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From Stage to Page

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From Stage to Page

Fueled by a passion to create, Aaron Reynolds '92 parlayed his theatre background into success as a children's author.

Story by KIM HILL



Reynolds uses his blog and social media such as this Instagram photo to build excitement for his visits to schools and libraries. His book Creepy Carrots is an award-winning bestseller.

Standing at the front of a public library's community room that's only slightly more visually interesting than the local DMV, Aaron Reynolds '92 has the crowd of children and their parents hanging on his every word. Reynolds is the author of 30 children's books, including *New York Times* bestseller and Caldecott Honor book *Creepy Carrots*. His presentation for kids is part celebrity appearance, part stand-up comedy routine. The silly accents, dialects and audience participation, including costume changes, reflect just some of the talents Reynolds honed as an IWU music-theatre major.

After his presentation, the Chicago-based writer talked about how he went from performing artist to children's author and how he managed to persevere through the 390 rejection letters he received from publishers (not that he was counting).

When you came to Illinois Wesleyan from the St. Louis area, what was the plan?

I was going to study theatre, move to New York and star on Broadway. That was the plan.

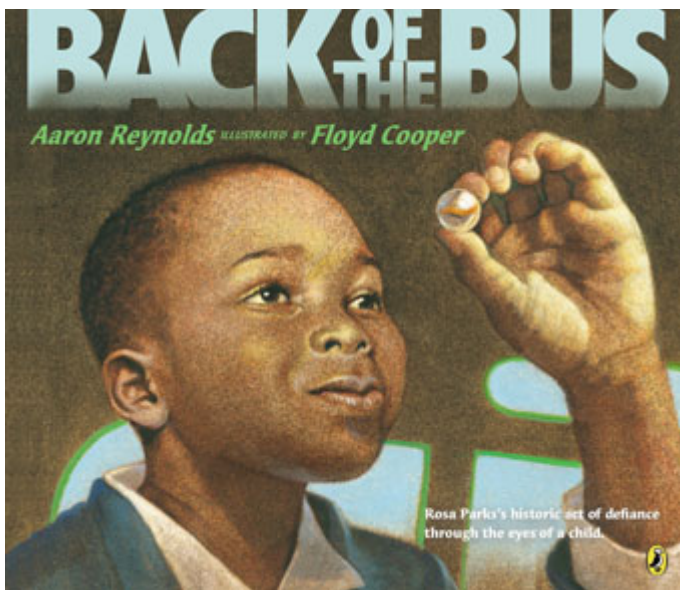
What happened to that plan?

I decided I'd start in Chicago. I got an internship with the Steppenwolf Theatre my last semester at IWU. After graduation, my wife [music major Shelly (Oakes) '90] and I were getting steady work as actors and singers and dancers, but we were still working day jobs to make ends meet. We'd run out over lunch to audition, rehearse at night and on weekends, do shows on weekends, get home at three in the morning, rinse and repeat. And it was at a point where it was just exhausting and we were thinking about having a family and I started thinking about alternatives. So I went to culinary school.

That's normally what starving actors do when they change careers.

I love cooking, so I thought this would be a creative alternative. At the same time I was in culinary school, we were heavily involved in a megachurch in the northwest suburbs. I had begun volunteering in the children's ministry program, which at that time was a world leader in using creative arts to teach children about the Bible. It was just everything I was about. A paid position came open, so I took a chance and left culinary school one semester shy of graduating. I had never worked with kids and had never written anything at that point.

Obviously at some point you started writing.



Reynolds took on a more serious subject for his book Back of the Bus.

That was soon a big part of the job. I loved creating things for kids, producing mini-shows, performing. It was right in my sweet spot with my theatre background and creativity. We were traveling all over the world teaching others how to incorporate these creative arts into children's ministries, and I loved it. But the more writing I did, the more I loved that even more. It felt like the creative control I had in theatre but 10 times more. So I decided to write a kids' book.

And how did that go?

I did all my homework, learned how deals worked, sent out story after story, and got back rejection letter after rejection letter. For over five years — 390 rejection letters. But I just stuck with it. I loved it, and it was just something I really wanted to do.

How were you living at this point?

I was still working at the church. And my wife was singing and doing some other things at the time, and by this time we had kids (son Ethan and daughter Reese). After years of trying, I got a call from a publisher. They loved one of my stories and wanted to turn it into a book. That was *Chicks and Salsa* [Bloomsbury USA Childrens, 2005]. And then it was a pile more rejection letters and a year later, another call for another book. So it wasn't like it was one book and done. But before long I am getting more phone calls from publishers than I'm getting rejection letters, and I love it so much I think I want to do this for a living. Very few people can make a living out of it, I have discovered.

When did you make the leap from salaried employee at the church to working-without-a-net author?

When I left the church, I was writing and selling but we certainly couldn't live on that, so I opened a children's ministry consulting practice. I had made somewhat of a name for myself in children's ministry because we were publishing a lot of curriculum for other churches, and it was my job to oversee the artistic direction of that curriculum. At the beginning, it was 90 percent children's ministry appearances at conferences and consulting, and I was writing in the cracks. As things picked up with my books, I was able to let the consulting taper off and let the writing carry the load.



And did the speaking gigs at the ministry conferences just naturally lead to the author visits at libraries and schools?

I didn't even know that was a thing. I had several books out before schools starting asking if I would do an author visit. I had to call some of my author friends and say, 'What is this? Do we do this?' And they said, 'Yes, do it, and you'll make some money, too.'

Let me guess. The theatre major in you showed up immediately.

This was my sweet spot. The school visits bring all of my theatre training, my love of being in front of the kids, my love of performing — it's all there. The speaking appearances and author visits make all the difference between doing it for a living and having to have another job.

How has theatre influenced your writing?

The theatre background is everything. Looking back when I was in high school doing plays and musicals, majoring in that in college seemed like the logical thing because that's what I was good at. When I started doing other things, like cooking school, then ministry and writing, my parents said, "Why did we spend all that money on theatre school?" I saw that the theatre training was the foundation of all of it.

Theatre made me focus on the power of technique and how to be creative and how to harness ideas. So I think really, what I was excited about in high school was creating things. And that continues to excite me. The theatre background has everything to do with what I do now. Early on, my family thought I bounced from job to job, but in my mind, it's not bouncing at all. Everything I've done is about creating, whether it's moments in theatre or amazing food or moments in ministry or stories in books.

Do you have a book of yours that is your favorite? Is that like asking which of your children is your favorite?

Probably whatever I'm currently working on is what excites me most, but there is no question that *Creepy Carrots* [Simon & Schuster, 2012] has been very good to me. I'm very thankful for that book, especially knowing that book was massively rejected and misunderstood when we first started shopping it.

For those who may not be familiar with it, *Creepy Carrots* concerns a young rabbit who has a habit of snatching carrots until the carrots start following him, and the suspense builds. Why do you think it was so misunderstood?

They said, "This is sick, this is not a kids' book, this is scary." People didn't get it. I wanted to write a horror story as a picture book, to push the edge. Something that's scary but not too scary, that's accessible yet creepy, something that scares 4- to 10-year-olds but also helps them laugh at the fact they're scared.

So a lot of people didn't get it, and then one of my publishers said they wanted it and sat on it for a year, then changed their minds. So my agent pulled it, took it to Simon & Schuster and sold it in two weeks. So that was a great lesson to me, in that you really have to trust the editors you're with. They have to get you and what excites you.

Most of your books have a sense of humor, but then you have a couple of very serious books, such as *Back of the Bus* [Philomel, 2010]. Where did that idea come from?

Rosa Parks was an everyday, ordinary woman who had the guts to step out and do something courageous, and that's just a very inspiring story to me.



Reynolds' "Here Comes Destructosaurus" came out this past spring.

I knew kids knew her story — it's been done to death — but I just started to imagine what it might have been like to be on that bus, and then what it might have been like to be an African-American kid on that bus, in the back where he was supposed to be in those times, watching this unfold. I began to explore the story from that perspective.

What's up next for you?

Here Comes Destructosaurus [Chronicle Books] came out this spring, so I'm busy promoting that. I've got four others in the pipeline, with my next book coming out in spring of 2015.

A lot of people don't realize how long it takes to produce a book from the time I get a contract to the time it rolls off the press. Peter Brown [*Creepy Carrots'* illustrator] took over two years to finish the paintings for that book, so it can be a very long process.

I've got more ideas, though, than I will ever write. I have enough ideas to last 10 lifetimes. There are so many things to explore with kids' books. My dad always asks when I'm going to write a grown-up book. And I'm saying, "Why would I?"

To visit Aaron Reynolds' website, [click here](#).