

# A Critical Examination of African-American Youth Athletes in the *Track Series*

## Lessons About Intra-racial Diversity & Bullying Reduction

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### Introduction

Jason Reynolds is the *New York Times* best-selling and critically acclaimed author of the *Track Series*, a compilation of four works of contemporary realistic young adult fiction that reflect the diverse experiences of four middle school, African-American elite track runners whose names correspond with the title of each novel: *Ghost* (Reynolds, 2016), *Patina* (Reynolds, 2018a), *Sunny* (Reynolds, 2018b), and *Lu* (Reynolds, 2019).

The novels are inextricably linked, as each protagonist tells his or her story and reflects on his or her teammates on the basis of their physical appearances, abilities as runners, family structures, and life circumstances. Each story is narrated from the first person point of view, a trait of contemporary realistic fiction that places the reader in the thought processes of the protagonist.

Thus Reynolds's use of intertextuality, or the presence of the core members of the Defenders in each other's stories, provides additional scope about each protagonist not revealed by the protagonists themselves. Intra-racial diversity encompasses diverse experiences of African-American characters on the basis of socioeconomic diversity and diverse family structures.

Many of the nuanced perspectives are influenced by social class differences, as protagonists differently articulate

expectations for their teammates' home lives on the basis of social class, zip code, and family structure. Through this process, the reader may develop a closer bond with Ghost, Patina, Sunny, and Lu, in the manner of acquiring fun facts that sustain engagement and interest as the stories merge and intersect.

The connection to the protagonists crafts authentic portrayals of their identities, their commitment to their sport, and the struggles they face on the track and in their home lives—including support provided by their coaches, families, and school.

Ghost, Patina, Sunny, and Lu additionally prejudge each other until they develop close bonds. In many instances, the protagonists may have prejudged their teammates on the basis of appearance, social class differences, residency, and/or family dynamics.

Moreover, each protagonist confronts bullying on the track and/or at school. As the series develops, the reader learns about the deep pain bullying causes that the core Defenders do not readily reveal to each other. The core Defenders suffer individually in silence until team bonding and divulging of experiences become a source of healing. The realities of bullying and acknowledgment that speaking up is a source of healing and problem solving may connect readers with shared experiences.

The research questions that guide this examination are, What does the *Track Series* convey about who African-American athletes are and the diversity of the African-American experience? What are the lived experiences of the Defenders that support their understanding of themselves and perspectives of their teammates? What

messages does the *Track Series* convey about prejudice reduction? What messages are conveyed in each story for bullying reduction? What is the nature of a coach's role in mentoring urban youth toward bullying reduction?

### Perspectives

*Focalization* is a concept that falls under the umbrella of critical content analysis. It encompasses the literary device *point of view*. Point of view indicates whose story is being told and from what perspective (Short, 2017). In this series a trusted narrator endeavors to educate the reader and raise awareness about their experiences. Focalization is applicable to the *Track Series* based on considerations of what counts as a sport, as Ghost, Patina, Sunny, and Lu educate the reader about the demands of track; goal setting; acquiring techniques to succeed at their events; their perspectives about winning; and the roles their coaches, teammates, and families play in supporting them.

Focalization further applies in the portrayals that indicate who these African-American athletes are through the point of view of four trusted narrators as their stories emerge and intersect as the protagonists learn about each other's struggles as athletes and in their lives away from the track, while making sense of their own. The intersection of characters yields intertextuality in a manner that underscores intra-racial diversity.

*Intertextuality* is "the elaboration of a text in relation to other texts" (Frow, 1986, p. 152), whereby readers locate textual voices from other texts within a primary text (Barthes, 1975).

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Intertextuality encompasses a close reading and comparative and contrastive analysis of similarly themed texts in the endeavor of providing multiple and authentic portrayals of cultural groups (Sung et al., 2017). To that end, high-quality literature has the potential to inform authentic portrayals of cultural groups, without stereotyping and without bias. Thus the *Track Series* portrays African-American athletes whose experiences differ on the basis of different economic backgrounds, family structures, and intraracial diversity.

Social processes of characters is a tenet of critical content analysis that has the potential to raise awareness of the realities of the harm caused by prejudice, as experienced by the protagonists (Short, 2017). The *Track Series* protagonists experience prejudice and demonstrate prejudicial treatment of each other, until they develop close bonds.

Characteristics of prejudice themes in young adult literature are reflected in the *Track Series*, including the realities of prejudice and race relations. Additional characteristics include dispelling myths about notions of superiority. Prejudice themes provide a sense of hope and empathy and reveal the pain prejudice causes. An analysis of the *Track Series* will reveal a purpose for facilitating prejudice reduction and offering solutions as part of the critical discussion of the complex portrayals of prejudice.

Social processes of characters additionally present an opportunity to analyze and interpret characters who have power and, conversely, the agency to challenge characters who are accepting of wrong-doing and conditions of oppression (Short, 2017). The *Track Series* embeds bullying themes into young adult literature. Characteristics of bullying themes include insight and relatability to young adults. As young adults connect with the literature, an analysis through the lens of closure may include characters who made unpopular decisions in the endeavor of doing the right thing.

The purposes of implementing bullying themes in young adult literature include utilizing bibliotherapy, which is a therapeutic approach that uses literature to support mental health. In this case bibliotherapy provides a discursive enactment of raising awareness about bullying and supporting bullying reduction (Moulton et al., 2011). Additional purposes include prompting intervention

and reduction through activities and discussion and offering coping strategies (Moulton et al., 2011). In addition to examining the *Track Series* for its portrayal of bullying themes through the lens of characters' social processes, considerations are made for the series as a way of utilizing and facilitating bibliotherapy.

### Methodology

A comparative contrastive analysis of each title in the *Track Series* was conducted to address the research questions and emerging themes (Johnson, 2017). Critical content analysis methodologies include focalization, intertextuality, and social processes of characters.

Focalization was categorized across each novel and applied to each protagonist to examine the messages the *Track Series* conveys about who African-American athletes are. Through this process, emerging themes encompassed intertextuality as teammates and their circumstances appear in each other's stories, through the lens of the protagonist of each novel. These portrayals yield coding for intraracial diversity across dimensions of family structure, residency, and economic diversity, through the lens of athletes' perspectives about themselves and each other, in a manner that centers around their identities as athletes.

Social processes of characters were categorized and applied to each novel to elaborate on the lived experience narrated by each protagonist and reveal ways in which each story unfolds and disrupts the prejudice the core Defenders maintained for each other. Therefore a critical examination of the *Track Series* uncovers the complex ways in which the protagonists confront their prejudicial treatment of each other and informs about the series as a source of prejudice reduction.

Social processes of characters were additionally applied to each novel to elaborate on the lived experiences that reveal the complexity and pain of bullying, which necessitates a need to speak up and present solutions for young adults. A critical examination of the *Track Series* reveals the harsh consequences of bullying and its potential as a source of bibliotherapy discussion for offering solutions.

### Focalization, Family Support, and Intertextuality Illuminate Intraracial Diversity

#### Ghost

Although all are new to the Defenders, Patty, Sunny, and Lu were formally trained and joined the team through traditional try-outs and recruitment. In the first novel of the series, *Castle Crenshaw*, otherwise known as *Ghost*, discovers his ability to run fast while running with his mother away from his father, who, in a drunken rage, was pursuing them while firing a gun. The world's fastest try-out emerges when he notices a track practice in progress and sits in the stands to observe. As he walks over, he informs the reader that running is something he never had to practice, because he knows how to run. His admission of running naturally and not requiring practice may be understandable to readers who are outsiders to the sport and unfamiliar with the demands of practice.

While observing Lu, well attired with a full-body running suit, jewelry, and Fresh Nike running shoes and admired by bystanders during the 100 meter event, *Ghost* assumes that Lu thinks he is unbeatable. *Ghost* takes a random chance: He walks onto the track and stands next to Lu as he takes the starting position for another race, hoping to prove that Lu is not as special as he thinks he is. Although Coach initially discourages *Ghost*, he reluctantly allows him to run and insists he should never

Figure 1  
Jason Reynolds, *Ghost* (2016)



come back after this one chance. Lu's boastfulness is detected when he glares at Ghost and tells him to get ready to be smoked. Lu's boastfulness fades into panic and confusion when Ghost keeps up with him, while onlookers and Coach are unable to determine the winner. Ghost attracts the attention of Coach, who invites him to join the team.

Ghost joins the team when his mother approves Coach's invitation, supported by claims of his potential to be successful. However, Ghost's working-class background and his mother's lack of familiarity with track and the resources needed to participate mean that Ghost will not be as well attired as Lu. His mother's priority is to provide what she can and offer words of encouragement, usually after a long day of work at a hospital cafeteria.

While being well attired is not a struggle for his teammates, Ghost struggles with collecting the attire he needs to meet the demands of practice. Ghost's initial practice is a one-on-one practice before official practice, a consequence of Coach reluctantly responding to a suspension call from school for fighting. Rather than refusing to pick him up and giving him a ride home, Coach reasons that the extra time could be used to get Ghost caught up before practice.

The first priority Coach sets forth is to change into practice clothes, with the expectation that the athletes bring their track bags to school so they are prepared immediately upon dismissal. Upon Ghost responding that his jeans and stained high-tops are his practice clothes, Coach is determined to worry about it later and directs Ghost to start with some stretches. Coach's response is significant, given that athletes who are not properly attired, regardless of sport, are not permitted to participate. Without Coach's advocacy and understanding of the limitations to what Ghost's mother could provide as a single parent, it is clear that Ghost's talents would have been a missed opportunity.

As the rest of the team arrives with sports bags and water bottles, as expected, Ghost is sensitive about the funny looks they give him. Ghost learns on the go, including his specialty. He becomes a sprinter on the spot when the Defenders are assigned to their specialty groups, followed by learning about ladders: "four, three, two, one, one, two, three, four" (p. 42). Further explanation from Ghost reveals his initial confusion and clarification that each number is

followed by 100, then followed by meters, and that running in this progression is exhausting, punctuated with humor: "Back on the line, this time for the 300. Toasted. Back on the line, now the 200. Roasted. Back on the line for the 100. Dusted" (p. 62).

Additional humor emerges when Ghost trips over his loose laces, then falls down while both high-tops fall off his feet: "Not only did I do the slow motion, stumble-stumble-fall thing . . . my shoes came off. Both! *Off!*" (p. 68). While Ghost expresses his embarrassment on the bench, Patty sits down next to him and assures him that he should not worry about his crash, as others have done the same and would do so again. Ghost notes her gentle tone and nice shoes.

A reader unfamiliar with the sport learns alongside Ghost about the nuances and necessity of warming up, cooling down, and ladders and the difficulty of running the 100 meter. It is possible to infer that Ghost may be positioned first in the series to provide an outsider to the sport an introduction to fundamental terminology, what it means to be part of a team, the importance of being properly attired, and that track can be accessible to runners from low-income backgrounds, particularly upon receiving care and support from coaches.

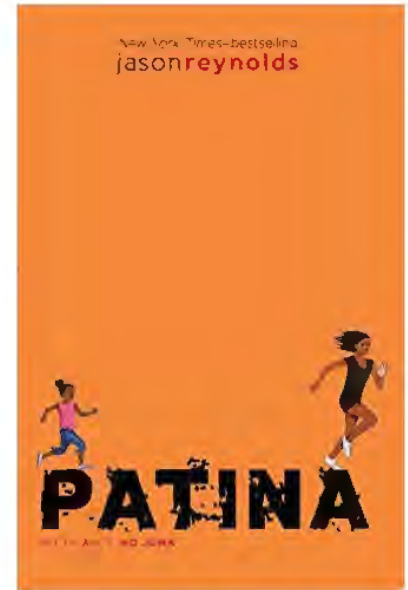
### **Patina**

Patina, otherwise known as Patty, is the protagonist of the second novel in the series. Patty's success and purpose in the sport are due in part to the support of her extended family. Patty's father died when she was young. Her mother coped with her sorrow by eating too much sugar as a way to connect with her father, which worsened her diabetic condition and necessitated the amputation of both legs. With her mother no longer able to care for Patty and her younger sister Maddy as a disabled widow, the girls' Uncle Tony and Aunt Emily, whom they fondly call "Momly," adopted them.

Patty's introduction to track began when she was paired with Lu for a relay at school. He told her about his track club, which encouraged Patty to ask Uncle Tony and Momly if she could join. Patty joined her first track team with their support.

In addition, Patty and Maddy transferred from their neighborhood public school in Barnaby Terrace to a rigorous and affluent elite school that

**Figure 2**  
**Jason Reynolds, *Patina* (2018)**



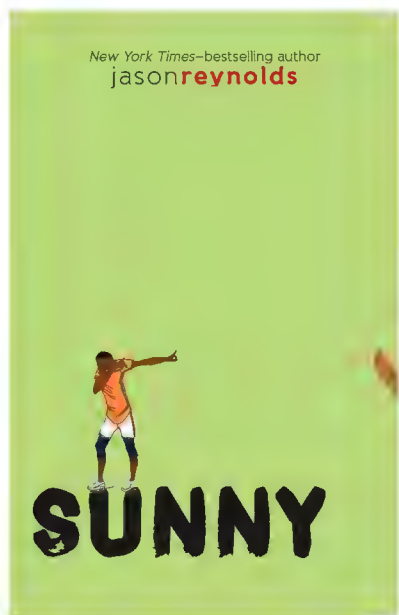
would provide a strong pathway to college. Although Patty is familiar with Ghost's school and community, her enrollment at the elite school creates a space in which she must navigate her racialized identity and social isolation in a predominantly White school. She attributes her success to Momly, who ensures that Patty completes her schoolwork and arrives at each practice, prepared and on time. She more fully understands and appreciates Momly's role when Momly is injured in a car accident, hospitalized, and temporarily unable to take Patty to school and practice.

### **Sunny**

Sunny is the best runner in the 1600 meter because he consistently wins the event. Winning counts, and Sunny has the raw talent to win, but he is not passionate about running and begins to put in less effort, evidenced by Ghost's first observation in his story of Coach yelling at Sunny for slacking during practice.

Sunny's father, known as Daryl to Sunny, supports his role in the sport in an overly critical manner. Sunny prefers to dance but was pressured to run track as early as he could remember, beginning with Daryl bumping him to take faster steps when he was learning how to walk and by directing him to run laps around the house by age four and the track by age five. Sunny suffers in the shadow of his mother, who died during childbirth.

**Figure 3**  
Jason Reynolds, *Sunny* (2018)



Daryl repeatedly tells him that he owes it to his mother to accomplish her dream of being a marathon winner. Although Sunny runs for his mother, the pressure from Daryl to run and to win is a source of strain because running is not personally fulfilling. Daryl represents parents who are never satisfied with their children's athletic accomplishments. Regardless of performance, Daryl's admonitions to run faster and harder, and to be more disciplined, communicate to Sunny that winning is never good enough.

Sunny's care for his teammates is evidenced by his great care of and sadness for Patty upon learning that Momly had been injured in a car accident. He cries when he hears the news out of fear that she may have been fatally injured. He does not want Patty to suffer the loss of a mother, as he had suffered. Momly is a patient of Sunny's grandfather, which affords Sunny the opportunity to visit her in the hospital. During his visit, Momly calls him a celebrity and voices that he will be the first discus player for the Defenders. Her words of confidence confirm that Patty speaks positively about Sunny at home.

### Lu

*Lu* is the fourth and final novel in the *Track Series*, and Lu is the only Defender who lives in a traditional, two-parent household. A co-captain of the Defenders, Lu excels at the 100 and 200 meter events. As a longtime track

runner, Lu's experience yields confidence, success, and consistently placing first. His experience is put to the test when he adds the 110 meter hurdles to his repertoire. Hurdles became a challenge for him, literally on the track and figuratively, as his challenges off the field include coping with being a new sibling and with being albino. Because of his confident demeanor, his teammates are not fully aware of his internal struggles.

Accustomed to winning, Lu describes running hurdles in a race and falling hard after clipping the second hurdle. Although nobody laughs, he experiences inner turmoil at falling so hard and losing face. Similar to the guidance Sunny receives in learning the discus, Coach models techniques unexpected by an outsider to the sport, from getting down on all fours and directing Lu to jump over him to taking off his contact lenses.

Upon doing the latter, the reader is informed that blurry vision and nearsightedness are conditions associated with albinism. Running without contact lenses forces Lu to close his eyes to fully see, to time his steps between the hurdles and focus on jumping over them without seeing them. This technique enhances his ability to run hurdles successfully.

Another hurdle with which Lu contends is a side his teammates do not observe. Prior to each practice, he applies heavy doses of cream to protect his extremely sensitive skin from the sun. Lu is accustomed to the discomfort, with acceptance that not wearing the cream would cause physical pain he would prefer not to experience. He additionally wears contact lenses because his otherwise thick glasses would be a source of ridicule.

**Figure 4**  
Jason Reynolds, *Lu* (2019)



Lu's parents worked hard to provide the resources to run track. They offer moral support and guidance to learn responsibility and discipline. Lu learns responsibility by helping his mother craft and deliver to clients her edible fruit creations. His dad is a drug abuse counselor, a career influenced by selling drugs during his youth. He routinely tells Lu about a track star from his childhood named Torrie Cunningham who was sought out by college recruiters as an example to which Lu can aspire. When Lu catches a glimpse of a drug-addicted Torrie on the street outside of Ghost's apartment building, he questions his dad about his current condition. He admits to selling Torrie his first hit when he was 15 years old, intended to help him run faster.

This admission shocks Lu as a narrative that had once inspired him becomes a narrative that informs about how drug abuse can shatter dreams. Lu's dad has good intentions of helping drug addicts in need, but his past life selling drugs included connections to characters he harmed, including Coach. He admits to having given Coach's father his last hit before he overdosed and that he was haunted by Coach's taunts about his stuttering during his youth.

A conversation with Ghost later in the novel reveals that Coach's dad traded drugs before his last hit for his Olympic gold medal, which startles Lu. Ghost does not know the source of the drugs, but Lu is stunned because he knows. These connections lead to Lu's discovery that his dad is still in possession of the medal. When he confronts his dad about why he would place him on Coach's team despite their past, his dad insists that Coach is the best.

As a teen, he wanted to be a better runner like Coach, and he wants Lu to have the best training. Thus, regardless of unconscionable circumstances, what counts as sport includes choosing the best possible training. Lu's urging to return the gold medal to Coach and apologize to right a wrong presents linkages to the consequences of bullying and the need to forgive, described in more detail in the "Social Processes of Characters" section which follows.

The anticipated ending of winning first place does not occur in any of the *Track Series* novels. Ghost, Patina, and Sunny end with starting their events but leave the reader to infer the outcome. The series ends with Lu's story, when the Defenders collectively decide to support Coach—when his child is

sick in the hospital—instead of racing in the championship. The connections to his dad prompt Lu to want to fully support Coach, as he feels responsible. It is possible to interpret that hard work; perseverance in acquiring proper techniques; an ability to cope with life circumstances; and support from coaches, family, and teammates count as sport more than winning does.

### **Focalization and Intertextuality— Who Are the Defenders?**

The focal Defenders are four trusted narrators whose stories merge and intersect as the protagonists learn about each other's struggles as athletes and strategize their lives on and off the track. Each Defender has a coping strategy that symbolizes a loss or hardship in his or her family. When incidents occur on or off the track, the Defenders are mentored and supported.

Ghost struggles with the reality of his estranged, incarcerated father. Every day for three years, since the shooting incident, he has bought sunflower seeds from Mr. Charles's store, symbolizing the father he knew, who loved sunflower seeds. Doing so served as a coping strategy for his father's absence and the trauma he endured, and as a portrayal of his father's kindness before his drunken rages. Doing so additionally sustained a daily connection with Mr. Charles, the man who became his mentor after hiding him and his mother in his store the night of the incident with his father.

His mother is kind and caring, evidenced by the time they spend together on weekends, her days off, catching up and visiting relatives. However, she does not earn enough as a hospital cafeteria worker to buy a car, appropriate track attire, or name-brand clothes, nor is she able to pick up Ghost for school or practice. Thus Coach fills the gap and provides the rides home and guidance that Ghost's parents are unable to provide. Ghost's story reflects the Defenders from single-parent households who require mentoring and support from coaches who take the time to know and care. Such care is needed to provide access and opportunity for team members with talent who otherwise would not be able to participate.

Ghost and Lu do not get along while Ghost acclimates to being on the team. As Lu gets to know Ghost, he develops empathy for him, particularly when he learns of the night Mr. Charles protect-

ed Ghost and his mother in his grocery store upon delivering a fruit assortment to the store. Lu's story reflects the Defenders from two-parent households that are able to provide. His story additionally reflects the Defenders who care and demonstrate empathy, despite a boastful exterior.

Patty's story reveals a close bond that develops between Ghost and Lu, as she notes how they stick together like glue, unlike the rough start that was narrated in Ghost's story. When teammates tease Ghost about his false start during his first race, Lu and Patty come to his defense. Her role of sustaining close family bonds helps Patty cope with her father's death as she bonds with her sister Maddy while brushing her hair; maintains a bond with her mother as she texts every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday before getting her blood cleaned; and embraces the sweet smells in her mother's house after church each Sunday as a reminder of her father.

Patty is an intentional runner whose inspiration is rooted in the people in her life. She runs in her father's memory, for her mother who can no longer walk, for the newbies on the Defenders team, and, as a minority in a predominantly White school, to prove her worth to her peers who misunderstand her. Patty's story reflects the Defenders with a two-parent household until her father dies. She represents extended family as adoptive parents who nurture her talents.

Sunny's story is the only in the series narrated in a diary format. He outlines his rationale for calling it a diary over a journal or a notebook. Maintaining a diary becomes for Sunny a way to make sense of experiences, emotions he does not understand, and moments when his father grieved and cried alone. Sunny copes with the mother he never met by piecing together puzzles of pictures of her face. His father sent pictures of her to a puzzle company, which transferred the pictures onto large puzzles—one among a few bonding moments with his father. As Sunny organizes the pieces, he ponders her eyes and what she must have been like. Aurelia helps Sunny cope by telling him about his mother's fun demeanor during her baby shower.

The most compelling picture for Sunny is a picture his grandfather had given, taken at his mother's baby shower and showing her baby bump. A closer bond develops when Sunny gives

the picture to his dad, which becomes a puzzle for him to remember her by. As they continue to break barriers, Sunny summons up the courage to ask his father why he wants to be called "Daryl" and not "Dad." Daryl's deep commitment to Sunny's mother becomes more fully understood when he explains that he does not believe it is appropriate to be called "Dad" because his wife never lived to experience the joy of being called "Mom."

Sunny's story reflects another Defender with a one-parent household, and he is the only Defender who is home-schooled. Sunny's household is more affluent than those of the core Defenders, but his father's grief, reclusive nature, and inability to move on are sources of depression for Sunny, as he believes that his father resents him.

This resentment is particularly detected on his birthday—the same day as his mother's death day, of which Sunny had been keenly aware as long as he could remember. Ghost detects his father's awkward demeanor and comments that he would never want to be like Sunny's dad when he grows up.

Lu copes with the uncertainty of becoming a new sibling and with his outward albino appearance. His endeavor of running hurdles is a symbol for coping with these challenges. He endeavors to look as normal as possible by wearing contact lenses because his otherwise thick glasses would be a source of ridicule. His impeccable attire for each practice and the flashy nature of his jewelry obscure his awkward appearance.

Although the core Defenders are accustomed to Lu's appearance, Ghost's initial descriptions of Lu indicate the surprise an outsider may experience as he attempts to describe Lu as a White person with Black features: "His skin was white. Like the color white. . . . But his face looked like a black person's" (p. 11). Aside from obscuring his appearance and confident demeanor among his Defender family, Lu is insecure when he is by himself. He copes with his insecurities by saying mantras in the bathroom mirror throughout the novel: "I am The man. The guy. The kid. The one. The only. The Lu. The Lucky Lu" (p. 1). Lu's story reflects the Defenders with two-parent, middle-class households. His parents nurture his talents and support his well-being as an athlete.

An examination of who the Defenders are reveals that the Defenders are

athletes who strategize complex factors shaping their lives and identities away from the track and running techniques that sustain them in the sport. Each Defender embraces the calculus of a dance that enhances his or her awareness of positioning, whether it is his or her own technique, where teammates are during a relay, or where a competitor is positioned during a race. Each focal Defender has a coping strategy that symbolizes a family loss or hardship.

When incidents occur on or off the track, the Defenders are mentored and supported more or less, depending on their circumstances. The Defenders represent the diversity of families in the Black community. In the dominant society that stereotypes single-parent Black households as broken, the Track Series presents a variety of family structures in which the protagonists are cared for in the same way that a reader's family cares.

Each Defender copes with insecurity in isolation. As the Defenders bond and as each Defender's story intersects, they become more aware of each other's insecurities. No one Defender's life is what it appears to be on the exterior.

### Social Processes of Characters

#### Prejudice Themes

The protagonists in the *Track Series* experience prejudice and demonstrate prejudicial treatment of each other until Coach facilitates close bonds. Perceptions of each other are informed by social class, determined by address, physical appearance, and family dynamics. Applying a social processes of character lens elaborates on the lived experience each protagonist narrates and disrupts the prejudicial treatment or initial thinking the core Defenders maintained for each other.

According to Patty's narrative, more numerals in one's house number is equivalent to less money in one's bank account. Her mother's address in Barnaby Terrace has four digits, an indicator of a working-class neighborhood, in contrast with Uncle Tony and Momly's house, a middle-class neighborhood with three-digit addresses. She knows that the house numbers where Ghost lives in Glass Manor have five- to six-digit addresses, an indicator of his lower economic background.

Lu is familiar with Glass Manor because his father had mentored residents with substance abuse issues. During an occasion when Coach gave

him a ride home with Ghost, Lu notes similarities and differences between apartment living in Glass Manor and row homes in Barnaby Terrace, where he lives. They both share walls with their neighbors, as Ghost lives up and down in his apartment building and Lu's neighbors live side by side. He notes similarities in the working-class African-American culture of both neighborhoods, including the pulse of music inside and outside and the busy nature of kids playing ball in the streets.

Despite these similarities, Lu lives one step higher than Ghost on the economic ladder, and his parents provide him a flashy and affluent exterior. Thus it is possible to infer that Ghost assumes that Lu is more affluent than he really is on the basis of his flashy outward appearance, which prompts his initial reaction to prove that he is not special.

Conversely, Lu assumes that Ghost could not possibly beat him in the 100 meter on the basis of his shabby appearance. Thus the clash during their first meeting is informed by their judgments about their economic backgrounds, cocky demeanor, and outward appearances.

Ghost is additionally familiar with changing neighborhoods across boundaries, detected when Coach gives the newly inducted Defenders a ride to a formal bonding dinner. When Coach picks up Ghost, Patty and Lu are already in the car. Both express having been to "these parts" before. The comments about their familiarity with Glass Manor abruptly conclude when Lu informs that his dad played basketball down the street and Ghost lies about playing at the same court. Perhaps his concluding comment is intended to avoid further discussion because he is sensitive about the condition of his neighborhood and detects their ambivalent tone about where he lives.

Sunny is the last Defender to be picked up. Ghost notes the changing landscape as they merge into his community on the other side of town. The individual houses with more than one level include driveways with at least one car and a basketball court, enough bedrooms for each child to possess four walls, and none of the wig or fish shops that characterize Glass Manor. Despite the advantages detected in Sunny's neighborhood, Ghost could not imagine a community without a semblance of Mr. Charles's store, which sustains him where he lives.

He describes Sunny's house as a castle and ponders why he isn't like the other people he'd met from Sunny's neighborhood. Although he does not elaborate, the other people would likely be arrogant, entitled, and hesitant to interact with a low-income youth. Ghost's reaction to Sunny's cool but weird demeanor makes it reasonable to conclude that he would think differently about Sunny if he knew where he had lived before Ghost had gotten to know him.

During the newbie dinner, Coach requires them to share a secret that nobody would know before handing their utensils over. Lu shares that he is albino, which does not surprise his teammates. He further confides wanting a brother, so he would know what he might have looked like if he were not albino. Lu's response suggests that his identity centers around more than his flashy exterior and that he grapples with having Black features while possessing a skin tone uniquely different from that of everyone around him.

Sunny confides that his mother died while giving birth to him, which prompts tears for Ghost and Patty. While urging them not to feel bad, he insists it is OK and elaborates that his father made him run because he owed it to his mother. Despite being forced to run, running connects him to her. He informs that his mother was not into the wealthy lifestyle his father provided for her and longed to accomplish goals, including winning a marathon. Thus Sunny's identity is informed by the pressure to run and by living in his mother's shadow, not by the big house in which he lives. Ghost identifies with Sunny as he jokingly makes a connection to Coach punishing him to run so hard.

Patty confides that she was adopted but, unlike most adoptees, maintains a connection with her mother. Patty's response stuns Lu because he had known her the longest and did not know about her mother's circumstances. As Patty elaborates on the reason her mother was not able to care for her or her sister, Sunny forges a connection upon noting that she ran for her mother, just as he ran for his mother.

Because Ghost narrates the newbie dinner, he describes how he was compelled to tell a personal family story to relate to his teammates. Everyone at the dinner table is stunned when he explains that his father was incarcerated for chasing him and his mother with a loaded gun.

He acknowledges their reaction but admits that sharing such a personal story makes him feel as if they can truly see him. In Ghost's words, "We were all running the same race at the same speed. . . . I was there—really there—as me, but without as much scream inside" (pp. 133–135). As an outsider to the group struggling to connect to the sport and to fit in with his peers, Ghost's admission reveals the significance of sharing personal stories across economic and residential boundaries as a mechanism for identifying spaces where members in a group are able to relate to each other's experiences.

Coach's endeavor of hosting the newbie dinner is an enactment of prejudice reduction. He cultivates a sense of family and breaks down barriers. This moment forges bonds as the Defenders unlearn preconceived notions they had maintained for each other. Each Defender is more than his or her economic background and outward appearance. Each has an insecurity and a challenge that matters. Their shared stories and intersection of experiences prompt knowing and greater care for each other.

Coach is connected to each Defender, just as they are connected to each other, as confirmed by Ghost, who unexpectedly asks Coach to share his secret. Coach hesitates to share, insisting the dinner is about them, not him. He caves in and shares that he ran in the Olympics and won a gold medal. Coach's upbringing in Glass Manor influenced his role as a coach who was deeply connected to the community in which he had been raised. He demonstrates a commitment to sharing his expertise to nurture the current generation of Defenders. His admission presents unexpected linkages with bullying themes that are embedded in the Track Series, which are described in the next section.

### **Bullying Themes**

The *Track Series* embeds bullying themes in young adult literature. The Defenders experience varied forms of bullying on the basis of their appearance and/or economic status. With few exceptions, they do not voice their pain to each other. The instances of encouraging words and solutions pose scenarios for bibliotherapy discussions.

Ghost experiences frequent bullying because of his appearance and where he lives. His peers regularly taunt him for wearing shirts that are too big, pants that are too small, and

bad hair cuts, among other taunts. Rather than confronting the source of the bullying with school personnel, Ghost takes it upon himself to fend for himself by fighting, which has yielded a thick school file. Ghost decides to become altercation-free when he joins the track team so that his file would not impede on his opportunity to run. On the day Ghost makes this commitment to himself, Brad Simmons taunts him in front of his friends in the lunch room upon regarding Glass Manor as a place that got its name for its residents' shattered lives. When this comment does not elicit a response, he throws food at Ghost, leading to a fight, followed by a suspension.

During his first practice on the same day, Lu bullies Ghost when he suggests he should at least wear pants that fit if he cannot afford running gear. He additionally questions whether his shoes are "Sikes" or "Freeboks." After practice, Patty offers Ghost a helping hand and assures him that Lu acts as he does because of the bullying he has endured for being albino. When she detects Ghost's confusion about what it means to be albino, she gives a name to his initial observations about Lu and clarifies its meaning. Bonding leads over time to their inseparability as the series evolves, beginning with Patty's story. As Ghost becomes a true member of the team, he often confides his bullying issues to Sunny.

According to Sunny's story, Lu made comments that were hurtful to him in front of the team, particularly his assertion that Sunny should not be allowed to laugh at their jokes because he was a thrower and they were having a runner's conversation. Such a comment may have stemmed from disappointment that Sunny had abandoned the team. Lu's comment minimizes Sunny's contribution as a discus thrower and makes him feel like a less-valued team player. As Sunny continues to work and demonstrates challenges because of the complex nature of throwing the discus, Lu becomes more understanding and supportive of his endeavors.

The root of Lu's inner turmoil that influenced his negative treatment of others is not fully detected until he narrates his own story. Kelvin was a classmate who tormented Lu for being albino and voiced racial slurs, to the extent that Lu felt uneasy walking into the building and feared confrontation. Their interactions become less tense when Lu makes

an edible fruit delivery to Mr. Charles on the anniversary of day that he saved Ghost's life. When he makes the delivery, he notices that Kelvin works with Ghost at the store. Kelvin and Lu remain silent in the moment.

During another encounter with Kelvin on the track, they are amicable and sit next to each other. It is possible to discern that Kelvin wants to keep his job at the store and that any confrontations could compromise his employment; thus he keeps quiet upon learning that Lu knows where he works and that his coworker Ghost is on the same team. Mr. Charles is a mentor for Ghost, so it is additionally likely that he mentored Kelvin about responsibility and kindness.

Lu experiences an altercation with his teammate Aaron on the track, a consequence of Aaron clipping him, causing him to fall. When Lu confronts Aaron, he taunts him and imposes colorism by referring to him as Snow White. Ghost intervenes, and Aaron questions why Ghost would defend him after how Lu insulted him over his shoes when he joined the team. Ghost's willingness to stand up for Lu presents another example of the close bond they have developed.

Coach intervenes and reminds them of their responsibility to get along as co-captains. He orders Patty and teammate Mikey to replace their role as captains for the rest of the day, then orders Aaron and Lu to do two more warmup laps. They walk away to other events and move on with no further discussion. An outside reader may interpret their handling of the situation as boys "walking it off."

Patty experiences bullying on the field while attempting to receive a hand-off from Krystal, a veteran Defender who is unable to hand the baton to Patty because Krystal is unable to keep up with her pace. When she accuses Patty of over-running, Patty insists that she was under-running. Unwilling to accept a correction from the new girl, a yelling match escalates into Krystal exercising her power over her and yelling that Patty thinks she is better than everyone because of her White mother.

Coach Whit intervenes when Patty exercises her agency over Krystal's wrongdoing and attempts to keep her in her place. Rather than accepting a condition of marginalization, Patty insists that her White mother doesn't make her better but that she is better because Krystal is lazy and slow

and doesn't work hard enough. With her heart pounding, she gives one last dig to prove she is not afraid, despite Coach Whit urging her to stop: "Better watch who you playin' with!" (p. 105).

Patty's enactment of talking down to Krystal is manifest in a funk that emerges after her father died and her mother's legs were amputated: "Even if they looked like they wanted to start—I would finish it. Talk people down. Talk them out of whatever they thought they wanted with me" (p. 105).

She expresses remorse after learning that she had driven Krystal to tears, especially after Coach confronts them and demands that they fix the problem. He insists that they start over and not drop the baton and informs them, "There are Krystals and Patinas all over the place, begging to be in your spot. Praying to form the bond y'all are so determined to break. Fix it" (p. 108).

Teammates Brit-Brat and Deja support Krystal and Patty upon learning that if they drop the baton, they will be removed from the team. Brit-Brat offers a courageous suggestion that is not popular but necessary to facilitate change by prompting Krystal and Patty to share one thing they want the other to know about them.

Her strategy is inspired by a familiar talk show host who gives Twizzlers to her audience. Their familiarity leads to a discussion of Twizzlers, during which Patty mentions that her mother sold Twizzlers in Barnaby Terrace. When Krystal questions whether any White women sold candy, Patty informs that Momly is her aunt. Patty's clarification makes Krystal feel bad for the assumptions she had made about Patty.

As they continue the conversation, Patty responds that she was not trying to embarrass Krystal and apologizes for not adjusting as they had learned during the waltz. She admits to still figuring everything out. Her honesty leads to Krystal admitting that Patty is faster, seconded by Brit-Brit, who proclaims that they could still win if they remained connected.

For the first time, Patty recalls that they were no longer sizing each other up and admits that Krystal "was just looking at me. Like she was trying to see me" (p. 112). The coaches' attention to the dispute led to problem solving and bullying reduction and stressed a connection the team players needed to rise to the challenge of running the relay.

In addition to being a new Defender, Patty is a new student at Chester

Academy. According to Sunny's narrative, she regularly complains about the "hair flappers," rich girls with long blonde hair who wear expensive clothes, don a lot of makeup, and are not concerned with Patty as she enters the hallway each morning with her head down to avoid being scrutinized. Although not bullied directly, Patty does not feel the same sense of belonging she felt at Barnaby Terrace School, where her racial identity was supported. Patty additionally strategizes around never finding a seat in an unusually small cafeteria by eating while walking around the perimeter of the room. She remains undetected until Becca, one of her group members from history class, makes space at her table. Becca's willingness to include Patty demonstrates the potential for grouping strategies to forge initial bonds across boundaries.

Coach facilitates myriad strategies for prejudice and bullying reduction with the Defenders in the *Track Series*. As the series comes full circle, Lu is determined to return the long-lost Olympic gold medal to Coach. As the best coach Lu could have, his father owes it to Coach to return the medal. Lu understands why his father had held on to it but does not fully grasp his pain until his mother confides the hold that Coach's bullying impressed upon him.

His mother met his father when he was a street dude, but as she got to know him, she understood that his dad was much more than what people thought about him and much more than his stutter. She furthermore stresses that jokes "cut deep. Deeper than we think. And if we don't . . . move past them, we have no idea what they can do to us" (p. 147).

The scenarios outlined throughout the series underscore the significance of confronting bullying, talking through feelings, and getting past them. Lu's dad finally sums up the courage to return the medal to Coach before practice one day. Lu observes the exchange between Coach and his dad, and the author leaves it to the reader to infer the nature of the conversation. Coach shares his gold medal so that the Defenders would know what it feels like and to inspire them to aspire to such an accomplishment. When the Defenders visit Coach in the hospital, he gives every team member a piece of the ribbon.

## Conclusion

Through a lens of focalization each Defender is uniquely different than initial assumptions of their peers on the basis of their economic backgrounds and outward appearances. Their shared stories, sense of humor, and intersection of experiences construct nuanced portrayals of each protagonist. As circumstances develop on and off the track, the Defenders demonstrate knowing and great care for each other. Through this process, each member exercises technique, discipline, focus, and the ability to truly see teammates from a nuanced perspective. Sportsmanship and family dedication count more than winning.

An analysis of social processes of characters revealed instances of prejudice and bullying that were addressed with the support of coaches, parents, and teammates. The circumstances are relatable to young adults and offer purposeful solutions. Thus the *Track Series* is an ideal source of bibliotherapy discussion. The *Track Series* illuminates characteristics of high-quality contemporary realistic fiction and intertextuality and is a high-quality work utilizing sports themes in young adult literature that accurately and eloquently portrays and humanizes the experience of talented African American youth athletes.

## Recommendations for Bibliotherapy Discussion

Each novel in the *Track Series* includes discussion questions that may promote bibliotherapy and thus a space for young adults to engage in discussion about instances of bullying and how to solve problems.

A question provided for discussion about *Ghost* addresses how Ghost could have retaliated differently instead of fighting against Brad Simmons. After reading more of the series, another question addresses whether the reader would support Lu during his altercation with Aaron, given how Lu treated Ghost when they first met.

In *Patina*, a question positions the reader to consider what they could do to make sure no one is left out or lonely at their school. Another question to pose: What could school personnel do to encourage a more welcoming school atmosphere for new students of color?

There are no questions related to bullying in *Sunny*. However, a question related to bullying inquires into Aaron's comment that Sunny should not



be able to laugh because they were having a runner's conversation. Because Lu comes to Sunny's defense, a potential question could address how Sunny could have come to Lu's defense when Aaron tripped him.

A question proposed for *Lu* asks what the reader thinks Lu's dad and Coach said to each other once the medal was returned. Yet another question explores what integrity means to the reader and may yield a further question that addresses how the concept of integrity could apply to a conversation between Lu and his dad after he returned the medal to Coach.

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