

Excerpt #1: From Jason Reynolds's *As Brave as You*

The boys had arrived two nights earlier after a long, cramped ride in the back of their dad's old Honda. Cramped at least for Genie, because Ernie, in a cheeseburger coma, had stretched out on the backseat as if it were his own personal couch, forcing Genie to be smushed against the window for most of the trip. Genie had thought about playing Pete and Repeat by mimicking Ernie's nasty snores, but then he realized it wouldn't matter because Ernie wasn't awake to get annoyed by it anyway. And that was the whole point of that game.

[Ask students to identify what they learned about the brothers and their relationship based on this description of the car trip. How does Jason Reynolds use indirect characterization to show that Ernie, the older brother, has more power in the relationship? What words would they use to describe Ernie so far? They may say *selfish*, *inconsiderate*, *sleepy*—essentially, a typical teenager!]

So to take his mind off the discomfort of being trapped under Ernie's leg, stewing in the thick silence between his folks, who had managed to not talk to each other for the past four hours, Genie flipped through pages of his notebook—where he kept his best questions.

[From this sentence, we learn, indirectly, that his parents don't seem to be getting along. Ask students what it says about them as characters that they would ride in a car for four hours without talking? They may say *stubborn*, *angry*, *sad*.]

Some had already been answered, and some were mysteries. He landed on one that he had totally forgotten about—#389: do honey badgers eat honey?—then tried telling his parents about how he'd read on the internet that honey badgers actually *do* eat honey and how many of them had been stung to death by bees because they wanted honey from the hive so bad. The toughest, craziest animal ever.

[Discuss how the author is showing Genie to be a highly *curious* person—one who has a lot of questions and cares enough to seek answers.]

“They're like weasels or somethin'. But tougher, know what I'm sayin'? Like, they're small, but they ain't scared to get busy, even on lions,” Genie had rambled. The fact that his parents had neither asked him about honey badgers, or even knew why he cared about them in the first place, never stopped him from offering up random info at random times. That was sort of his thing. He was different from Ernie in this way.

[This was an efficient way for the author to show us something about both characters—that Genie talks a lot and Ernie does not.]

Genie was the kind of kid who kept a small jacked-up notebook and pen in his pocket just so that he could jot down interesting things whenever they came. The point was to keep a list—a numbered list—of all the things he needed to Google, because to Genie, the more questions you had, the more answers you could find. And the more answers you found, the more you knew. And the more you knew, the less you made mistakes. Genie wasn't about mistakes.

[What does it mean that Genie “wasn't about mistakes”?]

Ernie, on the other hand, was the kind of kid who wore sunglasses 24/7 just to make sure everybody knew he was cool, and to him, the biggest mistake anyone could make was not to be.

[This is an example of direct characterization. Jason Reynolds gives the reader a hint that he’s about to share a direct description with the words “[Ernie] was the kind of kid who . . .” Talk about how Jason might have thought, *I want to make sure the reader knows that it’s important to Ernie that he appears “cool.” What can he do or say that shows this?* and then thought of having him wear sunglasses—a symbol of “coolness”—to convey that message to the reader.

That, and not being able to defend yourself. As a matter of fact, one of the only times Ernie didn’t wear his shades was whenever he was doing karate, which he had been learning since he was seven. He was a brown belt, or as he put it, a “junior black belt.” Genie loved to watch Ernie’s matches and tournaments, but not quite as much as he loved to watch *Jeopardy!* and *Wheel of Fortune*. Ernie, on the other hand, liked to watch girls. Genie liked to build model cars. Ernie . . . liked to watch girls. (pp. 6–8)

[Ask students to identify more direct and indirect ways the author described his characters. Can they tell, from just these few paragraphs, whether Genie and Ernie have a healthy sibling relationship? Hopefully, they’ll surmise that they are loving brothers from the fact that Genie seems to pay close attention to Ernie and enjoys attending his karate matches, which shows support.]

[You might also ask, at this point, whether Genie and Ernie seem like likable characters. Do these few paragraphs make them want to read more? If so, explain to the students that when they write their own stories later in the unit, they’ll want to assign characteristics to their main characters that keep their readers interested in wanting to read more about what happens to them.]

Excerpt #2: From Sarah Dooley's *Free Verse*

As foster mothers go, Phyllis could probably be worse. Of course, she's the only foster mother I've ever had, so I don't have much to compare her to. She's kind, and she cooks. She's sweet to her animals, a nosy cat and a sagging dog, both of whom live outside. She's thoughtful enough that she's taken some time off work, even though her boss has called twice to see when she's coming back. . . .

[In the beginning portion of this passage, author Sarah Dooley uses direct characterization to describe Phyllis. She uses adjectives: *kind*, *sweet*, *thoughtful*, and also verbs, to show what things she does that make Sasha (the narrator) think of her that way.]

After dinner, Phyllis brings out the acoustic guitar with its bumper stickers and scratches, lifting it from a case lined with nicked red velveteen. I have never heard anybody play the guitar the way she does, a string at a time, not chords. She doesn't look at written music. When she plays, she closes her eyes. There is no makeup on her cheeks, and her hair must be its natural color, because I have never seen this shade of gold-coming-on-silver in a box. She's not a large person, but when she plays the guitar, her shoulders draw up taller and her legs relax out longer and her neck—I swear, her neck grows three inches as she tosses her head back and breathes songs up to the sky.

I watch her fingers most: nails even but unpolished, fingers calloused and stubby. I like the way the skin dents in when she presses a guitar string. . . . She does not demand that I listen, but I'm caught, sitting on the floor next to the door, watching her fingers. The way the strings snap back into place when she lets them go washes me in sadness. Like nothing you do ever really makes a difference. . . . Phyllis does not look or act startled when I start to sing along. (pp. 7–10)

[The second two paragraphs offer more indirect characterization. Ask the students to think about how Sarah Dooley *shows* us what Phyllis is like in this part, rather than *telling* us. What do we learn about Phyllis by the description of her getting out and playing her guitar? What do we learn about Sasha by the way she, as narrator, describes Phyllis? How does Sasha respond to the music (it “washes her in sadness,” yet, she starts to sing along). Using discretion based on your knowledge of students' home lives, ask if students know what a foster parent is, and how they can tell that Phyllis will be a good foster mother for Sasha, who has recently suffered a great loss?]

Excerpt #3: From Frances O’Roark Dowell’s *Where I’d Like to Be*

[In this passage, the narrator (Maddie) lives at a temporary shelter/group home for foster children, and Murphy is a new resident who is unpacking her belongings.]

“Don’t you have anything better to do?” she asked, her head deep inside a box. “Play in traffic? Start a forest fire?”

[The students may be able to tell from the first paragraph that Murphy is sarcastic.]

“Nope,” I said. I was just dying to see Murphy’s stuff. I love stuff. One day I’d like to live in a big old house crammed floor to ceiling with stuff. “I’m fine right here.”

“That’s too bad,” Murphy said, pulling out a lumpy pillowcase. She took a smaller cloth bag from the pillowcase, tucked it in her pocket, and heaved two of the unpacked boxes onto her bed. In a flash, she was up and teetering on top of them.

“Throw me that pillowcase, will you?” she asked, holding out her arms to get her balance. “I mean, as long as you’re going to stare, you might as well be helpful.”

“Aren’t you afraid you’re going to fall?” I asked. “Those boxes look a little unsteady.”

“I never fall. I don’t believe in falling.”

“What does believing have to do with it?”

Murphy shook her head, like she’d never met anyone so dumb. “Believing has everything to do with everything.”

She grabbed the pillowcase from me and stuffed it under her arm. Then she pulled the little cloth bag from her pocket and carefully spilled its contents into her hand. “Thumbtacks,” she told me. “In case you were wondering.”

“I *was* wondering,” I said. . . .

She pushed some more thumbtacks into the ceiling over her bed and began pulling things from the pillowcase: orange and black silk butterflies dangling from shimmery threads, a web of glow-in-the-dark stars, a silvery moon. One by one, she hung each item from a thumbtack, until she’d made a shining galaxy above her bed.

I was starting to feel more ordinary than usual, standing there watching Murphy. The only thing above my bed was a fluorescent light. (pp. 7–10)

[There is really no direct characterization in this passage, and a lot of the indirect characterization takes place through dialogue. Talk with the students about what we learn about both Maddie and Murphy from the way the author, Frances O’Roark Dowell, writes about their first interaction. They might notice that Murphy seems more exotic and interesting than Maddie, that Maddie is very observant, and that Murphy has a bold personality.]