



****Full Interview with selected questions.****

You completed reading your first novel at the age of 17, what was it about that book that made you want to finish it?

Jason: The book was *Black Boy* by Richard Wright. At the beginning of that book, the main character burns and set the curtains on fire which burns the house down, and that's all it took... for the exciting part of the book to start early. It gets you right from the jump and in that moment I realized it's not that I hated reading, I just hated to be bored. I didn't want to have to wait 60 pages to get to the good part. I managed to get sucked in, like a movie, I managed to get sucked in right away, and that's what that book did.

What was it about hip-hop that influenced you, and who were you most inspired by?

Jason: Everything about hip-hop, I mean number one, they looked like me, and they talked like me, and they dressed like me, and they were telling stories that I could directly connect to in a language that felt familiar. They also were irreverent and that always sparked young people, right, the idea that they were doing what they wanted to do and making music that blended together other music and other styles. All of those is what really inspired me. For the most part it's just about representation, we were finally realizing that my generation had a voice and people from my specific background, my cultural background, suddenly had a big voice. And it was making people uncomfortable. It almost felt that a lot of us young [people] are like that, a pulley that we could grab hold of and not drown in a sea of dismissal, an eraser, and that's what it was. I loved a lot of rappers but the one that I always talk about faithfully that helped shape me, the first tape I ever owned was Queen Latifah's 'Black Reign'. Queen Latifah was a big deal, hearing her voice and what she was saying about the neighborhood and very normal things for people growing up in black communities, it just made me feel big, it made me feel seen.... I listen to everything, I have an older brother who had all the music, I had more than enough at my disposal to torpedo down the rabbit hole of rap music.

Mainstream rap and hip-hop have a very different sound today, do you think the act of story-telling in music has changed?

Jason: No, I think the business of music has changed, music hasn't changed, the business in music has changed. Storytelling still exists. Many people actually have more access to all sorts of different kinds of stories because they have the internet. Now the ones that rap talk about pop culture and mass media, of course it may feel a little different, but I've been careful about assuming that the storytellers aren't still there, there's still Kendrick, J Cole, and Travis Scott. There's all sorts of rhapsody. The young women are running rap music right now actually, there's still so much that is relatable in story-telling. We also have to remember that sometimes the story doesn't come from the language, sometimes these story simply comes from representation.

Did you ever struggle to find your place in the literature world?

Jason: Of course. I've been in this industry since i was 21. I've been around for a long time. I've seen it change, I've seen it grow, I've seen it stunt, I've seen all these things happen over the last 15 years. I remember after my first book, when I was a kid, when I was 21, nobody really wanted to touch the things that I was making, even with *When I Was the Greatest*, when it went on submission nobody wanted to publish it everyone was afraid of it. No one thought there was a market for that kind of book that was about black kids in Brooklyn, which was weird because there's always a market for anything that's big and anything that's honest. Nobody wanted to bother except for Simon & Schuster and that's kind of how it went. But there's not really a real push back, with *All American Boy*, people were terrified of that, what are they going to do about a book about police brutality? Publishers weren't scared but there were teachers, administrators and superintendents who were afraid, everybody was kind of shook, which makes me believe the book truly had power. Anybody who fears things like that fear the weight of the thing. But after



When I was the Greatest was out and we started to see the market respond, I still hadn't had any issues. I know how to be me and I know how to be honest, and I think that human beings should be respectful of other human beings even if they're different, and that's proven to be the case when it comes to many people.

What are some ways in which you authentically engage and connect with young people and what's the importance of doing so?

Jason: I don't talk about books, ever. I mean, think about it, I go to schools, why would I go to schools to talk about school? They're already there. Their teachers are having those conversations, their principles, and their parents. One thing I like to talk about is everything that's not about school. So, I go in and we talk about food, and sneakers, and rap music, and all these other things I did growing up. I basically tell them my own personal story. I tell them a very funny, and sad and triumphant [story], all these different things. Look... what we respond to is story time. Instead of you telling me what to do, let me tell you what I've been through and who I am because if I can get you to believe me, you'll read everything my name is on.

You write from a younger person's point of view, are you gathering that insight from your own experiences, or the young people you meet?

Jason: Both of those things. I've lived a colorful life, I've been around a lot of colorful family, so I have more than enough stories to pull from. I'm also around kids every other day and I'm watching them and I'm talking to them, I'm listening to them about what they like, what they want, what they fear, and all those things. I sort of merge those things I figure out what were the things that have not changed since when I was a kid and what are the things that have changed and try to humble myself to learn about who young people are today and then bump that up against who I was as a kid and figure out if there's some negative truth in the middle of that.

A lot of experienced writers have trouble gathering ideas and putting them on pages. How did you become such a prolific writer?

Jason: Since 2014 it's been about 12 novels. It's not magic, it took a little bit everyday, that's all. I keep a list of ideas of things I want to write about. I live an excited life, I have an insatiable curiosity, so I just write a couple of pages a day, it's amazing what a couple of pages a day will do for you. **laughs** It's about consistency and discipline and a wild and vivid imagination. If you want to write 5 pages a day, 5 days a week, that's 100 pages a month, 300 pages every 3 months, a book a year, just mathematically. Right now, I don't do that anymore, I used to do it like that, I don't do it anymore, but it still works out to be about the same. A little bit of progress gets the job done.

What are some important messages/themes that you try to tell young people through your work?

Jason: I'm not trying to give away messages, I'm not trying to teach nobody nothing. I think sometimes there are lessons that I have learned based on scenarios and circumstances but I'm not a parent or teacher or any of those things. I'm very careful about the idea of passing on some sort of message, ultimately though, I just want young people to feel cared for, I want them to feel like somebody sees them for who they are, not who they are projected to be. That means more to me than any lesson. They walk away from that book feeling emboldened, feeling seen, and there's no lesson in the world more important than self-actualization and providing a space and a framework for self-actualization and self determination, and what I mean by self determination I literally mean to determine themselves. I can bare witness to their lives and to shine light on the things that adults often try their best to dismiss and to create a framework for them to determine themselves.



Why did you decide to “re-mix” Ibram X. Kendi’s, *Stamped from the Beginning*, instead of other nonfiction books that historically talk about racism in America?

Jason: Racism in America has been happening from top-down when really it should be happening from the bottom up. It's one of those trends to protect young people from the discussion of race but we should be preparing them for the world in which they are about to inherit. And if we can compare them properly then they can actually change and shift the way our world functions but we have to give them the language, the information, the history so they can have unemotional conversations. Conversations rooted in fact, rooted in history, not rooted in systems, not in people. They're there talking to their partners and their friends when they get older, it doesn't have to be a huge and uncomfortable conversation. And that if it is uncomfortable, that there's comfort which feels normal enough to still have healthy discourse, and we can actually change, which we have yet to do, because we still are afraid to come up from the frame which has been the frame to sort of acknowledge the certain history in this country, a wonderful place, a beautiful place, in which we live, but it's a place that came at a horrendous cost that we have yet to rectify and reconcile, that's all.

Do you think it's important to be as transparent as possible when talking about these issues revolving racism to a younger audience?

Jason: Yes, I think that we do young people a great disservice by believing they can't handle the hard stuff. When most of those young people have already experienced that stuff. And I think it really speaks to the arrogance of adults that we sort of tap dance [around]. It has nothing to do with kids, it has nothing to do with our discomfort to have the conversation with them, [and] not their discomfort to have it on their own. It's about us being afraid to figure out how to explain the complex issues, it has nothing to do with their fear, it's about our insecurities. We need to honor them, and arm them, with the resources to have these discussions and be completely transparent.

History was one of my least favorite subjects in school because the teaching method felt very disconnected. If you could teach one subject for a day, which one would it be and what would your teaching style be like?

Jason: I would teach english. I did teach english at the graduate level. My style is a part of my life, I am who I am all the time, in every environment, my teaching style is one that is super loose and all about the experience of learning and creative learning. Wee can't continue to teach language arts and leave the arts part out of it, and so instead of teaching this idea of proper english, instead I would teach translation. I would say here's a Shakespearean language, lets translate this Shakespearean sonnet to standard english, then translate that standard english to colloquial English — the language of your neighborhood, the language of your household the language of your culture. If you're from Honduras, this gives you the opportunity for you to write it in the version of Spanish that you're the most comfortable speaking. That way what we can do is validate our natural talents, we validate who we are culturally, because language is quintessentially culture, we also learn better English and to better comprehend Shakespeare. All 3 of those could happen in the same amount of time. So, I would teach comparative lit, I would teach relation work, and fun stuff I [already] do with my students, and they're all in their 30s and 40s. I do all kinds of [exercises relating to] pace, setting, tone, rhythm, figurative language...all these things, but I'd do it in a way that feels fun and that actually work. Not just 'I' before 'E' except after 'C', thats fine, but let's take the music and figure out how to dissect rap lyrics today. Let's dig into the things that they're actually interested in. Let's talk about the show Empire in relation to human lit because it's the same thing. Let's do that.