

TEACHERS' GUIDE

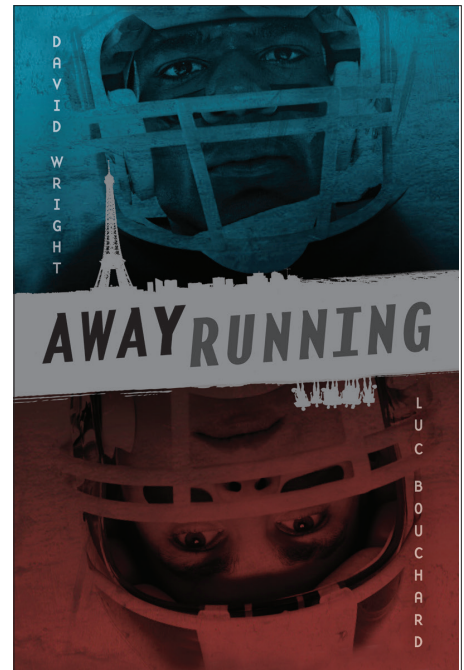
AWAY RUNNING

David Wright and Luc Bouchard

Fiction Ages 12+

Themes: American football, racism, violence, protest, war, grief, Paris, Montreal, college, friendship, team, confrontation, loyalty, disrespect, race riots, Islam

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SUMMARY

Matt and Free discover the dark side of the City of Light.

Matt, a white quarterback from Montreal, Quebec, flies to France (without his parents' permission) to play football and escape family pressure. Freeman, a black football player from San Antonio, Texas, is in Paris on a school trip when he hears about a team playing American football in a rough, low-income suburb called Villeneuve-La-Grande. Matt and Free join the Diablos Rouges and make friends with the other players, who come from many different ethnic groups. Racial tension erupts into riots in Villeneuve when some of their Muslim teammates get in trouble with the police, and Matt and Free have to decide whether to get involved and face the very real risk of arrest and violence.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Wright is a writer and teacher of writing. He played American football for the Flash of La Courneuve in suburban Paris before returning to Champaign, Illinois, a home base from where he sets out abroad, most recently to Bahia, Brazil, and Benin, West Africa. Visit www.davidwrightbooks.com for more information.

Luc Bouchard is an award-winning feature writer for the magazines *Elle*, *Chatelaine*, *L'Actualité* and *Reader's Digest Canada*. He lives in Montreal, Quebec, with his partner and his two daughters. Visit www.bouchardluc.com for more information.



QUESTIONS*Before the Book Begins*

1. Looking quickly at the cover of the book, what's your first impression? Look more closely. The cover is set up very strategically, with definite messages about the book's themes implied by the visuals. What do you notice? Explain your thinking.
2. The dedication in the book says, "For Zyed Benna, Bouna Traore and Muhittin Altun...Dead for nothing." Do you know who these people are? Why do you suppose the authors dedicate the book to them? In your opinion, how does a dedication like this at the start of a book influence its reader?

Pages 1–64

1. The *Diabes Rouges* is a real football team based in Villepinte, not far from where the story takes place. What does the name "*Diabes Rouges*" mean in English? In the United States, that term was historically used to refer to people of a certain culture in a negative way. How is that fitting, given the team's reputation?
2. On page 10, as Matt and Freeman are being held by the police, they are told by the top cop, "You shouldn't be running around with a bunch of hoodlums." Later, when the boys are released as their friends are taken away in a police van, Free says "Should be us going in too, right alongside them." (p. 11) Matt replies, "You're right, Free, but I can't help it – I feel kind of relieved." This scene, happening so close to the beginning of the book, quickly introduces the reader to the themes of prejudice and loyalty, which are both key to the story. What would you have done in the same situation if you were Matt or Freeman? Why?
3. Chapter 2 starts two months earlier than the first chapter, and the story continues from there. What is the author's purpose in starting the book where he did, rather than telling it chronologically, beginning where chapter 2 starts?
4. Have you ever done anything impulsively, without thinking of the consequences? This book has a number of events that happen because the characters act impulsively. Using jot notes, list the pros and cons of Matt's impulsive choice to go to Paris.
5. Many of Matt's teammates are from North African immigrant families. Why do you suppose they have stayed in Paris, despite clearly not finding the better life they were seeking, with fair treatment and good living conditions?
6. Matt and Freeman are both clearly searching for something too. What do you think each one is really hoping to find in Paris? Are their goals related? Do you think they'll find what they're looking for?

Pages 65–128

1. Freeman has a lengthy dream that starts on page 64. What do you think it means? Is it significant that the authors put it right before the chapter of Freeman's flashback?
2. We learn that Free has dealt with a tragedy that he has not shared with Matt or anyone else on the team. If you were in Freeman's place, would you have handled it the same way he did, both at home, and in Paris?
3. When Freeman writes a letter home (p.128), it's clear he feels he's abandoned his family. Is he right to feel this way, or do you feel he's being too hard on himself? Explain.

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Pages 129–201

1. The night the group goes to the Pizza Pie Factory is full of revelations for Matt. When Aida said, “It *is* about racism, Mathieu, but it goes beyond skin colour,” Matt doesn’t understand (p. 153). As the night progresses, things go from bad to worse. Using a T-chart and jot notes, list the events of the night on one side, and what Matt (and sometimes his fellow characters) learn from those events on the other side.
2. On page 159, Moose says “you know how it is with *les blancs*—with white boys... Sometimes you just have to put them in their place.” Why do you think he says that? Justify your opinion with evidence from the text and your own ideas.
3. When Free and Matt take their “field trip” to the D-Day beaches, we learn much more about Free’s character, and so does Matt. What does this scene in the graveyard show us about their characters and the relationship between them?
4. Think about the brochure’s message, “*They died defending freedom and democracy.*” The authors didn’t include this on a whim. How can this message be interpreted in relation to the bigger issues and events that occur in the novel? Explain.

Pages 202–297

1. The theme of family runs through the book, and we see it yet again when the boys visit Moose’s apartment (p. 214 - 224). Something special occurs between Free and Moose’s dad as they come to a mutual understanding. How do the authors use that scene to show us new sides to both men? How do you think they are both feeling? Use evidence from the text to defend your ideas.
2. The very next chapter after the encounter with Moose’s father, the story shifts back to the events that started the book. Why do you think the authors chose that moment to return us to the initial event? How does it affect the reader?
3. On page 240 the boys learn how the French media is twisting the story. What would you do if you were in their shoes? Do you think the protest walk is a good idea? Why or why not?
4. During the chaos of the riot after the protest walk, Matt does something completely out of character. How do you account for his actions? What do you think you would have done in his place? Why?
5. Matt never tells Free about what he did. Free recognizes Matt feels guilty and says “Wasn’t nothing you could do...about Moose and them.” (p. 273) Matt explains that Free doesn’t know what he did, and Free responds, “What did you do but survive when it wasn’t sure any of us would?” He adds, “You don’t ask to be a leader. Something happens and you act. It’s just who you are.” Why do you think these words are finally able to get through to Matt?
6. The final game between the Jets and the *Diablos Rouges* becomes a memorial to the boys. It also prompts both boys to make some decisions. How do you feel about the way the book ends, and what they both decide to do? What would you do in their places?

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ACTIVITIES***So What Really Happened?***

The events and characters in *Away Running* are fictional, but they are based on real events. Two young teens really were electrocuted while hiding in an electrical sub-station, trying to escape police. This occurred on October 27, 2005 in the Parisian suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois (not the fictionalized Villeneuve area of the story.)

To learn more about the timeline of the real events, visit: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4413964.stm>

An initial newspaper report a week later shows how the tragedy was being spun in the press: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4399070.stm>

To put yourself in Free's and Matt's shoes, you can see a French news report from the riots here: <https://youtu.be/S4onrdwgh0g>.

This English news video from Nov. 2 describes the nightly riots: <http://www.cbsnews.com/videos/paris-riots/>. The reporter quotes the mayor of Clichy-sous-Bois as saying "if France is prepared to tolerate tinderboxes, that no one should be surprised when they explode." What do you think this means?

What Have You Done For Me Lately

More than ten years have passed since that time. A French news show, *Revisited*, went back to the scene of the riots ten years later to see if things have improved.

Watch the episode here: <http://www.france24.com/en/20150605-revisited-clichy-sous-bois-riots-france-suburbs-paris>. What appears to be improved? What challenges still continue?

Make a ranking ladder of what you believe would make the situation in Clichy-sous-Bois better. Compare your ranking ladder with your peers to come to a consensus. Which of your ideas are easiest to implement? Why?

As a follow-up, share your ideas with the mayor of Paris by going to her page here: <http://www.paris.fr/annehidalgo>. Scroll to the bottom and you can complete the form and get an answer from one of our staff personally.

Foreign Talent

American football is popular all through Europe, not just Paris. To learn more, go to <http://americanfootballeurope.com/>. See if you can find any of the teams mentioned in *Away Running*. Then check out <http://www.europlayers.com/>. Here you can learn even more, including which teams are looking for players, and see if you qualify to play in Europe (just like Matt and Free!) Take the quiz that challenges your knowledge of American football rules and records.

Now create an advertisement for "foreign talent" for the real team of your choice on the Europlayer website. Include all the things a good advertisement should have (persuasive language, catchy visuals, accurate contact information, etc.) Refer to the information listed on the website to be sure you include the correct requirements, payment options, etc. According to your teacher's preference, you may use technology to create your ad or make it by hand.



Take the Tour

Use Google Earth to explore the setting of the fictional suburb of Villeneuve, which is really Clichy-sous-Bois. With your teacher's permission, type in Clichy-sous-Bois. Moving your cursor around, explore the neighbourhood. Make sure you try both the map view and the satellite view. Think about which one you prefer and why. Are you surprised by what you see?

Span out from Clichy-sous-Bois so you can see more of Paris as a whole. How would you describe, in your own words, the way the city is designed?

Juliette's apartment is a few blocks from Parc MontSouris in Paris. See if you can find the Parc. Can you find any other places from the story?

To finish, check out North Africa, where many of the residents of Villeneuve (Clichy-sous-Bois) were born. Type into the search window "Algiers, North Africa." Check out where Moose's family originated.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHORS

Interviewer: *You two met when you were teammates playing for a French football team, just like your characters, Matt and Freeman. How much of their stories are really your stories? What other autobiographical details are included in the book?*

Luc: We began writing *Away Running* as a memoir, about our experiences playing American football in a poor suburb of Paris, so we did live many things like the ones Matt and Free are confronted with in the book. But *Away Running* is fiction. It's inspired by true events and real people, but our old teammates would be the first to tell you that we took lots of liberties.

David: The other part—the non-memoir aspect of the book, that has to do with the riots—also emerged from true events and real people but had little to do with us, personally, and our experiences playing football in France. Our former teammates, yes. They still lived in the neighborhood. But Luc and I had been gone for years when the riots broke out.

Interviewer: *How long had you been in Europe when you two first met?*

David: Me, two years. It was 1988. I'd played one season for the Heathrow Jets outside London and the next one in Paris. After that, I spent four months working on a development project in the Ivory Coast, West Africa and was back in Paris, malarial, and my team ran out of money and folded. That's when I tried out for a position with the Flash of La Courneuve, where Luc was already playing.

Luc: I'd been in France four years at that point.

David: You were one of the first foreign coaches and players over there.

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Luc: I was. I started with the Spartacus, the first team in France. Laurent Plegelatte, this judo instructor who was a devout Trotskyist and also a jazz saxophonist, had “discovered” football while touring the US on his motorcycle in 1980 and brought it back to France. He’d stumbled on a high school game one Friday night outside Denver and convinced the home team coach to donate and send him twenty-two sets of uniforms. Plegelatte recruited a bunch of his students—all of them fellow communists!

David: So, the first American football team in France, in Cold War-era Europe, had a roster full of communists?

Luc: Yep. I joined them in September 1984. I kept my political allegiances to myself. Two of the Spartacus formed the Flash in La Courneuve, because Plegelatte thought that a football team could be a good outlet for young guys there.

David: And it wasn’t such a bad idea, really. La Courneuve was a trip! Straight up the ‘hood. Not any Paris I’d imagined before joining the team.

Interviewer: *Have the two of you stayed friends through the years, or did you just reunite to write this book?*

Luc: We met and became friends with the Flash, but it was working together for *US Foot* magazine, where I was editor and David wrote, when we got even closer. We wrote collaboratively for the first time on articles for the magazine.

David: Writing in French was hard. But writing about football and the NFL from France before the Internet even existed was something else.

Interviewer: *How did the book project begin?*

Luc: You were back in the States. We’d covered six Super Bowls together, and even though you weren’t writing for the magazine anymore, we tried to reconnect at Super Bowls.

David: It was, like, 1994.

Luc: Super Bowl twenty-eight, Dallas against Buffalo, in Atlanta. We’d gotten you press accreditation and you flew down but couldn’t even attend the game.

David: That sucked. I was in grad school and had classes to teach on Monday that I couldn’t miss. But it was remembering La Courneuve while I was a grad student that sparked the idea for a book. No one had told the story of playing American football in Europe.



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Luc: Few had lived it at that point.

David: Right. So I thought, let's tell that story, our story.

Luc: I remember how you first talked about it—as a story of friendship across race and culture, between black and white, Canadian and American, against the backdrop of American football in Paris.

David: We worked on it for three or four years, between other things. Me, finishing grad school and researching and writing *Fire on the Beach*, getting married and starting a teaching job. You, returning to Montreal and marriage and children and establishing yourself in the Canadian press.

Luc: The first “final” draft—your agent hated it.

David: Just hated it. Too narrow. Maybe too self-centered and too self-satisfied.

Luc: And she was right! Especially considering that it was the memoir of two nobodies.

Interviewer: *So how did it evolve into fiction?*

David: It was a long, strange journey. Once we got past navel-gazing, we decided to open it up. We were still imagining it as nonfiction, but not necessarily memoir. That's when we found a different—and frankly, an important—angle.

Luc: It was the summer that eleven year-old Sidi-Ahmed Hammache got killed by a stray bullet between warring gangs while he was washing his father's car outside the high-rises in La Courneuve, the home base of our old team, the Flash. June 2005.

David: I was in Paris that summer, and the incident provoked a lot of hurt and outrage. We read a lot about innocent victims of drive-bys and whatnot here in the US, but things like that were fairly rare in France at the time. The official government reaction was atrocious. Nicolas Sarkozy, who would be elected president a few years later, was the Interior Minister then, and he blamed the culture of the high-rises for the problem, especially the young people of those poor suburban neighborhoods. Hip-hop and rap were really popular, and a lot of the kids emulated the styles coming out of the US. Well, Sarkozy called them all “scum” and vowed to clean them out with a power-hose. Even though those neighborhoods are pretty mixed, they're seen to be largely North African and African, so his comments had a racist tinge to them. Instead of showing empathy—or even just leadership!—he stigmatized an entire demographic of the population. Everyone from every suburb like La Courneuve felt attacked. And it occurred to me that this little-known world—the Paris of projects and poverty, of class divisions and racial strife—was something that should be written about.



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Luc: Then four months later, the riots erupted.

David: Yep.

Luc: We met in Paris three days in. We'd go up to La Courneuve, where violence was pretty intense, and interview former Flash teammates and current players, kids who had tossed Molotov cocktails and cops who tried to police the neighborhood. We'd see the scorched marks on the streets where cars had been set on fire and the phalanx of riot police in helmets, with shields. And then we'd get on the commuter train and end up back on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, seated on the patio of the Deux Magots in the cool night air, tourists casually passing by and gawking at the old church across the street, everyone seemingly completely oblivious.

David: It was surreal.

Luc: And that version of the book went nowhere either...

David: Remember? One editor complimented us, saying how much she could imagine it as a movie, right before telling us she was passing on the manuscript.

Luc: And then Paul Rodeen, your agent at the time, said that he knew several editors of young adult fiction who were looking for just this sort of story—for a book aimed at what they refer to as “reluctant readers.”

David: Which is to say, at boys. The problem was, I'd never read YA before, not even when I was a YA myself.

Luc: Me neither. But we thought, Why not? From everything we read about it, boys—and particularly, boys of color—were this really absent demographic in children's books. The story we wanted to tell seemed perfect in that regard.

David: And so now, after three complete re-imaginings and umpteen drafts over almost twenty years, we have *Away Running*.

[Note: Paul Rodeen, of Rodeen Literary Management, was a former student of Wright's who became an agent and represented him at the time.]

Interviewer: Why two voices?

David: Through all the various evolutions of the project, one thing always remained—the notion of it being a dual-voiced, single narrative.

Luc: One voice was just too limited to represent the range of what each of us had experienced in Paris. David's Paris, as a black American, was different from my Paris, as a white Quebecker. For instance, I'd never been stopped by the police for their



supposed “routine” identity checks until I started hanging out with David. We’d be walking in Les Halles or the Latin Quarter and groups of foot patrolmen would regularly stop us. What made it even more disturbing for me was the fact that most of the time they wouldn’t even bother to ask for my ID documents. They’d just ask him. My Paris changed when I became friends with a black man.

David: For me, stuff like that wasn’t even really new, having grown up a black kid in Texas. There was always an extra level of scrutiny—and there still is, for that matter—by the police, by clerks in stores, all that. But it was interesting to see how it translated into a French context—for me, but also for the North African and African folks I got to know in La Courneuve. Because, you know, even though I got stopped all the time in Paris, once the police saw my American passport, they’d let me be. Not so the guys on our team in La Courneuve.

Luc: That’s why we couldn’t write our story about Paris in a single voice. We wanted to represent both of those realities in a primary way and to have the two characters experience La Courneuve each from his different perspective.

Interviewer: *Luc, writing a book with another person has to be more challenging than writing it alone. Can you describe the process you and David used to make it work?*

Luc: There’s a quote from George Orwell that I had pinned to the wall in my apartment in Paris: “Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout with some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand.” Working on *Away Running* was fun but also really challenging. I was a self-taught journalist and magazine editor when David asked me to write a book with him. So that meant I now had to become a self-taught novelist...

Luckily, David had become professor of literature and creative writing, and he was really generous in sharing what he’d learned and was learning. That doesn’t mean it was always easy or that we didn’t have ups and downs. But, despite having different careers, living in different countries and starting new lives, we always found ways to meet somewhere—in Paris, Chicago, Montreal, Austin—and get work done. In a weird way, writing *Away Running* together helped our friendship continue to grow.

David: I’d just add that, while writing together like we did is less common, especially in fiction, collaboration does things for a work that might not happen otherwise. This is my second collaborative book, and on a basic level, having a different viewpoint interacting with, and even interleaved with, my own has added a texture and complexity to my understanding of the subject matter that I’m not sure I’d have gotten to working alone. The “write what you know” thing that we learn in creative writing classes can be very limiting. I want to be able to write layered women characters and white characters and, in this case, North African-descended French characters. Working collaboratively with Luc helped me get there.

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Luc: Exactly. Because if writing is this sort of conversation between an author and an audience—and I believe it is—well, the dialogue is opened up and made more immediate for the writer when working collaboratively.

Interviewer: *David, you've traveled quite extensively since your early visit to Paris to play football for the Flash. How have your travels influenced your understanding of people, and the kinds of social conflicts you and Luc portray so well in this book?*

David: When I first decided I wanted to become a writer, I totally bought into that Hemingway idea of writing from one's experience. You know, you go out and have adventures that you can mine for material. And so I did. I played American football in Europe, and I worked development in Africa, and a friend and I hitchhiked from Brazil to Dallas... Things like that. But more than the surface adventures, I came to understand that a writer's true material is what's churning and germinating underneath.

For me, this has always had to do with questions of race and class and identity. So, in seeing and experiencing how issues of race and class play themselves out in Brazil or West Africa or La Courneuve, I've come to better understand myself and my own place in the world. The more I've traveled, the more I've understood myself—and consequently others, too. Because when I'm writing a character, necessarily I'm writing a little piece of myself into her or him. My understanding of myself is guiding how I come to understand her or him. This is the stuff that's at the heart of my writing, not the adventures my characters have but their evolving understanding of themselves as a consequence of their adventures—and misadventures.

Interviewer: *On November 13, 2015, Paris once again exploded into violence while the whole world watched in horror. What were your initial feelings when you heard about the Paris attacks?*

Luc: I sat stunned in front of the TV with my two daughters, who are teenagers, and tried as best I could to field their questions about how and why this could happen.

How? Well, there are fanatics everywhere who, for whatever reasons, are drawn to extremism. There's relatively easy access to guns. My daughters and I were watching it occur in France, but we would also see another example of it just a few weeks later, in the attack on the Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado.

But why this happens?... That's a harder question to answer.

I lived in Paris between 1984 and 2000, and there were several terrorist attacks over that period—in a cinema near Beaubourg, at a shopping gallery on the Champs-Élysées, at the Galeries Lafayette, in the RER at St-Michel Station, at Chez Tati department store on Boulevard Montparnasse... Paris has suffered so many throughout its history. But maybe we need to think a little bit more about what we mean when we talk about “terrorism” and “terrorists.”

Abdelhamid Abaaoud [the Belgian who orchestrated the recent attacks] was, without

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question, a fanatic and what happened on November 13 was, without question, an attempt to terrorize French society. No doubt. But maybe we're also using the term "terrorism" a little too easily. Maybe we use it as too much of a catch-all term. Maybe sometimes we use it as a way to distance ourselves from accepting any sort of accountability for the conditions that lead to violence.

There's a huge difference between the November 2015 attacks and the riots of 2005, but there is a sad overlap, too. Some of the young French men of North African and African descent who are getting sucked into the maelstrom of extremism and violence had been leading lives of despair before getting to that place of hopelessness. For too many, despair is all they've ever known.

Anyone who visits a Parisian suburb like Clichy-sous-Bois, where the 2005 riots erupted, or La Courneuve, where David and I played and where some of the worst violence occurred in 2005, can see examples of the despair that characterizes too many young lives in France. In those communities, there's disproportionately high unemployment, particularly among the young; inferior schools; crumbling infrastructure; fewer social services...

And don't forget: most of the people who live in those neighborhoods are French, born and raised. Many are of foreign descent, yes. Their grandparents, or maybe their parents, came from some former French colony—Algeria or Mali or wherever. But the younger generations are largely all French citizens and France is pretty much all they've ever known. So, some of what France is experiencing is a by-product of the country's troubled history of colonialism and the difficulty it has had coming to terms with this legacy.

A society has to take into account all of its citizens. To not do so is to risk social unrest by those who are left on the outside, looking in.

Interviewer: *There are examples of racial discrimination erupting into violence throughout history. In August 2014, Ferguson Missouri went through some very similar events to those you describe in the book. Do you think we as a society are doomed to keep repeating these tragic encounters, or do you feel some hope for our future? Why?*

David: I find myself vacillating between Malcolm and Martin in my view of the current state of things in the US—particularly in light of the murder of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman, of Tamir Rice and Eric Garner and John Crawford, on and on. And even more recently, of Laquan McDonald in Chicago and Jamar Clark in Minneapolis. I remember my own coming up. I'd have run-ins with the police or with people who I could look at and just *know* they were seeing something other than me. And as I see this continuing to happen—and too often with tragic consequences—I feel rage and outrage, and I feel very, very sad.

But it's important to remember that, as angry as he was—and justifiably so—Malcolm saw the promise of a future for everyone here. His speeches are evidence of this. "The Ballot or the Bullet," as bleak as the title might sound, identified the problems he saw in US society and laid out solutions to resolve them and avoid bloodshed. And Martin. Sure, he preached forgiveness and turning the other cheek, but this didn't make him any less an unrelenting and forceful activist for racial justice. The ones we admire and try to emulate



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have hope. It's why they go to the lengths that they do to try and affect change for the good—because they can see a way out of no way.

This is what the Black Lives Matter Movement is doing today, and it's important work. And the work they're doing is built upon the foundation of what all those others did before: Malcolm and Martin, yes, and also Frederick Douglass and John Brown and Ida B. Wells and WEB Du Bois and Ella Baker and Bayard Rustin and Yuri Kochiyama and Angela Davis, and so many more. As dire as things can seem—and can sometimes, in fact, be—we have to remember that the world that we continue to struggle to make better isn't as horrific as the legislated racial slavery that Douglass and Brown worked to undo, as the de facto and de jure Jim Crow that Wells and Du Bois worked to undo. Step by step, we, as a society, are walking the thousand-mile road.

Don't get me wrong: we have in no ways gotten to where we need to be. But by the same token, I also don't have to sit at the back of the city buses in the South; many more of us have access to a decent education than during my parents' generation; all of us can exercise our right to vote, even if some Republicans are trying to make it harder for us to do so.

Some police officers look at a young black man and see a “superhuman demon.” Some continue to fear black people to the extent that they use extreme and deadly force against us without just cause. But we're seeing more and more of them convicted for their crimes. Black Lives Matter has played a huge role in this—they and folks like Michelle Alexander and Rosa Clemente and James Rucker and the Innocence Project. The movement is sensitizing the larger American public to just how common these injustices continue to be, and Americans of all races are reacting against it.

So, yes, I feel hope. Writing *Away Running* was gesture of hopefulness.

