



I AM ALFONSO JONES

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foreword by Bryan Stevenson



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Foreword

We provide no guides, manuals, tutorials, courses, or training to help children of color survive the presumption of guilt and dangerousness with which they are born. Black and brown young people bear an unfair burden in America. They are required to understand a history that is not clearly taught in school, develop survival skills that few teachers impart, and navigate unfounded suspicions no one should confront. Many young people of color must find hope even when they are surrounded by tragedy, trauma, and experiences that constantly reinforce the fact that survival will be hard, success even harder.

The narrative of racial difference in the United States has created a smog that pollutes many communities and marginalizes people of color. It began when white settlers came to this continent and killed millions of Native people, forced them off their land, and declared them to be “savages.” That same narrative of racial difference sustained two centuries of human enslavement where African people were abducted, kidnapped, beaten, abused, sexually exploited, and denied human dignity. The Thirteenth Amendment prohibited involuntary servitude and forced labor, but said nothing about the ideology of white supremacy and the narrative of racial difference that was slavery’s true evil. Slavery didn’t end in 1865; it evolved. For another hundred years our nation witnessed racial terror lynchings, widespread mistreatment and economic exploitation of people of color, segregation, Jim Crow laws, bans on interracial romance, and unaddressed racial bigotry. A heroic civil rights struggle helped move things forward, but the narrative of racial difference endured.

Today, we have mass incarceration and a criminal justice system that treats you better if you’re rich and guilty than if you’re poor and innocent. The Bureau of Justice predicts that one in three black male babies born in this country will spend time in jail or prison; this was not true throughout most of the twentieth century. An epidemic of police violence claims the lives of people of color, who are frequently menaced, targeted, and harassed. In schools,

on streets, and frequently in media and popular culture, black children are presumed criminal and must do exceptional things to enjoy the opportunities other people are freely given. We are Alfonso Jones.

There is hope. Black and brown people in the United States have created a remarkable history of survival, achievement, and progress even in the face of extraordinary obstacles. We shall overcome.

It is tragic that we need a book like *I Am Alfonso Jones* today, but we do need it. For many, this is required reading. Like the gifted creators of this amazing book, we need to tell the truth about our history. We need the wisdom of generations before us who have endured the pain of racial inequality. We need the hope of our courageous ancestors to overcome the injustice that defines too many communities.

Hopelessness is the enemy of justice. Silence, fear, and anger are the elements that sustain inequality. *I Am Alfonso Jones* makes an important statement about ending the silence, confronting the fear and anger, and ultimately building a new way forward. This is a powerful story, with a powerful message that we all need to learn: Justice is a constant struggle. Join the struggle.

Bryan Stevenson

Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative

Author of *Just Mercy*

Author's Note

Growing up in the Bronx, my life was not dissimilar to Alfonso's. I was fortunate to be surrounded by a loving family and community that nurtured my artistic interests and talents, but I, too, faced adversities. In our neighborhood in the Throgs Neck Housing Projects, we had a serious distrust of the police and, most times, saw them as an occupying force; but nonetheless we still managed to get along—or get by. As I've grown older it seems that more and more incidents of police brutality have emerged, not just in New York City, but also across the country.

As a literary artist, I realized I've been documenting—in poetry—police brutality cases since the late 1980s. From Eleanor Bumpurs (who reminded me of my own grandmother) to Charleena Lyles, a thirty-year-old pregnant African American woman shot to death by police in the doorway of her apartment, in front of her children, after calling the police for a possible burglary (possibly her estranged abusive boyfriend), I have amassed a full-length collection of poetry on such horrifying cases.

When Amadou Diallo was killed in 1999, I took to the streets in a major protest that began in mid-Manhattan and culminated in front of the courthouses in lower Manhattan. It was jam-packed, and when the protest ended and the massive crowd began to disperse, I recall being purposefully pummeled by a white cop who disguised his brutality against me with the excuse of moving the crowd along. The sneaky smirk on his face when he realized a friend and fellow poet, Suheir Hammad, witnessed the assault, yanking me away and saying, "Come on, Medina, we need you alive!" showed me all I needed know about how some people, hiding behind badges, abuse their authority and positions of power to get out their own anger and frustration. This is one of the reasons we need better policing and screening of those who serve in public positions where society entrusts them to carry a weapon and a badge.

What I wish *I Am Alfonso Jones* achieves is not solely to open up dialogues about issues of race and class and police brutality, among other topics the graphic novel addresses, but to also inspire and instigate activism in the form of fighting for better, more humane and responsible policing. I also want to put human faces and universal narratives to the lives of those destroyed by police violence and overaggression due to stereotypes, racism, anger, paranoia, and fear.

Ever since the Trayvon Martin killing and the subsequent trial of George Zimmerman, who was found not guilty in a jury decision that was confounding, to say the least, I have been posting incessantly on social media (and writing poems) about cases of police brutality and injustices against people of color as part of the Black Lives Matter resistance. As a professor, I also hold intense discussions among my students at Howard University in Washington, DC, and even have my students respond in writing and video, in which they speak out as poets and concerned citizens about their fear, confusion, and anger regarding the onslaught of cases of police brutality and the killing of innocent, unarmed people of color. I also published an anthology, *Resisting Arrest: Poems to Stretch the Sky* (Jacar Press, 2016) on police brutality and violence, featuring some of the most prominent poets in the country.

I Am Alfonso Jones is a culmination of my great concern for the inequality that rears its head in the justice system, the prison industry, and in the dangerous elements found in policing in America.

The inspiration for Alfonso's story was taken, in part, from the various national incidents broadcast on a seemingly twenty-four-hour news loop, traumatizing people over and over again. The young black activists in *I Am Alfonso Jones* are fictional depictions inspired by the real-life visionary activists Opal Tometi, Alicia Garza, and Patrice Cullors, who started the Black Lives Matter movement.

One particularly egregious incident took place in a major superstore where a young Black man was checking out a toy BB gun on sale when he was suddenly shot and killed by two armed police officers responding to another customer's 911 call.

That was also the major tipping point in Alfonso's story—the trauma of that reality where one could be in a secure environment shopping and suddenly destroyed for the color of one's skin, for the perceived threat in the imagination of a white officer armed with stereotypes and a loaded gun. How one could be yanked from one's life at a moment's notice, and how the bullets that destroy a young boy's brown flesh could do such irreparable damage to a family, a community, an entire nation.

That we hear from Alfonso in the afterlife of such ruin is a miracle of fiction. That Alfonso's death—though heartbreakingly senseless—is not in vain, but a symbol of resistance to police brutality and racism—is a miracle of faith.

—Tony Medina