freedom of expression is protected; differences in others’ ideas, values, and experiences are respected; and where civility is positively affirmed.
- A community where curiosity, critical thinking and thoughtful questions are celebrated as meaningful contributions to the learning environment.
- A community that demonstrates compassion and responsibility through service and involvement within our campuses and our surrounding communities.
- A community where individuals accept their obligations to the group and respect the rights and property of others.

We are grateful to NVU-Johnson community members for honoring these principles in conversations about *Long Way Down* and when in engaging with related programming.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

and the book

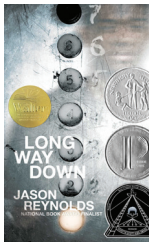


“My job is to illuminate that which is perennial in our country, whether it’s poverty, racism, sexism, anger, pain, trauma, love, fear, happiness, or marginalization. If I’m writing honest work, young people will be able to read a story and then make the connection to the current political climate. That’s far more important: How can we teach our young people how to think and not what to think?”

Jason Reynolds is a National Book Award Finalist, Newbery Award Honoree, NAACP Image Award Winner, recipient of multiple Coretta Scott King honors, and a New York Times best-selling author, among many other awards. Reynolds’ many books include *Ghost*, *When I Was the Greatest*, *Look Both Ways*, *As Brave as You*, *For Every One*, and, of course, *Long Way Down*, which has also received many awards.

Despite his considerable literary success, Reynolds didn’t read a book cover to cover until he was nearly 18. And while this fact isn’t something he’s proud of, it has been one of his great motivators not just to write, but to write about and for youth whose voices and perspectives are often excluded from literature. “All I want kids to know is that I see them for who they are and not who everyone thinks they are...and putting that on the page with integrity and balance, to acknowledge the glory and the brokenness. That’s all I want to do. It’s a lot, but so are they.”

Long Way Down is Reynolds’ ninth book. Written in free verse, the novel tells a complex story over the span of only sixty-seven seconds. *Long Way Down* explores the impact of gun violence on the lives of young people, including the cycle of trauma, anger, and loss that this violence creates. At the start of the novel, the main character, Will, grapples with the murder of his brother Shawn. The story unfolds from there, as Will faces the choice of how to respond in a world that seems to limit his options. Relative to other novels, *Long Way Down* is written in very few words. And yet, the book wrestles with big ideas such as racial and economic segregation, masculinity, gun violence, incarceration, the drug trade, and coming of age.



AUTHOR TALK & BOOK SIGNING

Jason Reynolds

Tuesday, September 10 | Dibden Center for the Arts | 8 p.m.

Join us for an evening with this year's Common Book Author, Jason Reynolds! A seasoned and gifted public speaker, Reynolds will speak to *Long Way Down* as well as his journey to becoming an award-winning author. Bring your copy of the text for a post-talk book signing.

ADDITIONAL UPCOMING EVENTS



NOT SO DIFFERENT AFTER ALL:

Vermont's Racial Disparities in Policing - September 18 • Bentley 207 • 6 p.m.

UVM Professor of Economics, Stephanie Seguino discusses the results of a study of racial disparities in traffic policing in Vermont from 2012-15. Results are compared to those from other parts of the country. Also explored will be the reaction of the public, legislature, and law enforcement agencies to these findings. The role of implicit bias in contributing to racial disparities will also be taken up.

FILM: THE MASK YOU LIVE IN

September 23 • Bentley 207 • 4 p.m.



The Mask You Live In explores America's definition of masculinity through the lived experiences of everyday boys and men. The film considers the way all of us are harmed by a narrow definition of masculinity and it offers suggestions for positive change.



LIBRARY DISPLAY: HOUSING DISCRIMINATION

Ongoing • Willey Library Lobby

Do you want to know more about why many of America's neighborhoods are racially segregated? Check out the display in the Willey Library and Learning Center. There, you'll find materials about redlining, blockbusting, and other unequal housing policies that continue to contribute to racial separation within our cities and towns.

RADICAL EMPATHY GALLERY TALK - STEPHANIE SEGUINO

October 23 • Julian Scott Memorial Gallery • 3 pm



Radical Empathy is a photography exhibit that explores issues of race. Artist, economist, and professor, Stephanie Seguino created the work in response to a question posed by philosopher Anthony Kwame Appiah, "What do we owe strangers by virtue of our shared humanity?" In this talk, Seguino will address the ways in which stereotypes can hinder our ability to see the full humanity of black men.

FILM: 13TH

November 11 • Bentley 207 • 4:30 p.m.



Ava DuVernay's award-winning documentary explores the history of race and criminal justice in the United States. The film traces the history of the 13th Amendment, which, DuVernay argues, effectively criminalized African Americans and led to mass incarceration in the United States.

The following pages highlight five themes from *Long Way Down*. We recommend reading through this information before starting the book and keeping these pages handy as you move through it. These themes will be explored through the programming listed on the previous page and your assignment card asks you to select passages that connect to at least one of the five themes. The passages you choose will drive our conversation about the book during Fall Orientation.

1

SEGREGATION / HOUSING



In *Long Way Down*, Jason Reynolds creates a sense of place through main character, Will Hollowman's descriptions of his neighborhood's residents. These descriptions point to racial and economic segregation. Racially and socioeconomically segregated cities and towns have long existed in America. Ghettos, or parts of a city occupied by a minority group, did not simply arise by mistake. Instead, decades of housing policy, as well as social, economic and legal pressure, intentionally and unintentionally created residentially segregated urban areas in this country. Some of the policies and practices that are most responsible include:

- redlining: refusing loans to those who live in an area deemed to be a financial risk
- blockbusting: the practice of persuading owners to sell property cheaply because of the fear of historically marginalized groups moving into the neighborhood, and thus profiting by reselling at a higher price
- covenants: contracts that barred African Americans (and sometimes other groups) from buying or renting property in certain areas
- unequal application of the GI Bill: Following WWII, Black veterans were often denied home loans, while their White counterparts built generational wealth

These policies and many others created conditions that hindered racial integration and often denied services and advantages to people of color.

2

MASCULINITY / TOXIC MASCULINITY



Masculinity is the quality of manliness — habits and traits that society has historically considered to be appropriate for a man. Toxic masculinity refers to a set of behaviors and perspectives that align with a narrow definition of manhood. This notion places value on physical strength and dominance, while disregarding emotional vulnerability and any characteristics considered feminine. In *Long Way Down*, the main character, Will, is shown to have a complex emotional world. At the same time, Will lives within a culture that promotes a limited notion of masculinity that restricts his ability to demonstrate and share his emotions. In an interview with Audible, author Jason Reynolds explains that challenging rigid definitions of masculinity is an intentional part of his work. In large part, he does this by writing about the emotional lives of his young male characters while simultaneously showing the ways in which society limits boys' expressions of their feelings.

3

POLICING / INCARCERATION



The lives of the characters in *Long Way Down* are interwoven with the criminal justice system. Will and his community are deeply distrustful of the police. “No Snitching” is one of the three basic rules of his community, and many of the men in his life have been, or are, incarcerated. The intersection of policing and race (especially for African-American and Black citizens) has a history that is centuries old and deeply intertwined with the founding of the United States. Before the U.S. was even a nation, slave patrols were the earliest form of organized policing. Starting in the early 1700s, slave patrols were intended to maintain white supremacy and power by returning escaped slaves and instilling fear among anyone who challenged the institution of slavery. While the criminal justice system at large has grown to become more proactive and preventative, racial disparities in policing and in all arms of the justice system continue to this day. Vermont is not exempt. For example, in this state, Black and Brown people are more likely to be pulled over and searched by police, despite the fact that White people are more likely to be found with contraband when they are searched (Seguino and Brooks). Nationally, people of color are overrepresented in every arm of the criminal justice system.

4

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY / DRUG TRADE



One of the supporting characters in *Long Way Down* is Will’s uncle, Mark. Jason Reynolds provides the reader with the background story of why Uncle Mark ends up dealing drugs in his neighborhood. The narrative depicts the way in which Mark’s choices are compromised as a result of his limited options and opportunities. And, Mark’s story runs in the face of many stereotypes about drug dealers, particularly those that suggest people start dealing drugs to become wealthy kingpins and that they are simply making a bad choice in the face of multiple good options. As the Drug Policy Alliance reports, nine out of ten people in federal prison for offenses related to drug trafficking are low-level dealers like Uncle Mark and one in two people in federal prison for drug-related offenses haven’t earned a high school diploma. Limited education and low earning potential can correlate with low-level drug dealing, which some use simply to make ends meet. While Uncle Mark provides an example of an individual actor making a choice, he also shows us the ways in which his circumstances (the neighborhood he was born into, a shortage of economic opportunities, and other factors) play a role in limiting the options he can choose from.

5

CYCLES OF VIOLENCE / GUN VIOLENCE



In an interview with NPR, Jason Reynolds indicates that one of his goals in writing *Long Way Down* was to dispel the myth that those involved in cyclical gun violence are cold-blooded and unfeeling. To the contrary, Reynolds says, “The truth is that everyone who’s ever been around anyone who has been in these environments knows that the people who pull the triggers are terrified.” Further, Reynolds says in a Kennedy Center Education Digital Learning interview, society tends to use labels -- gangster or thug -- that allow us to forget that many involved are children and teenagers. What, then, are some of the reasons that gun violence continues in many communities, including those like Will’s? Reynolds provides important insight when describing a common scenario: “So if my friend is killed by a rival gang, then my job is to kill the kid who killed my friend, not realizing that 40 years ago is when that original beef began, and now it’s just spinning on its own axis. When you compound that with the generational trauma involved, and then you compound that with poverty and education, and then you compound all of it with the social ills that exist in general for poor people and for marginalized people in America, especially people of color, this is what it looks like.” *Long Way Down* suggests that all of the factors Reynolds mentions – poverty, trauma, lack of education, among others – are essential in understanding why violence persists.

#LongWayDownNVU



Win a Hammock!

Follow **#LongWayDownNVU** to see images and thoughts of students, staff, and faculty reading and considering this year's Common Book.

Post a picture of you and your copy of *Long Way Down* to **#LongWayDownNVU** and be entered to win a hammock.

We look forward to your return in August and our continued discussions.

Questions? Feedback? Don't hesitate to contact us!

802.635.1474

Margo Warden, Director: Margo.Warden@NorthernVermont.edu

Emily Neilsen, Coordinator of First-Year Events: Emily.Neilsen@NorthernVermont.edu

Tammy Johnson, Coordinator of First-Year Support: Tammy.Johnson@NorthernVermont.edu

