



As J. R.R. Tolkien wrote, “An author cannot, of course, remain wholly unaffected by his own experience.” Every time Jeffrey Blount sits down to write, he is fully aware that his words will produce a product reflective of Tolkien’s quote. Not only can’t he wholly separate himself, he doesn’t want to. He understands that his life experiences, including the lens his 34 years in journalism provided for him, are some of the richest parts of his life. Those experiences provide opportunities to highlight the many issues that have crossed his life path. There are many that concern him, and his words have always been his best vehicle to address them.

In high school, Jeffrey found himself concerned that students had no voice in the heated town discussion about the possibility of a new school. Having written a descriptive paragraph about a homeless man in his tenth-grade English class, which left his classmates stunned, he’d concluded that his words had some power. So, he wrote a letter to the editor of his hometown weekly. Just after it was published, the managing editor of the paper made him a cub reporter. He learned that through the paper he had the power to influence tens of thousands and his love for journalism began.

But Jeffrey also loved to read, and he knew that books had sustained him through many difficult times. He knew that books had changed him – educated him about himself and the world. In this way, he began to think of books, especially novels, as a form of activism. Over time, he learned that novelists had proven his theory to be true. *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair, written about inhumane working conditions and unsanitary food production at meat packing plants, led to President Theodore Roosevelt fighting for legislation to create change which eventually led to the creation of the Food and Drug Administration. One man sat in a room and created a story which changed the legislative direction of the United States of America. *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck also forced congressional hearings. And according to the Washington Post, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* “remade the history of our national literature. Its most profound impact, though, was to shatter the lingering mythology of antebellum honor and gentility.”

The influence of these books and the research which concludes that novels create empathy in readers, led Jeffrey to take on the issues that are important to him through fiction, his favorite genre. He could, through writing, live the words of the famed civil rights leader, John Lewis. He could make good trouble. He could and has changed lives.

Jeffrey’s novel, *The Emancipation of Evan Walls*, published in 2019, is an example of literary advocacy. A story about an unusual struggle among gifted Black children. It led Jeffrey to mentor several children who wrote to him after they found themselves relating to the protagonist’s plight. It led to collaboration with Bright & Quirky.com, “routinely called a “lifeline” for families raising bright kids with learning, social

and emotional challenges.” Jeffrey spoke at their summit before tens of thousands in many different countries. Jeffrey began a working relationship with the National Association for Gifted Children, delivering the keynote address at their 2021 national convention. This partnership produced a colloquium where educators came to Morgan State University to discuss important educational issues, including the issues from Jeffrey’s book, which was an important part of a panel of experts. Jeffrey’s novel also led to his delivering a keynote address to Reading Partners, a national non-profit dedicated to early childhood literacy. This led to Jeffrey joining their national Board of Directors. Novels are artistic change agents.

Jeffrey says that his new novel, *Mr. Jimmy from Around the Way*, is also a work of activism, speaking out on poverty, inequities in housing, education, healthcare, and justice. How can all of that happen in one novel? Because in every poverty-stricken neighborhood in America each issue is always represented in some measure. He thinks of *Mr. Jimmy from Around the Way* as a road map to addressing some of these issues. It is also about the village and what that looks like. Who can and should help. Who stands in the way. And while the word activism may make some people uncomfortable these days, the characters in this book eventually provide a master class on the activism of kindness that, as Jeffrey says, "We can all get behind. As my parents said to me and my brothers, ‘If you want to feel good about yourself, do something for somebody else. Even through his own pain, just watch Mr. Jimmy work.’"

*Mr. Jimmy from Around the Way* is a novel intended to inform as well as entertain. To make readers think, reflect, and maybe even see the world a little differently. It is a novel intended to make a real difference in the world. Jeffrey knows that novels can do this. It’s why he is fond of quoting Margaret Atwood, who wrote, “A word after a word after a word.....is power.”

