

GHOST

also by **jason reynolds**

When I Was the Greatest

The Boy in the Black Suit

All American Boys

As Brave As You

Patina

Long Way Down

GHOST

TRACK: BOOK 1

jason **reynolds**

A Caitlyn Dlouhy Book



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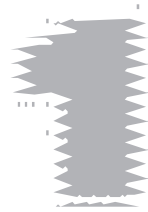
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to the runners

GHOST



WORLD RECORDS

CHECK THIS OUT. This dude named Andrew Dahl holds the world record for blowing up the most balloons . . . with his nose. Yeah. That's true. Not sure how he found out that was some kinda special talent, and I can't even imagine how much snot be in those balloons, but hey, it's a thing and Andrew's the best at it. There's also this lady named Charlotte Lee who holds the record for owning the most rubber ducks. No lie. Here's what's weird about that: Why would you even want one rubber duck, let alone 5,631? I mean, *come on*. And me, well, I probably hold the world record for knowing about the most world records. That, and for eating the most sunflower seeds.



“Let me guess, sunflower seeds,” Mr. Charles practically shouts from behind the counter of what he calls his “country store,” even though we live in a city. Mr. Charles, who, by the way, looks just like James Brown if James Brown were white, has been ringing me up for sunflower seeds five days a week for about, let me think . . . since the fourth grade, which is when Ma took the hospital job. So for about three years now. He’s also hard of hearing, which when my mom used to say this, I always thought she was saying “harder hearing,” which made no sense at all to me. I don’t know why she just didn’t say “almost deaf.” Maybe because “hard of hearing” is more like hospital talk, which was probably rubbing off on her. But, yeah, Mr. Charles can barely hear a thing, which is why he’s always yelling at everybody and everybody’s always yelling at him. His store is a straight-up scream fest, not to mention the extra sound effects from the loud TV he keeps behind the counter—cowboy movies on repeat. Mr. Charles is also the guy who gave me this book, *Guinness World Records*, which is where I found out about Andrew Dahl and Charlotte Lee. He tells me I can set a record one day. A real record. Be one of the world’s greatest somethings. Maybe. But I know one

thing, Mr. Charles has to hold the record for saying, *Let me guess, sunflower seeds*, because he says that every single time I come in, which means I probably also already hold the record for responding, loudly, the exact same way.

“Lemme guess, one dollar.” That’s my comeback. Said it a gazillion times. Then I slap a buck in the palm of his wrinkly hand, and he puts the bag of seeds in mine.

After that, I continue on my slow-motion journey, pausing again only when I get to the bus stop. But this bus stop ain’t just any bus stop. It’s the one that’s directly across the street from the gym. I just sit there with the other people waiting for the bus, except I’m never actually waiting for it. The bus gets you home fast, and I don’t want that. I just go there to look at the people working out. See, the gym across the street has this big window—like the whole wall is a window—and they have those machines that make you feel like you walking up steps and so everybody just be facing the bus stop, looking all crazy like they’re about to pass out. And trust me, there ain’t nothing funnier than that. So I check that out for a little while like it’s some kind of movie: *The About to Pass Out Show*, starring stair-stepper person one through ten. I know this all

probably sounds kinda weird, maybe even creepy, but it's something to do when you're bored. Best part about sitting there is tearing into my sunflower seeds like they're theater popcorn.

About the sunflower seeds. I used to just put a whole bunch of them in my mouth at the same time, suck all the salt off, then spit them all out machine-gun-style. I could've probably set a world record in that, too. But now, I've matured. Now I take my time, moving them around, positioning them for the perfect bite to pop open the shell, then carefully separating the seed from it with my tongue, then—and this is the hard part—keeping the little seed safe in the space between my teeth and tongue, I spit the shells out. And finally, after *all* that, I chew the seed up. I'm like a master at it, even though, honestly, sunflower seeds don't taste like nothing. I'm not even sure they're really worth all the hassle. But I like the process anyway.

My dad used to eat sunflower seeds too. That's where I get it from. But he used to chew the whole thing up. The shells, the seeds, everything. Just devour them like some kind of beast. When I was really young, I used to ask him if a sunflower was going to grow inside of him since he ate the seeds so much. He was always watching some kind of game, like football or

basketball, and he'd turn to me just for a second, just long enough to not miss a play, and say, "Sunflowers are all up in me, kid." Then he'd shake up the seeds in his palm like dice, before throwing another bunch in his grill to chomp down on.

But let me tell you, my dad was lying. Wasn't no sunflowers growing in him. Couldn't have been. I don't know a whole lot about sunflowers, but I know they're pretty and girls like them, and I know the word sunflower is made up of two good words, and that man ain't got two good words in him, or anything that any girl would like, because girls don't like men who try to shoot them and their son. And that's the kind of man he was.

It was three years ago when my dad lost it. When the liquor made him meaner than he'd ever been. Every other night he would become a different person, like he'd morph into someone crazy, but this one night my mother decided to finally fight back. This one night everything went worse. I had my head sandwiched between the mattress and my pillow, something I got used to doing whenever they were going at it, when my mom crashed into my bedroom.

"We gotta go," she said, yanking the covers off the bed. And when I didn't move fast enough, she yelled, "Come on!"

Next thing I knew, she was dragging me down the hallway, my feet tripping over themselves. And that's when I looked back and saw him, my dad, staggering from the bedroom, his lips bloody, a pistol in his hand.

"Don't make me do this, Terri!" he angry-begged, but me and my mom kept rolling. The sound of the gun cocking. The sound of the door unlocking. As soon as she swung the door open, my dad fired a shot. He was shooting at us! My dad! *My* dad was actually shooting . . . at . . . *US!* His wife and his boy! I didn't look to see what he hit, mainly because I was scared it was gonna be me. Or Ma. The sound was big, and sharp enough to make me feel like my brain was gonna pop in my head, enough to make my heart hiccup. But the craziest thing was, I felt like the shot—loudest sound I ever heard—made my legs move even faster. I don't know if that's possible, but that's definitely what it seemed like.

My mom and I kept running, down the staircase into the street, breaking into the darkness with death chasing behind us. We ran and ran and ran, until finally we came up on Mr. Charles's store, which, luckily for us, stays open 24/7. Mr. Charles took one look at me and my mom, out of breath, crying, barefoot in our

pajamas, and hid us in his storage room while he called the cops. We stayed there all night.

I haven't seen my dad since. Ma said the cops said that when they got to the house, he was sitting outside on the steps, shirtless, with the pistol beside him, guzzling beer, eating sunflower seeds, waiting. Like he wanted to get caught. Like it was no big deal. They gave him ten years in prison, and to be honest, I don't know if I'm happy about that or not. Sometimes, I wish he would've gotten forever in jail. Other times, I wish he was home on the couch, watching the game, shaking seeds in his hand. Either way, one thing is for sure: that was the night I learned how to run. So when I was done sitting at the bus stop in front of the gym, and came across all those kids on the track at the park, practicing, I had to go see what was going on, because running ain't nothing I ever had to practice. It's just something I knew how to do.



WORLD RECORD FOR THE FASTEST TRYOUT EVER

AT FIRST I watched through the gate. I was gonna keep moving, but then I saw that there were other people down closer to the track, hanging out, watching the practice. Like moms and stuff. So I joined them. Well, I didn't sit *with* them, because that would've been weird, but I grabbed a seat on one of the other benches. My school didn't have a track team, not that I would've tried out for it if it did. I was more into basketball. That was my sport, even though I had never really played. Sometimes on my walk home I would stop at the court and see if I could get a pickup game, but no one ever picked me, mainly because the old heads didn't like running with kids my age. But I always had this feeling

that if I could just get on, I'd be the next LeBron. But I never wanted to be the next . . . whoever the most famous runner is. I never even thought about it. I looked in the world records book and it says some dude named Usain Bolt is the fastest, but I had never heard of him. My dad never watched *running* on TV. Are there even any famous runners? Like, seriously? I never heard of none, but judging from the way these kids were stretching and jumping around on the track, some of them probably had.

"Okay, let's get some high knees!" the coach was commanding. He was short, and bald, but I could tell that his baldy didn't come from all his hair falling out. He was one of those guys who shaved it. Actually, he was one of those guys who shaved all the hair on his face except his eyebrows, which wasn't a good look. He looked like a turtle. A turtle with a chipped tooth, wearing a hoop earring and a black whistle around his neck. "Up! Up! Up!"

There were boys and girls—around my age—everybody dressed in shorts and T-shirts, holding their arms out in front of them, doing a jump-march kind of thing, slapping their knees to their hands.

"Come on, Sunny! It's only the second day of practice and you're already slackin'!" the coach barked

at the tallest boy out there. He was holding a clipboard and smacked it against his leg. "Get 'em up!"

I sat with my feet spread apart so I could spit the sunflower-seed shells on the ground between them. The salt was making me so thirsty, but I just couldn't stop eating them. On the track, the high-knee things were followed by jumping jacks, and some warm-up laps around the track, which seemed like a really bad idea to me. I mean, why would you run to warm up? You'd be tired before it's even time to race. *Duh.* Then all the runners gathered around the turtle-faced coach.

"Listen up," he said. "If you are on this track, you have either already been part of the Defenders, or you have been recruited to be part of the Defenders." He was talking to them like they had just joined the army or something. "I'm sure you all know what that means, but in case you don't, it means that you are part of one of the best youth teams in the city. We are the people the top high schools come to for talent. And if you go to a good high school and do well on a good team, guess what? You might even get to go to college for free."

Don't nobody go to college for free to run no races, I thought to myself, spitting a shell out. I hate when

they get stuck to your tongue and you gotta do that spit-flick thing. So annoying.

A weird-looking kid, I can't really explain what he looked like, well . . . let me try. You know how I said Mr. Charles looked like James Brown if James Brown was white? Well, this kid looked like a white boy, if a white boy was black. Wait. That doesn't make sense. Let me start over. His skin was white. Like, the color white. And his hair was light brown. But his face looked like a black person's. Like God forgot to put the brown in him. Wait, is that like Mr. Charles or not? Forget it. Anyway, the boy raised his hand.

"Yes, Lu?" the coach said.

"Is it true you ran in the Olympics?" the kid asked.

"Is it true that you didn't?" the coach shot back, playing him out.

The boy called Lu stood there like he just got slapped in the face by one of Charlotte Lee's rubber ducks. Like he didn't know what to do. "U-uh . . .," he stammered, not sure of what to say.

"Don't worry about what *I've* done. Worry about what *you* want to do. If you stick with me, I can get you there." The coach wiped spit from the corners of his mouth. "Now," he said, looking at his roll sheet,

“let’s see what we can do with you newbies. Lu, Patina, Sunny, on the line!”

The three “newbies” hustled down to the other end of the track.

“Lu, you’re up first. Hundred meter on the whistle,” the coach directed. The weird-looking dude, Lu, was decked out in the flyest gear. Fresh Nike running shoes, and a full-body skintight suit. Like a superhero. He wore a headband and a gold chain around his neck, and a diamond glinted in each ear. All the other runners stood off to the side as the coach put the whistle in his mouth. He held a stopwatch in his other hand. “Ready,” he said through his teeth. Then came the short squeak, *badeep!* and Lu took off.

It was quick. I mean, this kid was really fast, and when he got to the end of the straightaway, a woman who was sitting on a bench on the other side of the track jumped up and squealed and clapped like this dude was some kind of celebrity or something. I was impressed, not enough to clap—really, I was just happy something unborinɡ was *finally* happening—but definitely impressed enough to stop sorting seeds in my mouth until he was done.

“Nice job,” the coach said as Lu trotted back over to the side like a pro. Like this was no big deal, and