Reginald Dwayne Betts

Reginald Dwayne Betts transformed himself from a sixteen-year old kid sentenced to nine-years in prison to a critically acclaimed writer and graduate of the Yale Law School. He has written two collections of poetry, the recently published and critically acclaimed *Bastards of the Reagan Era* and *Shahid Reads His Own Palm*. In 2016 he was awarded the PEN New England Award for poetry for *Bastards of the Reagan Era*. In selecting Bett’s poetry, judge Mark Doty said: “Betts has written an indelible lament for a generation, a necessary book for this American moment.” His memoir, *A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Learning, Survival, and Coming of Age in Prison*, is the story of a young man confined in the worst prisons in the state of Virginia, where solitary confinement, horrific conditions, and the constant violence threatened to break his humanity. Instead, Betts used the time to turn himself into a poet, a scholar, and an advocate for the reform of the criminal justice system.

The national spokesperson for the Campaign for Youth Justice, Betts writes and lectures about the impact of mass incarceration on American society. A powerful and inspirational speaker, Betts is an important voice and advocate for juvenile justice and prison reform. Betts’ own experiences as a teenager in maximum security prisons uniquely position him to speak to the failures of the current criminal justice system and present encouraging ideas for change. Betts’ advocacy work led President Barack Obama to appoint him to the Coordinating Council of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

His writing has generated national attention and earned him a Soros Justice Fellowship, a Radcliffe Fellowship, a Ruth Lily Fellowship, an NAACP Image Award, and most recently, a 2018 Guggenheim Fellowship for his poetry. Betts has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and the *Washington Post*, as well as being interviewed on NPR’s *Fresh Air*, The Travis Smiley Show and several other national shows. He has spoken or appeared on panels at Harvard Law School, Yale Law School, Georgetown Law School, the University of Maryland and colleges across the country. He has also been a featured speaker at numerous conferences, including the Beyond the Bench conference, the NACo legislative conference, and the Coalition for Juvenile Justice annual conference.

In the spring of 2016 Betts graduated from Yale Law School. He has also received an A.A. from Prince George’s Community College, a B.A. from the University of Maryland, and a M.F.A. from Warren Wilson College’s M.F.A. Program for Writers. He lives with his wife and two sons in New Haven, Connecticut.