

Teacher Directions—Shared Reading of “Between Us: A Reckoning With My Mother” by Jason Reynolds

These directions accompany Essential Practice 17: Engage in Shared Critical Reading (page 103). You can hear Reynolds read his essay aloud on Brene Brown’s *Unlocking Us* podcast. Visit the podcast website (linked via the accompanying QR code) or visit go.SolutionTree.com/studentengagement to access a live link to the episode. On the *Unlocking Us* podcast page, you can access and then print a transcript for a hard copy of the essay.



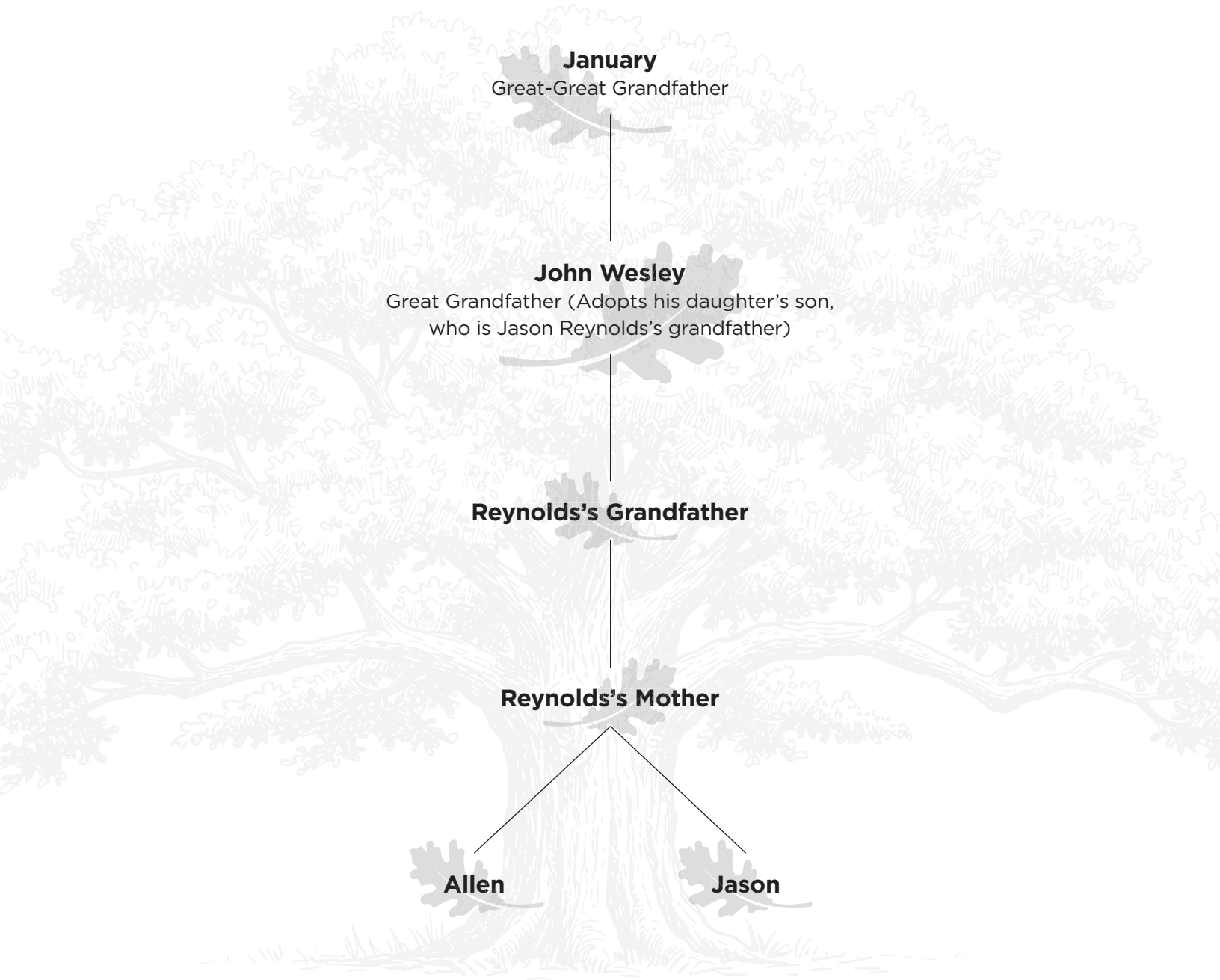
How We Do It

Follow these steps.

1. Instruct students to begin a page in their Notebook and give it the title *Critical Reading of “Between Us: A Reckoning With My Mother” by Jason Reynolds (2021)*.
2. Introduce students to Jason Reynolds with a short video. You might share the one at www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_f73NteYT to provide context about who Jason Reynolds is, why he writes, and mention that “Between Us” is a true story about him and his mother. (Ensure students understand the meaning of the phrase “play a number” or “play the numbers.”)
3. Place the copy of the Reynolds text under the document camera or on an overhead projector.
 - Point out the title.
 - Ask students if they know what a reckoning is or what it means to reckon with something.
 - Ask students what it means to keep things *between us*. When might you say this? To whom? Why?
4. Write these focus questions on the text model or the whiteboard to maintain student focus on the big ideas.
 - Is the narrator a good son?
 - What is the true meaning of this story?
 - What lesson does this story teach us?
5. Introduce the main characters in the story and have students plot them out on a family tree that they sketch in their Notebooks.
 - The narrator (in this case the author)
 - The narrator’s mother
 - The narrator’s grandfather
6. Play and pause the audio at pivotal moments, posing the guided questions. Some of the guiding questions are annotation moves and others invite students to jot down a thoughtful response either in the margin or in their Notebook. Model your thinking and annotation process throughout so students can follow along. Complete the family tree as new characters are introduced. As you read and listen together, also model for students how you underline or draw a box around the sensory images that bring the story to life for easy reference during later discussions.

Jason Reynolds's Family Tree

It can help to refer to the family tree as students listen to the story.



Guiding Questions

You can pose these guiding questions as students listen and follow the transcript that accompanies the audio.

- Define an oak tree, say what its unique characteristics might represent, and explain why this is a recurring metaphor in the story.
- What do you think it means that the grandfather is the oak tree of the family?
- What three things happened when the narrator was 13?
- Why does it seem that Allen didn't come along on these trips?
- Underline the phrase that Allen was "afflicted with adolescence" for later discussions with your group (Reynolds, 2021, p. 4).
- What do you think it means that his parents had "come undone" (Reynolds, 2021, p. 4)?
- Underline the phrase "internal, intergenerational residence and resonance" for later discussions with your group (Reynolds, 2021, p. 4).
- Underline the phrase "out of town lottery felt luckier" (Reynolds, 2021, p. 4). You will see this repeated phrase again in the text.
- When the narrator's mother "sermonizes" to him in the car, in what ways does this indicate that they had a unique and special relationship (Reynolds, 2021, p. 5)? In what ways are they different from the rest of their family?
- Notice what she says to her son and how she contrasts these views with those of their family.
- This is the first time we see the phrase "between us", which Reynolds uses as the title. Highlight, underline, or use an asterisk every time you encounter this phrase to determine its significance for later discussions with your group. Gesture to students or pause the audio to point out when the phrase recurs.
- The narrator now begins to discuss his family, which can get a bit confusing. Refer students to the family tree and add to it as new characters are introduced.
- The narrator says that his great-great grandfather was a *freedman*. What does that mean?
- The narrator describes his mother as an "independent and dependable compass" (Reynolds, 2021, p. 6). Underline this phrase for later discussions with your group for evidence of these qualities in his mother.
- When the narrator describes his grandfather's farm, underline the images that give the reader a vivid sense of life on the farm.
- Underline the vivid descriptions of the narrator's grandfather working the farm to revisit in later discussions with your group.
- The narrator's mother says to her father, "You're my father. And you raised us to always put family first" (Reynolds, 2021, p. 7). Underline this phrase. It has significance that will inform later discussions with your group.
- A significant change occurs in the narrator's life when he turns 17, which is a turning point in the story. Mark evidence in the text that demonstrates how this complicates the narrator's life.
- Notice where his mother expresses confidence to her son, but how the narrator also recognizes that she is afraid.

- The narrator begins to talk about his growing love for poetry. He describes himself as “scribbling well-intentioned self-righteousness to be recited at open mics” (Reynolds, 2021, p. 8). This provides a teachable moment to show students what this might look and sound like. Here are four possible examples performed by young people.
 - “White Boy Privilege”: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Al-KOZm2me8
 - “Why Are Muslims So . . .” at www.youtube.com/watch?v=3_i7wELTViO
 - “Letter to My Future White Son” at www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozBMFYnunrl
 - “Brown Girl” at www.youtube.com/watch?v=jC7fIQUggS8
- The narrator describes his poetry writing as a “thirst” and a “therapy” and “stretching a hole wider” and “smearing salve on a wound” (Reynolds, 2021, p. 8). What might this mean? Share additional insight.
- Underline the phrase “you are what you do most” for later discussion with your group (Reynolds, 2021, p. 8).
- Describe how the narrator’s writing career and his mother’s health started to move in the same direction.
- The narrator uses a phrase he learned from his mother to describe the fact that he secured a literary agent six months into his life in New York. (Ensure students understand that Brooklyn is a borough of New York City.)
- Why do you think the narrator refers to his mother as “the oak tree of this version of our family” (Reynolds, 2021, p. 9)?
- On the bus, the narrator told himself stories. Why do you think he tells this story to himself? What is he trying to justify? (Define the word *troubadour* [a folk singer] and the phrase *hard road* [a tough time] for students.)
- What is significant about the day of the narrator’s mother’s surgery? In other words, what is also happening that day?
- Underline the phrase “I was 22 when I met myself” for later discussions with your group (Reynolds, 2021, p. 10).
- The narrator and his mother have an important conversation before she is wheeled into surgery. Underline what they say to each other, and what the narrator realizes in hindsight about the decision he made at that moment to leave his mother while she was having a very dangerous surgery for further discussion with your group.
- At 36, the narrator writes about how ashamed he feels about the decision he made that day so many years before. Read and listen closely to how he feels, what he says, and how his mother responds for further discussion with your group.
- The narrator writes that “the itching isn’t coming from infection anymore, it’s coming from the fact that I’ve never removed the dressing” (Reynolds, 2021, p. 12) This insight connects to his mother’s comment: “Some things are meant to stay between us but this ain’t one of them” (Reynolds, 2021, p. 12). Because this exchange connects to the title of the story—“Between Us”—clearly label it to discuss further with your group.
- Reynolds ends the story with, “You’re my mother” (Reynolds, 2021, p. 12). This mirrors what his mother says to her own father. Reference this ending for later discussion with your group.

How We Assess

Here is how we assess this activity.

Formatively assess during the shared reading by monitoring active engagement. As you move through the text, circulate the room and check whether students are keeping up with their annotations. Support them through the process.

The summative assessment for this shared reading experience is for students to use Reynold's story as a mentor text and springboard to write what we call their own "Small Moment Tiny Memoir," an idea inspired by The New York Times Tiny Memoir Contest (The Learning Network, 2024). At the source, you'll find a step-by-step guide as well as student samples that you may find helpful.

Prepare students for this writing assessment by reviewing the annotations to discern how Reynolds uses storytelling elements such as conflict, characters, and setting for dramatic effect. Students then choose one of the following prompts to focus their miniature narrative.

1. Describe someone in your life who is:
 - An oak tree
 - A dependable compass
 - Afflicted with adolescence
2. Describe something in your life that is:
 - Both a thirst and a therapy
 - Like hitting the numbers

References

The Learning Network. (2024b). Tiny memoir contest for students: Write a 100-word personal narrative. *The New York Times*. Accessed at www.nytimes.com/2024/08/08/learning/tiny-memoir-contest-for-students-write-a-100-word-personal-narrative.html on June 12, 2025.

Reynolds, J. (2021). Between us: A reckoning with my mother. In T. Burke & B. Brown (Eds.), *You are your best thing: Vulnerability, shame resilience, and the Black experience* (pp. 3-12). Random House.