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# Ghost (Track)



## Synopsis

Ghost wants to be the fastest sprinter on his elite middle school track team, but his past is slowing him down in this first electrifying novel of a brand-new series from Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award-winning author Jason Reynolds. Ghost, Lu, Patina, Sunny. Four kids from wildly different backgrounds with personalities that are explosive when they clash. But they are also four kids chosen for an elite middle school track team—a team that could qualify them for the Junior Olympics if they can get their acts together. They all have a lot to lose, but they also have a lot to prove, not only to each other, but to themselves. Ghost has a crazy natural talent, but no formal training. If he can stay on track, literally and figuratively, he could be the best sprinter in the city. But Ghost has been running for the wrong reasons—it all starting with running away from his father, who, when Ghost was a very little boy, chased him and his mother through their apartment, then down the street, with a loaded gun, aiming to kill. Since then, Ghost has been the one causing problems—and running away from them—until he meets Coach, an ex-Olympic Medalist who blew his own shot at success by using drugs, and who is determined to keep other kids from blowing their shots at life.

## Book Information

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Age Range: 10 and up

Grade Level: 5 and up

## Customer Reviews

This is a generalization, but in my experience librarians really enjoy reading within their comfort zones. They'll travel outside of them from time to time but always they return to the books that they like the most. Children's librarians are just the same. The fantasy readers stick to fantasy. The realism fans go with realism. Graphic novel readers with comics. When I served on a yearly committee of librarians in New York I'd notice that some books were difficult to get anyone to read. Horse books, for example, just sat on our shelves untouched. Nonfiction could take some prodding. And as for sports books . . . forget about it. Nobody ever got near them. Still, you can't give up on them. Mike Lupica and Tim Green may rule the field but that doesn't mean other people don't make a lot out of athletics. If our Newbery winning *The Crossover* by Kwame Alexander taught us anything, it was that. Now Jason Reynolds, a young adult author until this year, has produced a middle grade novel centered on that most unlikely of sports: track. It skirts the clichés. It dodges the usual pitfalls. It makes you care about a kid who keeps messing up over and over and over again. It'll make you like sports books, even if you can't generally stand them. And now we've got to find a way to get a lot of it into the hands of kids. Stat. Call him Ghost. You can call him Castle Crenshaw if you want to (that's technically his name) but he's been calling himself Ghost ever since the night his dad got drunk and threatened Castle and his mom with a gun. Ghost learned to run that night and you might say he's been running ever since. He's got a load of anger inside that he doesn't know how to deal with so he tends to take it out on others at school. Then one day he spots a track warm-up and takes an instant dislike to the albino kid in the expensive tracksuit. Without thinking about it twice Ghost beats the guy on the track, running on the outside, which gets the attention of the coach. Coach begs Ghost to join and Ghost reluctantly agrees but it isn't what he expected. The other kids there all have their own lives, few of them easy. The running is much harder than anything Ghost has ever experienced before. And then there's the fact that no matter how fast he is, Ghost can't run away from trouble. It follows him and if he's not careful it's going to follow him right onto the track. Baseball. Basketball. Even football. These are the sports of fiction. I doubt anyone has ever run any statistics on it, but if you were to gather together all the children's sports books and group them by type, the baseball books would undoubtedly outweigh all the others 2:1. That's because baseball is a game with a natural rise and fall to its action. Basketball has speed and football has brute force, all good things when writing a story. Track? In track you run and then you stop. At least that's how I always looked at it. For Jason Reynolds, though, it's different. He didn't write this book with track as a single focus. He looks at what the sport boils down to. Basically, this is a book

about running. Running from mistakes (forgive the cliché), from very real threats, for your life, and for your team. Why you run and where you run and how you run. And if that's where you're coming from, then track is a very good choice of a sport indeed. On paper, this book looks like it's the sort of story that's all been done before. That's where Reynolds' writing comes in to play. First off, it's worth noticing that Mr. Reynolds is blessed with a keen sense of humor. This comes to play not just in the text but also in little in-jokes here and there. Like the fact that one of the runners (that, I should mention, gets cut later in the book because his grades are slipping) is named Chris Myers. Christopher Myers is the son of Walter Dean Myers, and a friend to Jason Reynolds. I love Jason's descriptions too. Mr. Charles at the corner store, looks just like James Brown if James Brown were white. . . Or Ghost saying later, "for something to make you feel tough, you gotta be a little bit scared of it at first." There are some pretty fantastic callbacks hidden in the story as well. Right at the start, almost like it's some kind of superhero origin story, we hear how Ghost heard the gun go off that night he ran away from his home with his mom and "I felt like the loud shot made my legs move even faster." That ties in beautifully with the starter pistol that goes off at the very very end of the book. But maybe what I like the most about Jason Reynolds' books is that he applies this keen sense of the complexity to his characters. I don't think the man could write a straight one-dimensional villain to save his soul. Even his worst characters have these brief moments of humanity to them. In this case, Ghost's dad is the worst character. You don't get much worse than shooting at your wife and kid after all. Yet for all that, Ghost still can't help but love the guy and eats sunflower seeds in his memory. Each character in the book has layers that you can peel away as the story progresses. Even Ghost, ESPECIALLY Ghost, who makes you want to yell at him and cheer for him, sometimes at the same time. There's been a monumental push for increased diversity in children's literature in the last few years. Diversity can mean any number of things and it often focuses on race. In a weird way, increasing the number of racially diverse books on a given publisher's release calendar isn't hard if the publisher is dedicated to the notion. Far more difficult is figuring out how you increase the economic diversity. Middle grade characters are almost always middle class. If they're working class then they tend to be historical. Contemporary lower income kids in realistic novels are almost unheard of. For example, how many books for children have you ever read with kids living in shelters? I've read just one, and I'm a children's librarian. So I watched what Reynolds did here with great interest. Ghost isn't destitute or anything but his single mom makes ends meet by working long hours at a hospital. Middle class kids are remarkably good at ignoring their own privilege while

kids like Ghost become almost invisible. In the book, Ghost's decision to initially race Lu isn't solely based on how Lu struts around the track, thinking he's the bee's knees. It's also on his clothes. Lu, was decked out in the flyest gear. Fresh Nike running shoes, and a full-body skintight suit . . . He wore a headband and a gold chain around his neck, and a diamond glinted in each ear. Later Ghost makes a decision regarding a particularly fancy pair of running shoes. That's an economic decision as well. Those are the most obvious examples, but the book is full of little mentions, peppered throughout, of where Ghost's class comes in to things. It's nice to see an author who gets that. We are often affected by forces outside our control, forces we don't even necessarily notice, particularly when we're children. If young readers see it, they'll be reading between the lines, just like Reynolds wants them to. Right at the beginning of the book, when Coach is trying to convince Ghost's mom that he should be running, Ghost realizes that he's in a situation that's played out in loads of sports films. He thinks, "If this went like the movies, I was either going to score the game-winning touchdown (which is impossible in track) or . . . die." Sometimes you can gauge how good a book is by how self-aware its characters are. But sometimes you just read a book, put it down, and think, "Man. That was good. That was really good." This is a book that actually made me tear up, and there aren't a lot of middle grade books that do that. I was rooting for Ghost hard, right until the end. I was caring about a sport that I'd never otherwise think about in a million years. And I was admiring it from start to finish for all that it accomplishes in its scant 180 pages. This is the book you hand to the kids who want something real and good and honest. There are a lot of Ghosts out there in the world. Hopefully some of them will discover themselves here. Run, don't walk, to pick this book up. For ages 10 and up.

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