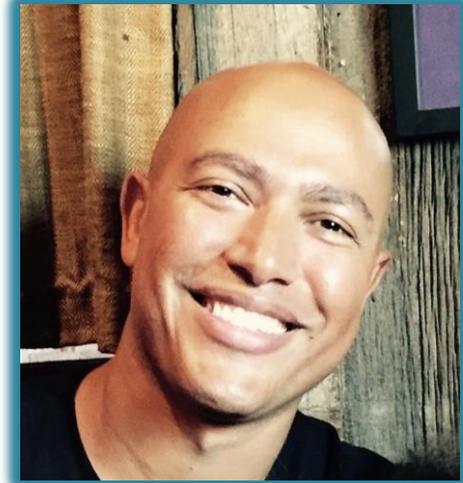


Torrey Maldonado, the author of the critically acclaimed *Secret Saturdays*, is a teacher in Brooklyn, New York, where he was born and raised. *Secret Saturdays* and *Tight* reflect his students' and his experiences. Learn more at www.torreymaldonado.com. Follow him @torreymaldonado

Q: Your love of reading is apparent! Growing up who were some of the authors that inspired you?

A: My motto is "Kids will be what they see," and as a kid I saw my mom's love for writing and writers. She kept her writing in spiral notebooks and probably only showed me. More than any other author, her writing-passion inspired me the most. When I was maybe no taller than a fire hydrant with my Jackson 5 Afro bigger than my head, she took me far out of our projects to authors' readings the way Bryan's mom takes him to more peaceful neighborhoods in *Tight*. What she and books poured into me showed me the world was bigger than my block, bigger than my zip code. It flooded me with a desire to follow in her footsteps and be a writer and teacher. And my dream as both is the same: provide books for kids to love, books that will love kids back, books that show them their world has magic in it, is bigger than their zip code, and share stories that help them see things as more complex.



Q: What inspired you to write *Tight*?

A: The longing to belong and the power of choices inspired *Tight*. Our longing to belong takes us down a path, and when there, we ask ourselves the questions Bryan does in *Tight*, including "What should I do?" and "Am I following my heart or others?" We hear "Do you" and "Be an individual" all of the time, but once we're on Bryan's path of following to impress others, it gets harder and harder to "do us" or make the right choices or turn and walk our own path. Bryan's struggle happens as a middle school boy in Brooklyn, but no matter where we are from, our struggle is the same. He is in a tight squeeze, which is partly why my book is entitled *Tight*.

Q: Who is your favorite character in *Tight*? And why?

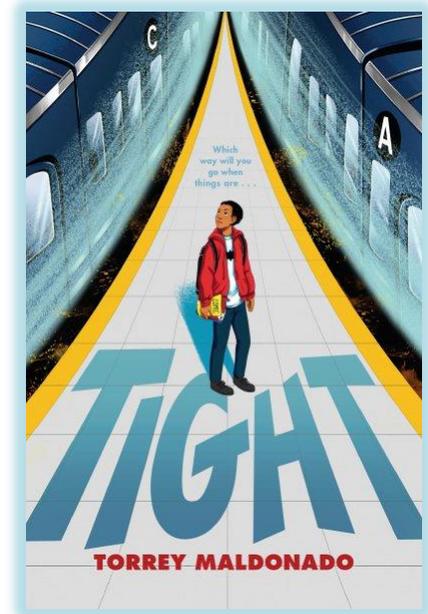
A: Oomph. That's a hard-hitting question. Choosing favorite *Tight* characters is like a parent picking a favorite child. Each character is a needed mosaic piece. However, my



upper favorites are Bryan, Mike, and Ava. Jacqueline Woodson, the National Book Award winner of *Brown Girl Dreaming*, articulates why I love Bryan. She says, “I was riveted by Bryan’s journey to breaking down stereotypes and becoming his own kind of superhero.” The saying “Behind every kid acting out is a story that’ll make you cry” explains my love for Mike and Ava. As I saw the movie *Black Panther* I reacted to the antagonist—Killmonger—the way readers react to Mike. People feel Mike is likable and interesting with great traits. In that way, Mike mirrors Killmonger and the “friend-emies” and bullies of life. Mike doesn’t steal your money; he steals your heart. I hope readers ask, “Is Mike good or bad?” and nuances in bullies they try pinpointing him on the bully spectrum. If they do, maybe it will help them understand and interact with real-world Mikes better. Similar to him, Ava seemingly antagonizes Bryan, then we uncover her heart and love for him and realize there’s truth in “don’t judge a book by its cover.”

Q: Can you share your writing process?

A: Listening to music makes writing *so much* better. I write to the music that my students and I love, but the instrumental versions. Otherwise, song lyrics mess with my words. Childish Gambino aka Donald Glover just stayed a door down from me in the same hotel hall. Inspired, I wrote a chapter while listening to his lyrics and I messed up and almost typed “This is America” over and over. Also, if I have “writer’s block,” I remember advice given on the Netflix show *Daredevil* by a journalist’s boss to a writer who didn’t know what to write. He tells her to write something new and different that only she can write. He says write your truth—all of it and everything you’ve been through and don’t pull any punches. He says write what people don’t know. That unstuck me as I wrote *Tight* and helps as I write my forthcoming books.



Q: What do you want readers to take away from *Tight*?

A: Carefully inspect your heroes. Question who they are. Question what you’re escaping into and what it brings. In 1988, *Life* magazine called the projects where I grew up “the crack capital of America” and one of the ten worst neighborhoods in the U.S. The neighborhood in Queens where the rapper 50 Cent grew up was like mine and he raps in “Hate It or Love It”: “Different day, same ****, ain’t nothing good in the hood/ I’d run away and never come back if I could.”

It’s the same in Bryan’s neighborhood in *Tight*. Like him, I escaped into comics and superhero worship. But what was I escaping into? In my escape, I walked into a trap. The Roots rapper and Jimmy Fallon bandleader Black Thought raps on “My Shot” on *The Hamilton Mixtape*, “Even role models tell us we’re born to be felons.” In Spike Lee and Jordan Peele’s *BlackkkKlansman*,

the character Kwame Ture says he worshipped Tarzan until he realized in rooting for him to beat Blacks, he rooted for self-destruction. Coming of age, I realized many of my superhero role models beat up criminals with faces like mine. Black Thought was right: My role models were telling me I was a felon. Like Kwame Ture in *BlackKkKlasmán*, I was rooting for white men to beat up who I saw in the mirror. Like Bryan in *Tight*, I became aware that too many superhero narratives program boys to be stereotypes of manliness and live a toxic masculinity.

Q: You were able to successfully overcome poverty and violence where you grew up in the Red Hook New York projects. What advice can you share with kids that are currently in the same situation?

A: My mom was able to successfully rally my village to get me to overcome poverty and violence. Have you heard, “It takes a village to raise a child”? A ghetto hood village raised me. In *Tight*, a village also helps Bryan. But when I was on my own, two major tools steered me from drama and helped me toward where I am now. My mom taught me to accept and develop all helpful sides of me. Survival taught me to code-switch, meaning switch what I show others depending on where I am. My characters in *Tight* do that. Here’s why it matters. President Obama used slang to build rapport with Jay-Z, Beyoncé, and others, then he used mainstream American English to build rapport with his cabinet and other privileged people. He code-switches because he knows what Bryan in *Tight* knows—you can’t show all of you all of the time. You see in *Tight* how you need to shield your candle flame so no one blows it out. Code-switching is a shield. Then the right time comes when you can bring out and shine a different light and others will welcome it. My mom got people to shield my light until I learned to shield it, and it helped me grow from a bullied bookish, insecure, quirky boy into a published author who is lucky to be invited to shine and share light with younger and older readers.

Q: What advice would you share with adults who want to make a difference in young people’s lives?

A: I have taught middle school for nearly twenty years. Middle school years are “crossroad years.” As a teacher and an author, I wish more people knew the saying “Kids need to know how much you care before they care about how much you know.” As a boy, uncaring books and teachers led to me hating school. I hated boring books and boring teachers. I hated ones that dismissed my experiences and those around me. And that’s when all of the not caring about me in school made me not care about school. That’s when I had to repeat a grade, nearly three times. Then magic happened. My mom let me choose what to read. I got hooked on comics, and then, in time, the right books. If more people see that “Kids need to know how much you care before they care about how much you know,” more books will be written that care about all readers and more readers will love books back. It definitely will make kids care more about school too.

Q: Public librarians from all over the world will read this interview. Is there anything that you would like to share with them?

A: Tight is about what our environment presents and how we react. The book is a timely version of the Robert Frost poem *The Road Not Taken*. Bryan knows what's tight in good ways for him, but two roads diverge in his hood and he's in a tight squeeze. He has a choice: take the road less traveled, which will make all the difference, or follow in the footsteps of people-pleasing and toxic masculinity. Recently, I made a keynote speech to an all-adult audience about superhero worship in *Tight*. I began with, "Raise your hand if you're into superheroes." Nearly everyone raised hands. Then, I asked, "Whose superpower would you want?" The room exploded with answers. This reveals our common yearning. No matter where we're from, most of us wouldn't mind a superpower. Bryan wants one growing up where *Tight* is set. *Tight* doesn't recycle outdated stereotypical hero narratives and is a cautionary tale about taking the well-worn path and copycatting what your environment presents. I hope readers of all ages will read *Tight* and pick the powers that Bryan discovers as their own too—strengths that people through the ages have said matter. A Negro spiritual and Civil Rights anthem chants, "The one thing we did right is the day we started to fight." Bob Marley said, "Get up, stand up." Bryan embraces and wields that power and also the power of choice.