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**[00:01:01]** <music>

**Intro:** Hi, friends, welcome to another episode of That Sounds Fun. I'm your host, Annie F. Downs. It's a really special week here at That Sound Fun, and we have got a great show in store. We're coming up on the weekiversary of *What Sounds Fun to You?* being out in the world. I can't tell y'all how much it's meant to see you post your kiddos in MiniBFFs with the book.

If you haven't grabbed a copy, it's available at your local bookstore or on Amazon. And it's the perfect one to pass along to your teacher friends and kids' ministers and of course any kids in your life. And if you have read the book and want to leave a review wherever you purchase the book from, that helps a ton.

So this week on the show, I'm passing the microphone over to my good friend, Pastor Mike Kelsey. Y'all know him. He's been on the show, and he's hosted the show before. We handed him the mic in 2020. And he is a trusted voice in leading and teaching me about life and the gospel and racial justice and how it looks. And I've loved how much I have learned and grown from hearing conversations between Mike and his friends without me in the room or on a microphone.

So I called Mike and I was like, "Let me hire you again, please, to come take over our podcasts for a week of shows." And he very kindly said yes. I cannot wait for you to hear these conversations with his guests.

Just a reminder that you will only hear me and the intro and the outro and telling you about our ad partners. These conversations Mike is hosting I am not there. It is just Mike and his friends. And it is an incredible learning opportunity in these really awesome conversations and incredible guests that Mike got together for us.

So today, Mike talks with his friend, author, Jason Reynolds, who I'm sure many of you know. I think you're really going to enjoy Jason's point of view, his creative process, and the friendship and honesty between these two men. So here is our host, Mike Kelsey and author and friend, Jason Reynolds.

**[00:03:13] <music>**

**Mike:** All right. Well, I'm excited to be back on That Sounds Fun Podcast with Annie F. Downs. I don't know why she keeps letting me do this. But I'll take it. And today, man, I got a good friend of mine, Jason Reynolds on, prolific author, but even better friend. Jason is good to have you on, man.

**Jason:** Man, my guy. Good to see you, brother.

**Mike:** Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Now, let me just start real quick before we get into the main stuff. I just want to help our audience just understand our relationship. And so I just want to share these two snapshots that I think is going to give people a pretty accurate picture of our friendship.

One of them is recent. You took me to dinner and you ordered something I'd never heard of before. You order salmon color. Correct?

**Jason:** Correct.

**Mike:** Yeah. This one looks juicy. This one looks amazing. I'll never remember what I ordered, but I was looking at yours and I was like, "What in the world!" And so the next time I went out, and I tried to be fancy and order that, I didn't remember what it was called. So I order salmon shoulder.

**Jason:** Exactly. Even though salmons don't have shoulders.

**Mike:** They don't have shoulders. They don't have shoulders. So I was like, "You know what? I need to stick to the level that I'm on." You know what I'm saying?

**Jason:** We all get there in our own time, man.

**Mike:** Well, the second little snapshot is—and I told you this before—your current wardrobe is always what I'm going to be wearing two to three years from now. That's been true ever since we've been in college though.

**Jason:** It's been true for a long time.

**Mike:** It's been true. And I don't know if you remember this, but you put me on my first pair of skinny jeans.

**Jason:** I'll never forget it. I was so proud of you.

**Mike:** Yeah. Unique low joints, bro.

**Jason:** You were a slim dude? I don't know what he was thinking. What took you so long, man?

**Mike:** I don't know what took me so long. But now they out. So I'm like, "Why throw away all my normal jeans?" You know what I'm saying? So let's jump right into your career. We've known each other a long time. God has been really gracious and kind. And you, man, have put in work. And I try to buy every book you publish. In fact, they're all in a bookshelf in my living room at home.

But then I saw this in a New York Times article. It says, "Since 2014, Jason Reynolds has published 13 books, which have sold more than 6 million copies." Now, you know me, I was never good at math in college. And I'm looking, I'm like, It's 2021. Since 2014, you've published 13 books.

**Jason:** Yeah, man.

**Mike:** I don't understand. How do you write that much?

**Jason:** You know, I think for me, the wow part is thinking about this 6 million of them sold. I mean, it's overwhelming to think about that. I mean, like, bro, it's a good chance that if you bump into a kid that they read something that I've written, which is a wild thing to think about.

**Mike:** Y'all, it's crazy wild. First of all, we both grew up in Prince George's County, PG County, Maryland, I call it the kingdom of black people, which is a very unique place. It was the highest concentration of black wealth in the country, but it was also full of a lot of the other real but you know, kind of stereotypical challenges in black community.

So Prince George's County is a very diverse county, rich with black history. And so man, you can imagine my surprise though now as a pastor of a multi-ethnic church. At one of my members' houses, their family is Chinese, and their little library area—this is years ago—and I just look up on the bookshelf and one of your books is on the bookshelf. See, like her daughter got to join in like her library or something like that. And it was just wild.

Some people may not be familiar with you, so I want to introduce to them some of your books. So let me just survey a couple of your popular books. I'm going to run through a couple of titles just give us an overview of the book. And dawg, there's just so many. I don't even know which ones to pick.

**Jason:** Pick a few. It's all good.

**Mike:** Let's just pick a couple. You wrote the track series. One of them was *Ghost*. So just give us a quick overview.

**Jason:** *Ghost* is a story about a young man who experiences a moment of trauma early in his life, and then figures out how to use that trauma when he joined the track team because he knows how to run because of that traumatic moment. And he finally joined the track team and he develops new friendships, new family members. And He doesn't let the trauma sort of be the thing that sort of leads his life. You know, it's based on a true story from my homeboy Matt Carter from southeast DC.

**Mike:** Shout out to Matt.

**Jason:** Shout out to Matt. Shout out to the city. Shout to Oxon Hill where I'm from. I'm very proud of that. You know what I mean? Working class. You know what I'm saying? I wanted to sort of show what that looked like and what that was like without it being some sob stories. It's cool. It's fun. It's all the things you know.

**Mike:** *Long Way Down*. That's my favorite.

**Jason:** *Long Way Down* story is also based on true events, true emotions as about a young man whose brother is murdered, and he is forced to grapple with the codes of the

community. You have these. I mean, a lot of us who grew up in certain environments you have these codes you follow. No snitch and no crime. And you always sort of seek revenge. You know, an eye for an eye.

I wanted to conceptualize the whole thing by putting him on an elevator as he's going down to the lobby to go and find who killed his brother. The whole book takes place in one minute of his life as on each floor he's visited by a new person who comes into that elevator who he knows. The trick bag is everyone on that elevator is already dead.

It's just a story about what it means to be haunted. And when I say haunting, I mean, like, what is it... because we're all haunted, right? Haunted by our mothers, haunted by, right... there's always something whispering in your ear. Right? I mean, even if, you know, your religious beliefs, you lead the church, you hear that spirit in your ear all the time. And so to try to figure out a way to talk about consciousness as a way to talk about hunting, and to figure out a way to talk about gun violence, not as gun violence but as children who are afraid

**Mike:** That's what I love most. Two things I love most. Number one, your writing. And we'll talk about this, but ever since college, I'm a Jason Reynolds groupie. I told you. Since college. All I want to do in life is be a-

**Jason:** Drive the bus.

**Mike:** That's it. You know.

**Jason:** I know. I know.

**Mike:** You already know and you still haven't granted me my request. You won't let me fulfill my calling.

**Jason:** One day.

**Mike:** But just the writing. Because *Long Way Down* was written differently than your other books, right?

**Jason:** Yeah, yeah. It was written in verse. It was written in verse. It was written in verse for a very specific reason. I mean, you know, if you write a novel in verse and you're able to sort of mimic what the human mind is doing, especially in this story, right? If trauma is what we're dealing with, then verse makes more sense because the human brain does not actually function in complete sentences. And so I was

able to really kind of tighten and intensify the story and put you on that elevator, because there's so few words in the book.

**Mike:** Mm-hmm. It was genius, bro. It was genius. The second reason I love the book is exactly what you said. It humanizes people, kids that are so often demonized, or at best, just treated as an issue. So when we talk about gun violence in Chicago, you know, we talk about violence in Brooklyn or wherever it is, we don't tend to hear stories of these kids through the lens of just their humanity. And I thought you just did that in just a brilliant, compelling, beautiful, moving way.

**Jason:** I appreciate.

**Mike:** All right, *Look Both Ways*. I can't do all the books, but let's just go-

**Jason:** I know, yeah. *Look Both Ways* is a collection of short stories that you can pluck out one by one, or you can read straight through like a novel—interconnected, short stories. And really the whole premise is there's school, there's home, and then there's like a liminal space. There's a space between school and home, especially if you're a young kid and you're walking home from school. And it's that 15-minute walk where you get to actually exercise a certain level of autonomy, because there's no adults around.

I'm always interested in figuring out ways to show young people as their true selves, show them as their whole selves, big, and curious, and imaginative and funny and sad, and all over the place. And *Look Both Ways* is almost like a sample set. It was like a study in young life in that 15 minute period. So it's 10 different stories. It's probably 40 different characters, everybody's going separate ways. And it's completely separate worlds, but all those worlds are actually connected.

Because I think that that's also life in and of itself, right? If we talk to each other long enough, we'll realize that we are all connected in some way, shape, or form. The issue is we don't talk to each other. Right? Not long enough. You won't put in that energy to talk to each other long enough to realize that I ain't gotta hate you because your cousin is my best friend.

**Mike:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, man. Well, I mean, folks can go on your website. They can check out all your other books. You're about to drop *Stuntboy*, which I already pre-ordered. And I'm excited.

**Jason:** *Stuntboy. Ain't Burned All the Bright* coming out in January with Jason Griffin.

**Mike:** With Jason Griffin. Yeah, man. Shout out to Jason Griffin. I'm sure we'll talk about him as we talk about your story. Man, you wrote *Miles Morales*, which is just Spider Man book. I mean, you've done all kinds of stuff. And you also co-authored a book called *Stamped*, which is, as you call it, a remix of Ibram X. Kendi's *Stamped from the Beginning*. And that was huge.

Ibram X. Kendi is a... Well, I'll be honest, he's a lightning rod in our culture because of some of the things that he writes about and talks about. And so you get asked to almost rewrite this book in a way that will engage children. First let me ask you, do you read your reviews?

**Jason:** No.

**Mike:** You don't. Okay. So, you may not be aware then that you got some pushback?

**Jason:** Oh, no, I'm aware.

**Mike:** I'm just saying. You got a little bit of pushback—you know what I'm saying?—on *Stamped* and other books. I don't want to get into the nitty-gritty of all the critiques and criticisms, but there is one that I wanted to ask you about. One of the common critiques that I saw about, particularly your book *Stamped*, was that people said it was anti-white and that you were anti-white. Which I know you personally. In fact, Jason Griffin, who you're about to come out with another book-

**Jason:** One of my best friends.

**Mike:** One of your best friends, and y'all really started your career together is a white dude. But do you think all white people are racist?

**Jason:** You know, I think that the question in and of itself is a minefield. And I think that that question is reductive. There's a reason why. I think that over time, what we've learned to do because of punditry and news media, and social media, and all these things is figure out what exactly is the most divisive way to use language.

So I'm going to answer your question, but I want to reframe it a bit. Because I think that if I answer your question flat out, I think it's ineffective. And I also think that it's no longer useful and it can feel a bit dismissive.

Here's the way I think we should frame it. I am a male, I am a man in America, I am a cis-gendered, heterosexual male, right? By the way, none of those things even matter in this particular context because I am a man. My body is that of a man.

Which means that if we all know, I mean, we have these arguments all the time around gender and around sex and around who is paid more, who is treated differently, right?

I know for a fact that when I walk in a room I command a different kind of respect. I know for a fact that when I open my mouth I command different kinds of respect. I know for a fact that my body in the room can be a force, can change the temperature of a room simply because I'm a man.

And so if I'm a man, and I know that we live in a country that for centuries treated women as second-class citizens and is patriarchal in its nature, which we all know this to be true—we're still waiting on a woman president, by the way. We all know this to be true—then I think it would be dangerous for me to assume that I don't have any misogyny in me. Right?

If every single moment in my life I have been able to make decisions, and those decisions even when they are harmful decisions, they've been pacified, they've been squelched. I can harm somebody, and they'll be like, "Oh, you know, boys will be boys. Oh, you know, he's a man. Let him run." You know what I mean?

**Mike:**      Yeah, yeah.

**Jason:**      So it'd be weird for me, it would be immature and irresponsible for me to be like, "Yo, there's no misogyny in me." And if I did believe that, then what I would really be doing ostensibly is I'd be becoming more harmful because I widen the blind spot.

Now, what we could do on the flip side is we could say, "Look, I try to be a good person. I see myself as a pretty solid guy. I think I try, I try to be a pretty good person." But I got to be aware that some of that send me because if not, I might say something really painful, I might do something really painful. And it's not my fault that it's in there. It was bred in there simply by the structures of the country historically.

**Mike:**      And reinforced.

**Jason:**      And reinforced over and over and over. It doesn't make me a bad person. But it does mean that I have to hold myself accountable in order to create safety for the people around me. Right?

**Mike:**      Yeah.



**Jason:** Now, if we take that idea and we think about it in regards to race, it's just saying that like, white folks, it is impossible to ignore a deep-seated, embedded bias that has been reinforced. Mike, I'll tell you a quick story, man. It leads to this very thing.

Here's what happened. Me and Brendan Kiley, another white man who I love dearly, another one of my very best friends, we were All American Boys together. And we're traveling around the country and this question comes up. And also, to be honest, Mike, I also feel like people are just looking for ways to absolve themselves because it feels bad. And it does feel bad. It feels bad for me to say that I might be a misogynist or I might have misogyny in me. It feels bad. It doesn't make it any less true.

And so I'm traveling around. I'm in Denver, Colorado with Brendon. And a lovely woman stand up in the back of the room and she says, "I dealt with my bias years ago. I don't have any prejudice. I dealt with it years ago. I don't have any racism. I don't have any prejudice."

You know, I'm appalled, but I'm also down for the challenge. And so I say, "Let me ask you something. If that's true, okay. But let me just ask you something. We'll have an experiment. You don't have to answer this question out loud because I would never want to embarrass anybody publicly. It's not my jam. But I do want you to think really hard about the answer to this question. Keep it to yourself."

And I said, "Brendan, come up here with me." We stood side by side. I said, "The name of our book is *All American Boys*. Which one of us is the All American boy?"

**Mike:** Wow.

**Jason:** Now, her face turned red. She nodded her head and she had a seat. I'm not trying to trash you. I'm saying that it's dangerous to think that we don't have any biases. She knew I can't be an All American boy when really I am. Really I'm more American than most. And so it's these kinds of things that we just kind of got to get comfortable with. White folk, I'd encourage all of you to just get comfortable with it. It is not a judgment against who you are. If anything, it should be motivation for who you'll be. It's how I feel.

**Mike:** And I think that's huge, man. I think a lot of, especially as a pastor, and in relationship, man, just like you, a lot of white folks that I love and understand that in our cultural moment what people call this like racial reckoning moment, it can feel like, no, white people are just out here just being bashed. Like we think all

white people are just absolutely bad and irredeemable and to be black is to be holy and sacred and pure and right.

**Jason:** No.

**Mike:** That's too simplistic and dismissive of the conversation. And I'll be honest, man, I've never read any book by Ibram X. Kendi. I read *Stamped* because it's you. And I don't know him personally, but I do know you. I mean, I just thank you for leaning in and using your gifts, man to try to shed light and try to spark conversation and try to humanize the conversation. Not just in *Stamped*, but I would say especially, man, in your works of fiction, which are... it's like fiction pointing to reality. You know what I mean? Is so much of your work.

**Jason:** You know, Mike, I could have written all that in a novel and it wouldn't have been as much pushback. I think that the beauty of fiction is that it creates a framework for us to have tough conversations without us having to have them about the actual people in which they affect. These characters, but these characters are representative of real people. You know what I mean?

**Mike:** Yeah.

**Sponsor:** Hey friends! Just interrupting this conversation real quick to share about one of our incredible partners, [ZocDoc](#). So with the launch of *What Sounds Fun to You?* last week, we've been asking y'all to rate and review the book. And you know why? Because ratings matter.

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And now back to the conversation between Mike and Jason.

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**Mike:** All right. I want to just talk for a second about just some of your accolades, some of the stuff that's random. Because people may not know this stuff. But I know this stuff. Your home was featured in HGTV Magazine.

**Jason:** Mm-hmm. For sure. For sure, man.

**Mike:** You say that like that's normal. You know what I'm saying?

**Jason:** I mean, it's normal for me.

**Mike:** It is normal for you. And I've been to your spot before and you got different couch now. But when I came-

**Jason:** You ain't seen upstairs. There's upstairs.

**Mike:** Oh, there's upstairs. Okay. Now, when I can't you had a pink couch, which-

**Jason:** I still got a pink couch. That's downstairs.

**Mike:** Okay, well, there we go. There's nothing normal about you. So that was crazy.

**Jason:** That was crazy. You know what, though, man, I think that sort of lends itself to the other part of my life. Like I'm a whole person, brother. I contain multitudes. All of us do. You know what I mean? I think we get caught up in certain conversations and forget like, y'all, my whole living human with a bunch of other things going on and interests. I want to laugh. I want to relax. I want to decorate my house. I'm interested in art and design and fashion and everything else, you know.

- Mike:** So you talk about embedded bias. Because it's not just white people, it's all of us, right? Our ideas about race even affect this conversation. So I know you well. We've known each other for 20 years. Those of you who can't see Jason, you can look him up. He's 6'3 dude with locks, big dude, all that. Even for me though, I walked into your house, and I'm like, "This don't look like a black dude's house." You know what I'm saying?
- Jason:** Hey, you know what, though? But you know what, man? I'll tell you this. That's funny. I'll tell you this. What I really wanted people to see was that it looks like a woman's house. Because I was raised by a woman, and my mother's home is what reminds me of home. Femininity is what I prefer, brother. I go to people's houses, you know, especially if you're a single man, and you live alone and it's like, "I'm too old to have posters of Michael Jordan. I'm an adult."
- Mike:** Yo don't have no black lights.
- Jason:** I've got no black lights. I got none of that. You know what I'm saying? Because I want to make sure that people feel comfortable. I think oftentimes people feel most... we don't ever talk about it this way. But I think people feel most comfortable in the homes of their mamas.
- Mike:** Yeah, because you got all kinds of colors, house textures, a chandelier in your bedroom. All kinds of stuff.
- Jason:** Art everywhere. There's wallpaper. Why not? Why we can't do that?
- Mike:** I think there's like flower wallpaper or something like that.
- Jason:** Yes, flowers. There's floral wallpaper, hand-painted floral wallpaper. Why we can't do that? Why we can't do that?
- Mike:** Go ahead. You got it. I'm doing that because you know my wife. You know what I'm saying? I'm going to live in that whether I want to or not.
- Jason:** This is my point. I do know your wife. And what I'm saying is that you live in a space where your wife believes in sort of making a home a comfortable space. Right?
- Mike:** Yeah.

**Jason:** But for whatever reason, it's your wife's inclination. It's your wife's jam. By the way, this does not mean all women do this, because it's not true. Right?

**Mike:** Yeah.

**Jason:** But what I'm saying is that your children growing up with their mother and father but with knowing that their mother cared as much about a home, there's a good chance that your sons, that's what they will recognize as comfort, as safety. You see what I'm saying? So when it's time to build a space, if they got the resource, they're going to build a space that's reminiscent of the one that they feel most safe in. That's all. My mother's house looks like this.

**Mike:** Well, this is beautiful, dawg. I mean, I came in, I was just... you know, I was walking around touching walls.

**Jason:** I bought the floors above me, the two floors above me. So that's where I'm at now. It was like a lounge. I basically built a lounge in the house.

**Mike:** Yeah, man. Yeah, bro. Well, all right, Brain Yoga.

**Jason:** Brain Yoga.

**Mike:** You created a game.

**Jason:** Yeah, yeah.

**Mike:** That's wild.

**Jason:** But you know me. Mike-

**Mike:** I know. I'm not surprised by this. But I'm just saying. For the people that don't know you, like the end, as a black man, you would not expect that your home as a living by yourself would be in HGTV Magazine. As a black man, you would not expect that you'd be making a card game for kids. You know what I'm saying? Which my kids love. And you were doing the IG live in the beginning of the pandemic. And I just love getting pulled up on that.

**Jason:** Hey, look, man. I'm free, brother. I'm free. You know that. I've been free for a long time. I do what I want to do. I do what I want to do. And so for me, it was literally a situation where it made sense. I don't like to wait on anybody. I started this career

independently years and years and years ago as you know, as a 16-year-old. You know what I mean?

**Mike:** Yeah.

**Jason:** Hustling books out. You might have been the most excited one. I remember you telling me your father was like, "This boy got a real book?" I now forget that conversation. As a 16-year-old. You know what I'm saying? And that that hustle is still there. Brother, that ingenuity is still there. I'm all about, like, how can we figure out how to use the resources we have to make somebody's life a little better?

The game thing, like, I ain't making no money on it. I'm making no money on it. I'm breaking even barely. I really just wanted to make sure that people could get it and that it was accessible. And now young people can have something to keep their imagination spot. If they lose their imaginations, we're over. We dunzo, right?

By the way, and not to keep harping on a certain thing because I want to move forward, but I do want my white brothers and sisters to know this too, all of us, my browns, everybody, the whole thing that we're arguing about by the way, Mike, everything we're fighting about, the whole thing is rooted in imagination and language.

**Mike:** How so?

**Jason:** People hate *Stamped* for all these reasons. But if you read the first chapter, it talks about how in 1400 there was a Portuguese brother. He was a scribe. The Portuguese were running to North Africa, and they were expanding territory, which means that they were killing people, taking gold, enslaving people. All of Europe was doing at the time it was a normal thing because they were expanding their dynasties.

But the Portuguese wanted to separate themselves from the rest of Europe. And so what they did was they had this dude, his last name was de Zurara. He basically wrote a new narrative because he was there. He wrote a new narrative, and the narrative said that what we are doing is not brutality, it's benevolence. What we are doing is we are enslaving these people to civilize them. That narrative became the narrative of all of Europe eventually, and then that whole narrative became the narrative that would eventually justify American chattel slavery.

And the point of that story isn't just about, you know, the lie of it all. It's that all of this, everything we're fighting about now, white folks mad at me for all these reasons, and yada, yada, yada, all of this starts 600 years ago from the figment of

someone's imagination and the understanding of the power of language. Which means that if we can convince young people to keep their imagination sharp, and give them new language, then we can bend it back. Very simple. Very simple.

So for me, that's what Brain Yoga is meant to do, man, make sure that they can... If they can't imagine, if they can't create, then we show up for real.

**Mike:** I love it. I would encourage parents to pick up Brain Yoga. It's just such a fun game. It's fun for me. I love that because it just forces me to just be imaginative and...

**Jason:** I made it free. It's a game that I used to play myself and it's a game that I use for my grad students. Like it was for adults, and then I was like, "You're never too old to imagine."

**Mike:** Yeah, man. All right. So you've gotten so many awards, Newbery Award, Printz Award, two-time National Book Award finalist, New York Times bestsellers. I can go on and on and on.

**Jason:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Mike:** You're serving your third term as the Library of Congress National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, which gives you the opportunity to travel all over the country to different schools and do assemblies with kids and spend time with kids. You've been interviewed by Trevor Noah, hold a copy, Gayle King, and now me. So I'm sure you're just waiting to update your bio. You know what I'm saying?

**Jason:** I can't wait, man. Great, great-

**Mike:** So listen, man, you've reached a level of success and fame that so many people aspire to, whether as a writer or in their particular field. What have you learned about success?

**Jason:** That it's embarrassing.

**Mike:** Okay, that's not where I thought you were going to go. Like what do you mean? How is success embarrassing?

**Jason:** Let me qualify this by saying it's embarrassing for me. For me, right? It's different for everybody. I think for me, it's hard because what happens when you become successful is that people exceptionalize you. And I'd rather not be exceptionalized. I

think I'm no different than I was when I was 16. I'm no different than the kids who hang outside my house every day. You know, I'm no different than my daddy, God bless his soul, who never got to do all of this or my mother who worked for 40 years for \$40,000. You know what I mean? Or my older brother who've been a janitor for 20 years. Right?

I'm not exceptional, bro. I had opportunities. I took those opportunities. I had a skill that I worked very hard for. But there's tons of people who work harder than I do, who can do all the things better than I can and they may not get a shot. So I work very hard to just justify why God gave it to me.

But success in and of itself is a bit exposing in funny ways, man. I don't want to walk around and everybody look at me. People all the time are like, "Oh, I saw Jason." And like, "Did you say something to him?" "No, I was too nervous." For what? Come holla at me. Say what's up. I don't like that, bro. I don't like being plucked out. I know it's a thing. I know there's all kinds of Scripture about that. You know what I mean? Like, God will pluck you out. But for me, brother, I want to remain in the fold, man. Me personally, I want to remain in the fold. I want to make the fold stronger. In it. in it. You know what I mean? So that's where I'm at with it, man.

**Mike:** Yeah, man.

**Jason:** It's also amazing, though. I don't want to short it.

**Mike:** I was about to say, I mean, there's parts of it that's nice.

**Jason:** No, no. Look, my mother will never have to worry no more.

**Mike:** Yes, sir.

**Jason:** You know what I mean?

**Mike:** Yeah.

**Jason:** That's the biggest part of it. My family will always be straight. My loved ones, my beloved's will always be good. Aaron Holmes will always be good.

**Mike:** Shout out to Aaron Holmes, man.



**Jason:** You know what I'm saying? We'll always be good. My folks are solid. And that's because of these books. And I'm grateful for that. I've seen the world 10 times over because of the stories that I wrote about my own neighborhood.

**Mike:** It's crazy. What a gift!

**Jason:** And just maybe, just maybe 20 years down the line people are saying, "Man, he shifted the literary landscape for children." I'll take that too.

**Mike:** Well, let's talk about that, man. And I've told you this before. We talk about real stuff all the time.

**Jason:** Oh, yeah.

**Mike:** We debate about stuff. Over 20 years, we've had so many conversations about faith and religion and Christianity, all the differences and all that. But I remember last time we hung out, we had dinner and I remember saying this to you just this... what we kind of in pastor world we call the doctrine of common grace. This idea that God has given His grace to all humanity to be able to create.

We've all been made in the image of God and we've been given these capacities to be conduits of God's goodness and blessing in the world. And we live that out in so many different ways. And you're doing that with your writing. And you specifically chose to write for children. And I'm curious, man, like, why? Why? Because honestly, I'd imagine some people who aspire to be authors or writers, I mean, if you get a publishing deal, period, I'm sure you pretty hype about it. But did it ever feel like writing for kids was JV to you?

**Jason:** I think for like two seconds for me and Jason... you know, me and Jason, when we made that first book when we were 21 they classified it as young adult, as a children's book. We didn't know at the time even that that was a thing. We were just doing our thing. You know what I mean? And they were like, "This is for kids." And it felt like a slight at the time. I look back now and I realized the reason it seemed like it was for kids is because we were kids. Right? Like it sounds like 19, 20, 21 year old, which is young adults. You know what I mean?

**Mike:** Because y'all packed up, left DC area, and just went to New York City and toughed it out.

**Jason:** Yeah, and toughed it out. But we were kids. Now that I'm much older, you look back and you're like, "Oh, yeah, we just cutting our teeth." But that was it. Once we

figured out what it was, it was like, "Oh, this is it. I love this." Because I think the real question isn't why I write for Kids? The real question is, who else is there to write for? Who else is there?

Mike, look, at the end of the day, I don't really worry about us. I'm worried about the youngest. They got the opportunity and the potential to actually change something, to actually grow up without all the baggage that so many of us have. And every generation hopefully has a little less. That's the goal, at least. And I think these young guys are on the right path. But my job is to make sure that they understand, it's to light the way a little bit.

And that doesn't mean I'm trying to teach them anything because I'm not. That's not my job. I just want to be witness to their lives. But there is true power in someone witnessing your life, someone acknowledging that who you are is all right. You know what I mean? And that's really it.

First of all, the people who trashed children's literature, don't recognize that what they're really doing is trashing children. It's not that you don't like the literature, is that you don't think young people are sophisticated. You're disrespectful to our children, our kids, and you don't know it because you're so caught in your ego that you can't even see it. Talk about blind spots. Ageism is another one. You know what I mean? And also when it comes to the skill, my G, I tell everybody, this the hardest audience on earth.

**Mike:** I promise you, though. I can say that. As standpoint, give me some adults, give me an auditorium of 100,000 adults any day. But we try to communicate to kids-

**Jason:** 20 kids.

**Mike:** ...requires another level of sophistication and clarity.

**Jason:** Different.

**Mike:** It's different, yo.

**Jason:** It's different skill sets. Like my man used to always say, you write for adults or you speak to adults, or whatever it is, it's like you painted the Mona Lisa with a full palette. You got all the colors, you got everything there. But do it with kids, is you painting the Mona Lisa with half the palette? And it still has to look like the Mona Lisa.

**Mike:** Wow.

**Jason:** Which one of us has more skill?

**Mike:** Yeah, yeah. Yeah, man.

**Jason:** So that's where I'm at with.

**Mike:** And I think about, man, Jesus' teaching. These kids were trying to come up to Him while He was in a crowd and some of His disciples started shooing them away. And Jesus rebuked the disciples and said, "Don't send them away." And then He said, "Because the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."

And He used them as a paradigm for what a relationship with God is supposed to be like, the humility and wonder and trust that we have to have in Jesus in order to truly experience that kind of intimacy. And so in a society and with disciples who were devaluing children, He elevates them as the prototype for how we are to relate to God.

**Jason:** That's how I feel.

**Mike:** Yeah, man. Yeah, man.

**Jason:** I ask everybody this question, man, when I do interviews, when I'm the interviewer. And I always ask people, like, you look back on your childhood, you go back to your 10-year-old. So usually what we say is like, what would you tell your 10-year-old self? What I always say is, you know, what would you think your 10-year-old self for? Because your 10-year-old self got it right. You know what I'm saying?

It's an interesting experiment to do, Mike. If you look back, man, like, think about who you were, because a lot of who you were at 10 is who you are. A lot of that kid is what makes you. It's amazing.

**Mike:** It is amazing, man.

**[00:40:30] <music>**

**Sponsor:** Hey friends! Just taking a quick break to tell you about one of our amazing partners, [Dwell](#). Dwell is a Bible app that I have absolutely fallen in love with.

Their mission is inspired by the encouragement in Psalm 119: to hide God's Word in our hearts.

Dwell has built an absolutely beautiful scripture listening and reading experience. They have over a dozen new recordings of the Bible, and they've handpicked voices that will engage and inspire you. And they have so many versions of the Bible too, like the NIV, the NLT, and the Message to name a few.

One of the coolest things about Dwell is their new read-along experience. If you've ever seen Apple music's lyric feature, then that's exactly what you can expect from read-along at Dwell. Big bold text accompanied with beautiful background art that scrolls as the narrator reads to you.

Your time of Scripture listening can now be reinforced and enhanced as you read along to the Bible with Dwell. In fact, studies have shown that recall is significantly increased when listening and reading are combined. In short, a multi-sensory approach leads to quicker and deeper learning. I've been listening to Scripture regularly for the last couple of years. It's been amazing to me how it sparks these pictures in my mind in such a cool and different way than what I'm simply reading.

I love how Dwell lets you pick whether you have music in the background or not. I usually do without. And listening from different voices truly adds dimension to my experience of Scripture. There's tons of customization available in the Dwell app, like listening plans and playlists. So you can listen through a book of the Bible or a selection of verses about a certain theme. And there's a sleep timer so you and your family can listen as you drift off without losing your spot or draining your battery.

So to get started with Dwell, go to [dwellapp.io/thatsoundsfun](https://dwellapp.io/thatsoundsfun) to get 10% off a yearly subscription or 33% off Dwell for life. You guys, 33% off means you save \$50. So make sure to visit [dwellapp.io/thatsoundsfun](https://dwellapp.io/thatsoundsfun) and commit to scripture for the rest of this year or you know, the rest of our lives.

**Sponsor:** And I have one last incredible partner to share with you, [Your Enneagram Coach](#). Y'all know how much we love Your Enneagram Coach. Have you ever shared the Enneagram with someone in a way that helps or encourage them? And do you enjoy coming alongside people and championing them as they journey toward health in themselves and their relationships?

If your answer to either of these questions is yes, you're going to love hearing about this opportunity, you guys. We love the Enneagram around here and Your Enneagram Coach, Beth McCord is one of our go to Enneagram experts.

But did you know that Beth and her team actually certify Enneagram coaches? They have over 1500 Enneagram coaches worldwide. These coaches are literally changing their own lives by building a flexible and successful career doing something they're passionate about. But more importantly, they're helping others grow, heal, and flourish using the powerful tool of the Enneagram from a Christian perspective.

That certification program opens a few times each year and is opening soon. But before it does, Beth wanted to give you guys, our friends, the opportunity to explore this further. Right now you can register for Beth's mini course, Getting Started as an Enneagram Coach: The 3 Essentials for Coaching with the Enneagram for a limited time for free. You guys, free dollars. Free.

If you've ever even slightly been curious about what an Enneagram coach is, what they do, and if it might be a fit for you, then Getting Started as an Enneagram Coach: The 3 Essentials for Coaching with the Enneagram is an important training tool for you. And for a limited time, again, it is totally free, you guys.

So learn more and sign up for your free Getting Started as an Enneagram Coach mini-course at [yourenneagramcoach.com/TSF](http://yourenneagramcoach.com/TSF), like That sounds fun. And if you're listening to this episode after enrollment is closed, you can still sign up to be notified next time registration opens at [yourenneagramcoach.com/TSF](http://yourenneagramcoach.com/TSF).

And now back to the conversation between Mike and Jason.

[00:44:21] <music>

**Mike:** Well, so you write broadly for children, but you definitely if you read through your works it's clear that you're writing from a certain vantage point in a certain culture. Well, let me just say this for a second. I will give all the listeners a heads up. So your books do have some mature themes-

**Jason:** Sure.

**Mike:** ...because of the context that you're writing about, because of the story that you're telling. Sometimes there's some colorful language in there. So I'm not trying to get fired—You know what I'm saying?—As a pastor. But my daughter has read... I sent you a picture. You know what I'm saying? I didn't even know she was reading. She took it off the bookshelf, and we went on vacation, and she's in the back of the van. Which I can't believe, I'm driving the van. Anyway. And she's reading *Ghost*.

But first of all, it's just wow. Because when I was reading your stuff, I was going back and reading some of your stuff over the last couple of weeks, and I'm like... to be honest with you, that's how I used to talk, you know what I'm saying, when I was young. But you're writing in a certain cultural voice. And that was an intentional decision. In fact, there's a great New York Times article about that. I think this is recent. It's August 9, 2021 is the article "Who Jason Reynolds Writes His Best-sellers For."

**Jason:** Oh, The New Yorker.

**Mike:** Oh, it's the New Yorker. It was the New Yorker, yeah. So when you write, who are you writing for?

**Jason:** Here's the way I look at it. I'm writing for all the children, everybody. I'm writing to black children. There's two different things. Let me clarify what that means. Look, I love kids. The one thing that we all agree upon is that we want our kids to have a fair shot, no matter what your race, color, creed, religion. I just want my babies to have a shot, a fair shot at life. You know what I mean?

And so I'm trying to make books that are universal in nature. But the way that we create universality is to drill down on specificity. I think the mistake that happens is people think to be universal one has to be intentionally broad. When the truth is that like tell me your personal story, and then trust that I'll find myself in it. Right?

And so I write to the black experience, I write to the black child, but I write for all these babies. And you know what? I'm going to tell you something. This is why I get so frustrated. And I'm glad we're talking about this. Because earlier you were talking about the pushback and all that stuff. Why get frustrated is because the pushback don't come from kids. Ever. Ever. The pushback comes from adults. Pushback don't come from kids.

I've been on in schools. *All American Boys* alone, we spoke to a million kids in the country. A million. Never had no problems, Mike. Never had no problems. It was a kid who came to me in New York. I was doing an event when *Sunny* or *Lu*, one of the books came out. Young kid, adorable. I think he was like nine. He raised his hand, he has a question. I say, "What's up, man?" And he says, "How come you don't write white kids in your books?" And he's a white kid. Right?

**Mike:** Wow.

**Jason:** And then the adults immediately start squirming and everybody's nervous. And he really is asking earnestly. He's not asking to poke. He's literally like, "I noticed, and I'm asking because I'm curious." And my response because I always respect the child enough to be honest, and I figure out ways to do that that's not harmful. So I said to the child, "You know, where I grew up, in my neighborhood, there were no white people. There were no white kids. Where I grew up, that was a real thing." But then I say, "But I also want to make sure this doesn't bother you at all." And all the adults start leaning in, right? And his response was, "Why would it bother me?" And then we moved on.

**Mike:** Wow.

**Jason:** It didn't even bother him. Every adult in the room was clutching pearls. And this kid is like, "Oh, no, it was an observation because I read the book so closely. And I read all of them and I realized that's interesting." And then he's like, "But it doesn't bother me. I love these books." The end. Imagine that.

We talked about lifting the kids up, Mike, and using the kid as the paradigm, as the archetype. Like come on. We fight and the babies is like, "Yo, we don't understand what the big deal is." We ready to have the hard conversations. We ready to lean into somebody's comfort. We ready to build a vocabulary in lexicon. We ready to create a more equitable and just world. We try to save the planet. We want to...

Think about who they are. They're the most empathetic generation of all time. And we're like, "Oh, yeah, man, there's too many problems, man. They try to indoctrinate you." I'm not trying to indoctrinate nobody more than they've already been indoctrinated. If anything, I'm just trying to assess exactly what the most healthy doctrine is.

**Mike:** Well, I guess broadly speaking, man, have you experienced any challenges being a black man in the literary industry? Or let me back up. What is it like for you when you walk into a school? When you walk into a school, this accomplished author, and like I mentioned, you're a big black dude. You know what I'm saying? Very black.

**Jason:** In all black clothes.

**Mike:** Yeah, wear all black clothes, which I'm going to be wearing in 2023. What's that like for you? What's that experience been like for you?

**Jason:** It's changed over the years, Mike. I walk in any school library or bookstore in America and it's pandemonium.

**Mike:** Yeah, because they know you now.

**Jason:** They know me. And it's hard to miss me. You know it's me. But years ago, Mike, come on, man. I show up to the school... and I am who I am. You know this about me. I don't know. It is what it is.

**Mike:** It is what it is.

**Jason:** It is what it is. You show up to the school, man, T-shirts, sneakers, cool, and doing my thing, and they give me a hard time. I'm like, "No, I'm here to give a lecture. I'm here to talk. I'm Jason Reynolds." And they will be flabbergasted because they always felt like I look "unprofessional" quote-unquote. And I talked to the kids just like, "I'm talking to you." You know what I mean?

To the point that I used to tell principals, I'd say, "Listen, when I'm getting ready to do, it's going to be completely against everything you want. But all I can ask you to do is trust me. And when this is over, I want you to go to your school library and watch what happens. Just watch what happens." And time and time again, I'd get up, it'd be 5,000 Kids in the crowd, I do my thing for 45 minutes an hour. And they dismiss it. And I got an email saying, "We don't have any Jason Reynolds books left."

**Mike:** Wow.

**Jason:** Right? Because I learned something very, very early on about how to tap in and what it actually was. One, the way you look matters to a child. They know what teachers look like. They don't want to talk to another teacher. They want to talk to the cool uncle. Like everybody else in our family, like all of our families, so I can hear from my daddy, but if my uncle say it, I could really hear it. You know what I'm saying?

**Mike:** Has it mattered to any children when they... now everybody knows who you are. But when they see you and you're a black man who wrote the book that they've been reading, does that...?

**Jason:** That was the biggest thing. Back in the day, Mike, that was the biggest thing. My first cover story was for Kirkus Magazine. I was on the cover of Kirkus Magazine. And there's a quote on the cover that says, basically how kids would always be like,



"That's what he looked like?" It's like, "Oh, is that Jason Reynolds? Him right there? That's Jason. That's what he looks like."

And the black kids especially would be like, "Yo, he looks like me." Tattoos and the whole nine, right? "He looks like me," or "he looks like my older brother," or "he looks like my father." Because kids at that age we're like... we're the fathers. It's like, "He looks like my dad. He looks like..." And I think for a lot of young black kids, man, you walk in that room or you walk on stage, and they sit up a little straighter because they know you. They feel like they can see themselves.

**Mike:** Yeah, yeah, man. Well, just a couple more questions, man, because I know people will want to know this. First of all, thank you, dawg, for taking the time and sharing so personally and transparently. When you write, do you... Steven Pressfield talks about what he calls the resistance. Where when you sit down to write or do anything meaningful, there's all these thoughts and insecurities and doubts or whatever. Like, do you face the resistance? Are there inner challenges that you experience when you sit down to write at this point, after writing so many books and achieving so much success, do you face those challenges?

**Jason:** For sure. For sure, man. Other than praying, writing is probably the only thing you could do where you're forced to reckon with all of yourselves. In order for me to make it happen, I have to be alone with me. And so all the things that I normally would be able to avoid due to the noise of the day, I can't.

And I gotta hear my insecure voice, my arrogant voice, my traumatized voice, my goofy voice, my lazy voice, my terrified voice, the voice that feels inadequate, the voice from college that still struggling to pass and to get help, the voice that's dealing with his father's death, the voice that's dealing with relationships, all of that stuff they all come rushing to the forefront.

And I got to sit there and try to figure out which ones need to be pushed back and which ones need to be pulled forward. They are all there to help me. That's the thing. I don't see it as resistance. They're all there to help me figure out how to tap into a human thing. I just got to figure out which of these is the right combination in any particular moment. And that's hard.

**Mike:** Do you ever hear the success of your last book in your ear as you're sitting down to write the next one?

**Jason:** Yeah, because I'm human and I'm competitive, brother. You know, I'm human. Man, you've been over here. All them awards and all that... you name it, are you seeing any on the wall?

**Mike:** Mm-mm.

**Jason:** zero.

**Mike:** Zero.

**Jason:** They all up under the couch. You know why? Because how can I continue to work if I sit in a shrine of myself? So that's how I combat that. I work to combat that. It's why I don't read no review. It's why I don't go out. I barely be outside bro. I'd be in a house chillin. I want nothing that can cloud me. And I know you're never as good as they say you are, and you're never as bad as they say you are.

**Mike:** Yeah. Well, you pretty though. You're pretty good, man. I appreciate you taking this time. One last question before we end. Because the podcast is called that sounds fun, so what is fun for you? What do you do for fun?

**Jason:** Oh, man. You know, a lot of things. Things that are inappropriate for this podcast.

**Mike:** Yeah, I'm like you gotta keep it clean.

**Jason:** I'm like, "Mike, you know me." I'm like, "Mike, you know me. Why would you...? Come on, Mike. You try to put me in a trick bag.

**Mike:** I want Annie to invite me back on the podcast, though.

**Jason:** I got you. Look, for real, I love to travel. I love to eat. I'm always at every restaurant in the city, and you know, trying to figure that out. I love my mother. Hanging out with my mom is better than hanging out with anybody. The funniest person in the world. Shout out to mom. I love you. You know what I mean?

I got a very small group of friends that I stick tight with who know me well enough to let me be a mess. That's always a good time. I don't know, man. I'm a super simple dude, bro. I like watching TV. You know what I mean? This is why people don't want to speak to me because I do what everybody do. Ain't nothing fancy about my regular everyday hobbies.

**Mike:** Except salmon color.

**Jason:** Or I like to eat fancy food. But “I like to eat” is the point. Yeah know what I'm saying?

**Mike:** Yeah. Listen, man, those of you who are listening, you got to check out Jason Reynolds. So much more that we could have gotten into. He came up as a spoken word artist and as a poet. And if you want a quick just snapshot of his brilliance, just Google or YouTube this graduation ceremony speech that he did, which was just so brilliant and moving and just beautiful. Man, Jason, it's been so good man to be able to sit across the microphone from you. And I love you, man. I'm proud of you and excited for what's coming next, bro.

**Jason:** My brother, love you too, man. Good to see you. Talk soon.

**Mike:** Yes, sir.

[00:57:37] <music>

**Outro:** Oh friends, aren't they the best? That was so cool to hear their history and their friendship. I learned a ton listening to them today. Hey, be sure to pick up some of Jason's incredible books like *Long Way Down*, *Look Both Ways*, and goes through some of his more recent works. And we'll link to his site in the show notes because he is a prolific writer, and there's so much more to check out. And follow Jason so you can tell him thanks for being on the show.

If you haven't gotten your tickets to the That Sounds Fun live stream on November 2, you can grab those at [compassionlive.com](https://compassionlive.com). It's going to be such a fun night. And let's be real. There's no limit to how many of us can get together for a virtual event in a virtual room filled with friends. Sounds very fun to me. And a bunch of you have asked. Yes, it will be available to stream until November 7. If you're not able to attend it the exact time that it's live on November 2, you'll still be able to put your ticket to good use.

So if you need anything else from me, you know I'm embarrassingly easy to find. Annie F Downs on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, all the places you may need me, that's how you can find me. And I think that's it for me today, friends.

Go out or stay home and do something that sounds fun to you. I will do the same. Today what sounds fun to me is dinner. I'm hungry. So dinner sounds fun to me today. I think I'd like burger up. We will see. Have a great couple of days, friends. And remember Mike is with us all week hosting these incredible shows. We'll be

back here on Wednesday where he has another illuminating and helpful conversation. We'll see y'all then.

**[00:59:12] <music>**