



A Reading Group Guide to

## ***Long Way Down***

By Jason Reynolds

### **About the Book**

Will has known about the rules ever since his childhood friend was killed on the playground, and he's followed the first two: no crying, and no snitching. When his older brother, Shawn, is shot and killed while walking home from the store, Will knows he is expected to follow the final rule and avenge his brother's death. He knows where Shawn keeps his gun, and he thinks he knows who the shooter is: a member of a rival gang named Riggs. Even if Will has never used a gun—never even held a gun before—rules are rules. But in the elevator on the way down to meet Riggs, Will encounters family and friends who died playing by the rules, and now Will has to decide what he is going to do when the elevator reaches its final stop.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Using details revealed in the text, create a character sketch or character collage of the book's protagonist.
2. Unlike a traditional prose novel, *Long Way Down* is written in verse. Poets are known for using language intentionally and with precision, often choosing words with connotative and denotative meaning. Reflect on the significance of the protagonist's name. The word *Will* can be used as a proper name, but also as a verb and a noun. In what ways does the protagonist encompass multiple meanings of his name?
3. What are "The Rules"? Do you agree that these three rules exist? If so, can you remember how you learned about them? If not, are there other unspoken rules that you follow instead? What do you think Will means when he writes: "They weren't meant to be broken./They were meant for the broken/to follow."
4. When we analyze poems, we pay attention to the poem's format. This includes things like length, shape, line breaks (including the use of enjambment and caesura), and spacing on the page. Identify a section of the novel where you think the format adds meaning to a passage and explain how the poem's format impacts the meaning.
5. Will enjoys finding anagrams, especially when the anagram illuminates or comments on the meaning of the original word. Explain the connections between the anagrams that he creates. Why are they significant to the story?
6. When Shawn turned eighteen, what did his mother worry about? What do you think she meant in saying that when Shawn walked in the nighttime, he needed to make sure that the nighttime wasn't walking in him? Do you think Shawn tried to heed his mother's warning?
7. Will includes a list of nicknames for a gun. Are there any other nicknames that you know of that he did not include? What are the different connotations of each name? When Will puts the gun in the back of his pants, what nickname does he use for it? What does his choice suggest about his feelings toward carrying the gun?
8. Who does Will believe killed his brother? What are his reasons for believing this? Do you think he's right?

9. Throughout the novel, Will uses figurative language (simile, metaphor) to describe things or feelings. For example, when he holds Shawn's gun for the first time, he notes that it is, "Heavier than/I expected/like holding/a newborn." In this example, the juxtaposition of the image of a newborn baby with the weight of the gun highlights the deadliness of the gun and loss of Will's innocence. Find an example of figurative language that you think is especially effective and explain why it is significant.
10. How does Will plan to avenge his brother's death? In this moment, do you think he is doing the right thing?
11. Through flashbacks, Will shares memories of his brother. What do each of these memories reveal about their relationship?
12. When the first ghost enters the elevator, Reynolds includes a time stamp at the top of the page. How much time elapsed between the first stop and the bottom floor? Why do you think Reynolds includes these indications of the passage of time? Do they inform or complicate your understanding of the text?
13. How does Will recognize the first ghost that enters the elevator? What was the ghost's relationship to Shawn and Will? What message do you think he is trying to convey with his words and actions?
14. Why doesn't Will recognize Dani at first? What questions does she have for Will? What message do you think she is trying to share with him?
15. Why did Uncle Mark start dealing drugs? Why did he keep dealing? How did he die? Why do you think Uncle Mark wants Will to act out what will happen when he follows the rules? What message is he trying to convey with his words and actions?
16. How did Will's father die? How does the relationship between Uncle Mark and Will's father parallel the relationship between Will and Shawn? Why do you think Will's father pulls the gun on Will? Does Will understand what his father is trying to show him?
17. Frick is the only ghost to enter the elevator whom Will does not know. How is he related to the story? Why do you think he visits Will?
18. The last person who enters the elevator is Shawn. What does Will tell his brother? How does Shawn respond? What rule do both brothers break? Do you think Shawn wants Will to avenge his death by shooting Riggs? Explain your answer.
19. The last words in the book are a question. How do you think Will answers this question? Where do you think Will will be five years after the end of the book?

### **Extension Activities**

1. Research the epidemic of gun violence in America, specifically looking at gang-related gun violence (note: the *Chicago Tribune* has excellent special reporting on gun violence in Chicago). Try to identify some of the root causes of the epidemic. What could be done to solve this problem?
2. *Long Way Down* explores the perpetuation of a cycle of violence and the theme of revenge. Compare the development of these themes in Reynolds's novel to a classic revenge story like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *The Iliad*, or *The Count of Monte Cristo*.
3. Will is fifteen years old and facing the challenge of making adult decisions that may have lasting consequences. Compare Will's conflict in *Long Way Down* to the conflict of the speaker in William Stafford's poem "Fifteen". Think about a time when you were faced with a moral dilemma. What choice did you make?

Write a narrative poem or narrative essay about your own experience.

4. Because poems often include meter and sound devices (such as alliteration, onomatopoeia, repetition, assonance, and rhyme—including internal and slant rhyme), we often talk about the musicality of poems. Try adding a musical element to the novel or a section of the novel. You may choose to create a soundtrack for the text using existing music, or you may want to create your own beats to accompany a moment or moments in the text.

5. Look at some examples of crime reporting; then, using as many specific details from the text as you can, write a newspaper article about Shawn's murder.

6. Will notes that his brother idolized the rappers Tupac and Biggie. While rap music is sometimes criticized for being misogynistic and/or glorifying violence, drug use, and gang culture, rap music has also brought to light issues of social justice and been a catalyst for reflection, awareness, and change. Choose a hip-hop or rap artist to research and profile. How do their personal experiences inform their music? What message do you think they are trying to convey? Choose one of their songs and analyze it the way you would analyze a poem.

7. At the beginning of the novel, Will reflects that the story he is about tell will either make readers want to be his friend or not want to be his friend at all. After you finish the book, write Will a letter telling him which one is true for you and explaining why.

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