

YA Book Review

VIOLENCE AND OBEDIENCE: TEENAGER BATTLES INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL FORCES IN REYNOLDS'S *LONG WAY DOWN*

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A descent into hell in literature is not solely reserved for Dante and his work *The Inferno*. Jason Reynolds's 2017 young adult novel *Long Way Down* centers around fifteen-year-old Will Holloman and his uncomfortable descent downward in his apartment elevator.

During his elevator ride, Will is greeted on each floor by ghosts of his loved ones who have died as a result of the gun violence in his neighborhood. Each ghost encounter raises Will's anxiety and doubt surrounding whether or not he should continue on his quest to avenge his brother. To avenge his brother, Shawn, Will has to follow The Rules of the neighborhood, "If someone you love gets killed, find the person who killed them and kill them," (33) but Will could also choose to break the cycle of violence by going up to his apartment.

Through Will's internal conflict of deciding whether to follow The Rules, and the external conflict of living in such a violent neighborhood, Jason Reynolds addresses the hardships people living in low socioeconomic areas face daily. An appropriate way to teach these hardships would be to engage in cultural studies, and spend the first day of a teaching unit researching living conditions for these areas.

Long Way Down should appeal to middle and secondary school readers for two reasons.

First, the protagonist Will Holloman is a 15-year-old boy, meaning he would be a freshman or sophomore in high school. Will's age and his adolescent word choice makes him relatable to young adult readers; they can easily assume Will's perspective.

Second, the internal conflict of choosing what to do about his future, to follow The Rules or not, is relatable for middle and secondary school readers. While students are probably not in the exact same elevator as Will Holloman, they can understand the pressure of having to make big decisions. Teenagers are constantly facing questions about their future.

Long Way Down would be an excellent way to introduce poetry, because the novel is written in free verse. It would be beneficial for students to begin a poetry unit with *Long Way Down*, where the language is easy to comprehend.

While I enjoyed every aspect of *Long Way Down*, if I had to pick a favorite quality it would be the style of writing. Not only does the free verse style make it a quick read, but it also allows Reynolds to be creative and use the words themselves to portray bigger ideas. For example, on page 70, Reynolds writes

“DOWN
DOWN
DOWN DOWN DOWN
DOWN DOWN
DOWN,”

creating an elevator’s downward arrow and symbolizing Will’s journey towards hell. Along with this, Reynolds specifically uses “down” seven times for the seven floors Will is about to travel.

I believe there are no reasons to prevent teaching *Long Way Down* in a middle or secondary school classroom. But if any potential challenge could be raised about it would probably be concerning the gun violence in the novel. If a parent did raise that concern, I would argue on behalf of the novel that the violence is a way to educate readers about this current problem in America, and that even though it can be shocking initially, it is important to read about these topics. If they still protest then, of course we could also offer then option of reading Dante’s *Inferno* as an alternate choice.

Author Biography

Marci Heatherly is from Girard, Kansas, and has been interested in English, specifically teaching English at the secondary level, since she was a freshman in high school. Currently, she is a junior in the English Department at Pittsburg State University with a minor in creative writing. In her spare time, she enjoys reading additional works by authors learned about in classes, as well as contemporary short stories and poetry. In May 2022 she will be studying abroad in Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic. She is ecstatic to visit the Kafka Museum in Prague. She can be reached at mheatherly@gus.pittstate.edu.

