LONG WAY DOWN

BY JASON REYNOLDS

ONE BOOK BALTIMORE 2019 DISCUSSION GUIDE
One Book Baltimore is honored to partner with Jason Reynolds to engage Baltimore City Schools students and their communities in the shared experience reading *Long Way Down* and in the rich conversation about peace and anti-violence that this work invites.

*Long Way Down* was selected with the help and input from students, teachers, and other Baltimore community members, and representatives from these groups will lead the conversation around this work. In our second year, One Book Baltimore can extend these needed conversations across the city with guided and thoughtful purpose.

One Book Baltimore’s broad group of local community-oriented organizations will connect students and community members to increase discourse and actions toward peace and anti-violence through schools, libraries, and other community spaces, with the dual goals of promoting literacy and enriching our community.

This initiative is made possible through the efforts and contributions of Baltimore City Public Schools, Baltimore Ceasefire, the Enoch Pratt Free Library, the Baltimore Office of Promotion and the Arts, Johns Hopkins University, Maryland Humanities, and the T. Rowe Price Foundation. These efforts are further supported and amplified by the partnerships with AKJ Education, the Maryland Book Bank, CityLit Project, and others.

Additionally, if you are the owner of this book, the Baltimore Book Bank generously invites you to bring this copy to the book bank upon finishing it, where you can trade it in for up to three other books of your choice, free of charge.

We thank you for picking up this book and invite you to join us in the shared experience of reading *Long Way Down*. We hope you will also join us in ongoing conversations about peace and anti-violence in our communities.

Sincerely,
The One Book Baltimore Planning Team

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**One Book Baltimore is a collaboration between**

[Logos of participating organizations]

Scan QR code for additional information.
Character List for *Long Way Down*

**William Holloman**: Fifteen-year-old African American teen who is the narrator and protagonist of the story; wants to avenge his brother’s death.

**Shawn Holloman**: Older brother of William; avenges his friend Buck’s death by murdering a gang member; gets murdered by gun violence at the beginning of the story.

**Shari “Mom” Holloman**: Heartbroken by her son Shawn’s murder; husband was also murdered by gun violence; has severe eczema.

**Carlson Riggs**: Dark Suns gang member who allegedly murders Shawn.

**Pop (Mikey) Holloman**: Will and Shawn’s father who is murdered when Will is three years old; he murdered a man named Gee who he thought murdered his brother Mark.

**Uncle Mark Holloman**: Will and Shawn’s uncle who dreamed of making a movie; his murder is related to drug dealing.

**Buck (James)**: Man who looked out for Shawn after Will’s father was killed by teaching him “the rules” of the streets; he was murdered by Frick.

**Dani**: Girl who was Will’s childhood friend who kissed him when they were eight years old; she was shot in front of Will while they were playing on the monkey bars.

**Frick (Frank)**: Dark Sun gang member who murdered Buck for his gang initiation.

**Tony**: Will’s friend who is with him when Shawn is murdered; repeatedly referred to as trying to “fly.”

**General Themes**

- Search for identity
- Individual identity vs. Group identity
- Independence
- Coming of age
- Culture
- The importance/role of family
- Forgiveness
- Trust
- Hope
- Determination
- Prejudice
- Compassion
- Empathy
- Peace and nonviolence
- Maintaining values and morals in the face of adversity
- Revenge
- Honor
- Respect
Before Reading Activities

**ACTIVITY 1:** Define identity. What is the difference between personal identity and group identity like belonging to a clique or gang? Give an example for each.

**ACTIVITY 2:** Write a 1-page journal entry about a particular event that has impacted your life and has shaped who you are. Include a photo, drawing, or object that represents this event and explain why you chose the item.

**ACTIVITY 3:** The link below contains current crime data in Baltimore City. Scroll through the document to find your school’s district and analyze the data by answering the following questions:

1. What crime rate is the highest? What crime rate is the lowest (name at least one)?
2. Look at the date ranges at the top of each column. Is there anything shocking about the trends of the data (how the crimes increase or decrease during certain times of the year, etc.)?
3. What is your personal reaction after seeing this data?
4. Is there anything you or your larger community can do to reduce crime rates? What are some suggestions?


**ACTIVITY 4:** Chart the figurative language you find throughout the book. Be sure you analyze the effect of each example. (See “Figurative Language in Long Way Down” Chart).

**ACTIVITY 5:** When you are ready to start reading, play the link below and listen to the author Jason Reynolds read the first eight pages of the book. Why is important for us to read and hear poetry out loud? How does it impact your understanding when you hear the words rather than just read them?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iF5MRMtpEcl

**ACTIVITY 6:** In 1625, an English philosopher and statesman named Sir Francis Bacon wrote an essay titled “On Revenge.” Bacon ends this essay by pointing out that public revenge on bad leaders is “for the most part fortunate” but reminds his reader that private revenge is “unfortunate.” Do you agree or disagree with his argument? Is it ever acceptable to get revenge on someone? Support your answer with examples from either current events or literature/films you have seen that deal with revenge.
1. How do you typically solve problems that arise in your life? Do you think society gives teenagers little choice but to use their “attitude” to solve their problems? Explain your position.

2. How can a person’s race and upbringing affect the way they view and live their life? Elaborate on your response with examples.

3. Have you ever followed unspoken rules with your friends or relatives? What are some of those rules, and how did you learn them? What happens if someone who knows the rules does not follow them? Some examples of unspoken rules might be: “no snitching” or “older siblings have first dibs over younger siblings,” etc.

4. What people in your life have had the most influence on the person you are? Explain how their influence has shaped who you are today.

5. How do personal experiences in one’s life influence how one approaches moral dilemmas? Explain your answer with support.

6. Have you ever been in a situation where you wanted to get revenge on someone? Discuss the incident and explain how you reacted to the incident. Did you get revenge, or did you avoid doing so?

7. Gandhi famously said, “An eye for an eye makes the whole world go blind.” What do you think this quote means? How can you connect this quote to your own life? Do you agree with Gandhi’s idea?
1. What is the purpose of the narrator stating that “this story is true,” and “It happened to me. Really. It did. It so did”? (p. 1).

2. Why does the narrator Will repeat his name several times in the poem “MY NAME IS”? (p. 2). What two words does his last name sound like? What could be significant about his full name?

3. In the poem “THE SADNESS” the narrator uses imagery and figurative language to describe sadness. Using this poem as a model, pick any emotion and write your own poem that uses various images and figurative language to describe what the emotion feels like (p. 6-7).


5. What are the two meanings of “beef” in the poem “MAYBE THERE’S SOMETHING INVISIBLE”? (p. 26). Explain how “BEEF” is personified in the next poem. What is “fool’s gold”? (p. 27).

6. Analyze what Will means by the following statement about “The Rules”: “They weren’t meant to be broken. / They were meant for the broken / to follow” (p. 35).

7. After reading pages 36 and 37, write your own anagram that somehow relates to your life.

8. The color yellow is mentioned several times in the first chapter (p. 28, 36, 69). Research what the color yellow symbolizes. Is it an appropriate color for Reynolds to incorporate into this story? Explain your response.

9. Look up the definitions of consonance, alliteration, and sibilance. Then reread the poem “REASONS I THOUGHT (KNEW) RIGGS KILLED SHAWN” (p. 55) and record examples of these literary devices from this poem. What is their effect on the reader?

10. Characterize Will and Shawn’s mother. What are some of her personality traits? What kind of mother is she to her sons? Use specific examples for proof.
1. In the first chapter Will discusses several aspects of his life where he has followed rules, and when he arrives on the seventh floor, he addresses the “elevator rules” (p. 73). Do you follow these rules in an elevator? Why are there so many rules in society? What is ironic about how Will views rules in the streets versus laws that people are required to obey?

2. Describe Buck’s physical and character traits. What is the effect on the reader when his mouth is described as “jagged, sharp and sharklike”? (p. 79).

3. What is the deeper meaning of Will calling himself a “loser”? (p. 75).

4. Explain why the word “of” is crossed off in “I KNOW WHAT YOU THINKIN’” (p. 85).

5. Read pages 89 through 92, and then analyze the possible meanings of the line: “Your tail is showing” (p. 89). What do we learn about Buck through this comment?

6. Why is the title of the book mentioned after Buck gets on the elevator? (p. 97) Why do you think it is Buck who mentions it rather than Will?

7. What is laughter being compared to in the poem “BUCK LAUGHED, AND”? (p. 100). What is the deeper meaning of laughter to Will? Do you agree with him? Explain.

8. What is Reynolds suggesting by mentioning the fact that there are only 15 slugs (bullets) in the gun? How does this new knowledge make you feel? How does it change the tone of the book?

9. What is the purpose of the repetition in the poem “HE HELD THE GUN OUT.”? (p. 105). How does Reynolds use word play in this poem?

10. What is significant about Buck’s repeated comment to Will “You don’t got it in you”? (p. 106).
1. In the poem “SHE CHECKED TO MAKE SURE” (p. 111), the writer uses enjambment, or when two lines run together without a pause or a break in meaning. In other words, it is when a sentence carries on right through the line break. Reread the title and the first two lines out loud, and then read the line starting with “walking.” What is the purpose of pausing mid-sentence after the first two lines? Does the enjambment change the meaning of those lines? If so, how?

2. How does punctuation change the meaning of the repeated lines, “She could see him”? (p. 113).

3. Why do you think Buck’s cigarette was “burning but not burning down”? Why was there no ash coming from the cigarette? (p. 116).

4. At the end of “I TOLD DANI,” Will describes what he sees: “Her eyes wide, the brightness / dimming. Her mouth, open. / Bubble gum / and blood” (p. 133). What images are being juxtaposed? What is the effect of this specific juxtaposition?

5. Explain the meaning of the following in the lines: “and God ain’t / no pushy parent / so he just folds / and snaps / us shut” (p. 134). What is the effect of the use of sibilance?

6. Explain the connection between “ANAGRAM NO. 2” and the previous poem “THE WAY I FELT” (p. 136-137).

7. Why might Reynolds have formatted the words “purpose,” “family,” and “for her” (p. 141) separate from the previous lines?

8. White space in poetry is how a poem is arranged on the page, including line breaks, page layout/format, and spacing. Look at the poems “THEN DANI ASKED” and “BUT” and discuss how white space is used (p. 142-143). Are the layout/format and spacing effective? Explain your response.

9. Do you think Will’s interaction with Dani has shaped how he views wanting to seek revenge?
1. Cigarettes and smoke have been mentioned throughout the book, including the first two poems on the fifth floor (p. 150, 151). What is the symbolic meaning of smoke? How does smoke imagery impact the mood of the book?

2. Explain what the following lines mean: “How do you tell water / ain’t nothing funny / about drowning?” (p. 155). Who or what represents the water? Why does Will feel like he’s drowning?

3. Describe Uncle Mark. How is he “foreshadowing the flash”? (p. 159).

4. After reading Uncle Mark’s movie script idea (p. 161), write your own brief movie script that relates to something you have experienced or you have heard about happening. Use Uncle Mark’s script as a model for the structure of your script.

5. Reynolds uses the stylistic device epistrophe, which is the repetition of phrases or words at the ends of the clauses. What is the purpose of this device in the poem “AND YOU KNOW”? (p. 164).

6. What do we learn about Will’s character after reading the conversation (and “SCENE”) between Uncle Mark and Will? (p. 176). Support your response. How do you think “THE SCENE” ends after the ellipsis?

7. What were Uncle Will’s “options” after he lost his camera? (p. 182-185). Why do you think many people make the same decision that Uncle Mark makes? Does his way ever work? What option would you have chosen if you were in Uncle Mark’s position? Explain.


9. When Uncle mark says, “It’s never the end,” what does it mean? (p. 192) Do you agree or disagree and why?
1. Will describes the hug he has with his Pop using diction such as “raw bits,” “the irritated / and irritating / dry spots,” and “the parts that bleed” (p. 199). Are these words you would use to describe a hug with someone significant in your life? Why did Reynolds choose this diction to describe the hug between Will and his father?

2. Why does Will believe his father died of “A BROKEN HEART”? (p. 202). What is significant about the repeated mention of “the middle drawer” throughout the book? How might “the middle drawer” symbolize something deeper?

3. Will mentions that the word “dad’ is a language so foreign” that it is difficult for him to say (p. 206). Can you empathize with Will? Is there anyone who has been absent in your life and you also find it difficult to call them by a certain title, such as dad, mom, brother, or sister? Explain your response.

4. What alliteration is used in the last stanza of “I WANTED TO UNLOAD”? (p. 207). How is this figurative language effective?

5. What is shocking about Pop’s story of revenge? What is Pop’s emotional reaction to his own story as he relives it with his son? (p. 212-220)


7. What does Pop do to Will that is shocking? Why does Pop do that to his own son? Why does Will make an excuse when his father breaks “the rules”? (p. 224-225).

8. Explain the purpose of enjambment and the white space after the simile “squeezed tight like / I was some rag doll” (p. 231).

9. Look back at the time stamps throughout the chapter starting with the poem “MY POP” (p. 198). How much time has elapsed from Will getting on the elevator to arriving on the third floor? What is significant about how much time has passed from the fourth floor to the third floor? Why do you think Reynolds includes the passage of time throughout the book?
1. What is different about the “thick pale dude” from the other people who already joined Will on the elevator?

2. Who is Frick and how does Buck know him? What is your reaction after learning about their relation to each other? (p. 244).

3. After reading “YOU HEARD ME RIGHT,” read the background of who Frick and Frack were in real life. Then, explain the irony of Frick’s nickname in this book.

4. Will pauses Frick’s story to provide background on Buck’s life (p. 246-250). Why do you suppose Reynolds chose to add more information about Buck at this point in the book? Does it change your opinion about Buck? Why or why not? Explain.

5. Identify the metaphor in “HE NEVER REALLY TALKED ABOUT IT” and analyze the effectiveness of the metaphor (p. 252).

6. According to Frick, how does one become a Dark Sun? (p. 260-261). Why do “preachers / who act like / gangstas” get respect? (p. 262). What is the significance of an OG?

7. Why is it significant that there only 15 bullets remaining in the gun? (p. 269).

8. According to Will, why did Tony talk about who killed Buck? What does Will mean by “Tony talking was...an attempt / to grow taller / get bigger”? (p. 273). How do these lines relate to the author’s larger theme of the book?

9. How has the “no snitching” culture affected Baltimore?

10. What is significant about the fact that Will could not see anyone’s reflections in the elevator, and more importantly, that his own reflection was “blurred”? (p. 277).
1. Polyptoton is a stylistic device that is a repetition of the same root word. However, each time the word is repeated in a different way. Find examples of polyptotons used in the poem “COME ON,” (p. 282). What is the effect of these examples? What effect does the image “this vertical coffin” have on the reader?

2. Who gets on the elevator on the second floor? What is shocking about this person’s outfit? How does the description make you feel?

3. Why does Reynolds describe Shawn as “a middle drawer / of a man,” and why is that phrase significant? (p. 291).

4. Explain the importance of what Will tells Shawn in the last stanza of “EXPLAINED” (p. 294). Do you think these are statements Will would have said before he got into the elevator? Explain.


6. How do Shawn and Will break one of the “rules” and what is Will’s reaction? Do you think it is acceptable to break rules like this one sometimes, or does breaking the rules make a person hypocritical? Explain.

7. What are the ways Will describes the elevator when the door finally opens? Why is this diction significant? (p. 300-304).

8. Why does the author describe Shawn as being “invisible / in the cloud” (p. 303), and what is symbolic about the cigarette “burning” in Will’s stomach, filling him “with / stinging fire”?

ACTIVITY 1: In the end of *Long Way Down* it is unclear what choice the narrator will make once the elevator doors open. Using *Long Way Down* and the author’s writing style as a guide, write an ending to the story where the narrator makes a clear choice to either seek revenge or choose an alternative path.

ACTIVITY 2: Research what Baltimore City Government Officials and/or politicians have done recently to address teen and gun-related violence. (Teachers and parents might want to refer students to the links on the left for research.) After you have completed your research, evaluate if Baltimore City Government Officials have been successful in decreasing teen and gun violence in 2019. Write a paragraph stating your overall evaluation.

ACTIVITY 3: Interview community members to find out what residents believe can be done to prevent teen and gun-related violence. Create a clear list of their suggestions. Then write a formal letter to the mayor or your local congressman to share the community’s suggestions to rid Baltimore City of gun-related violence. (Other options are to create presentations, pamphlets, or videos to communicate your suggestions.)

ACTIVITY 4: In January 2016, President Obama gave advice to a Chicago teen who lost a brother to gun violence. Watch the Youtube video listed on the left (2:29 min). Then respond to the following questions regarding Obama’s advice

1. List the suggestions President Obama gives Tre Bosley when asked about his advice to those growing up in poverty and surrounded by gun violence.
2. Does President Obama give Tre Bosley useful advice that he can apply in his life? Explain.
3. Does President Obama seem to understand what Tre has gone through? Explain.
4. What other positive advice would you give Tre if he asked you the same question?

ACTIVITY 5: Pretend you are a newspaper journalist. Write a 1-page newspaper article that discusses the details surrounding one of the individual’s stories who enter the elevator throughout the book. Use as many details from the poems as you can to write your article. However, you will have to make up realistic details that are not found in the book, so be creative! (Teachers and parents: use actual newspaper articles as models if students need to see formal writing and format. *The Baltimore Sun* and other newspapers are free online.)

ACTIVITY 2 RESOURCES
https://health.baltimorecity.gov/programs/violence-prevention
https://mdpgv.org/
https://youth.gov/youth-topics/preventing-youth-violence/forum-communities/baltimore/summary

ACTIVITY 3 RESOURCES
https://www.goodletterwriting.com/formal-letters.html
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GoEXT89D4Ik

ACTIVITY 4 RESOURCES
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2SN19jamzk

ACTIVITY 1 RESOURCES
ACTIVITY 6: After reading the book, it is significant to compare identities of the various characters. Choose a character from *Long Way Down* who you feel you can relate to in terms of identity and personality. OR, you may choose a character who you feel you cannot relate to at all, for example, they are the complete opposite in identity and personality than you. Compare and contrast that character’s identity to your own identity by answering the following questions:

1. Would you both be in the same clique? Or different cliques?
2. What characteristics are similar between you both?
3. What characteristics are different? Why do you think are they similar or different?
4. Do you agree with this character’s values and morals? What values do you respect the most? What values do you respect the least? Why?

ACTIVITY 7: Create a timeline of Will’s development throughout the book. Plot his growth on the timeline in terms of identity, self-reflection, maturity, etc. Plot his relationships and his accomplishments. You may demonstrate and explain the character’s growth, maturity, reflection, etc. through your chosen genre. Be creative and use pictures, words, symbols, etc. to plot the character’s timeline. Choose a creative and imaginative way to demonstrate your knowledge of Will in comparison to your own identity. (Teachers and parents, some examples for the project are: a poster board with pictures, phrases, quotes from the book, a digital timeline, poetry, objects/items that demonstrate the differences and similarities between student and Will, etc.)

ACTIVITY 8: Create a list of themes you have learned from this book. Which theme should be addressed in Baltimore now to make the city better? Use examples from the book and stats/current events to support your theme choice.

ACTIVITY 9: Listen to the interview with Jason Reynolds in the link on the left (2:26 min). Answer the following questions after listening:

1. What are the reasons he wrote this book?
2. What does he mention that kids don’t know but still act upon?
3. What happens when one’s morals are challenged?
4. What does he want to honor in this book?

Other texts you might want to explore or use as resources:

*Art Activism Workbook: Volume 1* by Aaron Maybin
*Hummingbirds in the Trenches* by Kondwani Fidel
*We Speak for Ourselves* by D. Watkins
*Dear Martin* by Nic Stone
*Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes
*Anger is a Gift: A Novel* by Mark Oshiro
*Monster* by Walter Dean Myers
All of Jason Reynolds’ Books
After Reading Questions

1. At the beginning of the novel, Will states “what I’m about to tell you / you’ll either / want to be my friend / or not / want to be my friend at all” (p. 2). Do you think you would be friends with Will or not? Why? Do you think Will has strong core values? What do you think they are?

2. The whole book takes place in 67 potent seconds. Is this enough time for a teenager to decide whether he’s going to murder the man who killed his brother? What are possible outcomes of Will’s life if he DOES head out to kill Riggs? What are possible outcomes of his life if he chooses NOT to kill Riggs?

3. Why do you think people murder others? What do you think goes through someone’s mind after they have murdered someone? Would you ever do something that challenged your own values?

4. Why does this book matter? Do you think this book could have taken place in Baltimore? Why or why not?

5. How do “The Rules” drive the cycle of death? The third rule states, “if someone you love / gets killed, / find the person / who killed / them and / kill them” (p. 33). What are the outcomes of rules and expectations like this? Can this cycle be seen in Baltimore City? Explain your response.

6. What do the settings of the elevator in Will’s apartment building and the basketball court represent? How does the setting of the elevator add to the story?

7. What are the consequences of violent acts of revenge depicted throughout this book?