

# BLACK & BLUES

Author and activist Frederick Joseph trains his eye on combatting the patriarchy, confronting censorship, and building community.

By SARAH FONES

Frederick Joseph didn't expect his first book, *The Black Friend*, to become a *New York Times* bestseller in 2020. Nevertheless, it stayed atop the list for weeks, as would his sophomore effort, 2022's *Patriarchy Blues*. A mix of personal, often searing reflections on race coupled with candid conversations from prominent activists and artists, *The Black Friend* is a primer of sorts—encyclopedia included—for white people looking to take up an anti-racist mantle. *Patriarchy Blues*, meanwhile, examines racism and its sibling social ills misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia through Joseph's Black male lens. Both are excellent, vital reads that relied almost solely upon word-of-mouth and the author's own social media hustle to reach as many readers as they did.

"Publishers rejected it," Joseph recalls of *Blues*. "They're just like, 'Well, no one's gonna buy a book by a cis[gender] het[erosexual]

man—let alone any man whatsoever—talking about patriarchy.' That's not news, right? Like, you'll give a deal to Tucker Carlson, but no one wants to have these conversations." (Carlson, of Fox News infamy, has a book deal with Simon & Schuster; Joseph's publisher, HarperCollins, counts conservatives Ron DeSantis and Ben Shapiro as clients.) Given his lofty perches on the *Times* lists, it would seem people *do* want to have these conversations. But wading through publishing's murky waters sans sizable hardcore followings remains daunting for most new authors. Even when the subject matter is extremely timely, prescience doesn't guarantee marketing muscle behind your book.

Joseph ought to know. Before launching his career as an author, poet, and activist, he founded a nonprofit creative agency, We Have Stories, and worked as a corporate philanthropy consultant.



PHOTO BY FREDERICK JOSEPH

“It’s not solely a matter of Black people or brown people or queer people. It’s everybody.”

In 2019 he cracked the *Forbes* “30 Under 30” list for marketing and advertising. The previous year, he created the biggest GoFundMe campaign in history, the #BlackPantherChallenge, which raised nearly \$1 million and allowed over 75,000 kids all over the world to see the Disney-backed film free of charge. Disney also published his 2022 children’s book, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever—The Courage to Dream*.

A New York native, Joseph attended St. John’s University and Hunter College, later getting a master’s at NYU. He grew up poor in the suburbs north of the city in a rough area with a single mom who sent him to a predominantly white high school. Joseph’s experiences there—forced to fight neighborhood kids to instill fear and win back his precious Pokémon cards; forced to hear white people claim they “don’t see color” and keep a straight face—figure prominently in *Black Friend and Blues*.

Though publishers may have been skittish about investing time and money in a book about the patriarchy, it’s safe to say *Blues* remains as topical as ever in a post-Roe world. Ours is an era where bodily autonomy doesn’t exist for countless pregnant people; where

trans rights are increasingly under attack one state-house legislative maneuver at a time; where trans youth are living with fewer options and more dread; where far-right-elevated “tradwives” are trending; and where an entire economy has sprung up around poisonous, unrealistic ideas of what constitutes masculinity. While talk radio and YouTube are arguably the frothiest founts of hatred, the phenomenon extends to the literary world as well.

Joseph admittedly keeps close tabs on what’s selling and says he noticed an uptick in books whose authors are collectively invested in keeping men toxic. Subject matter revolves around everything from picking up women to wilderness survival to extreme health and fitness regimens. All ostensibly predicate “real manhood” upon things like dominating conversations, learning to shoot a crossbow, or buying the best supplements for peak performance. In these works, it’s all mental, but therapy is anathema; or it’s fine to be angry but remember that boys don’t cry; and our potential is limitless, but only as straight white cisgender men.

Increasingly, it’s difficult to talk about toxic masculinity without mentioning platforms like Twitter. From new ownership to the old

## Her Battle Cry

**Shifting in the sheets of night  
let the mind wake to her words.  
Inside your heart hear them loud,  
with eyes open wide.**

**The steady swell of her drum.**

**May her voice echo in spaces,  
she is told she doesn’t belong.**

**Do not expect her to whisper.  
She need not be gentle,  
for you.**

**Divine is the sound of her work,  
as she builds a table for herself.**

**Listen—  
brother.**

**—Frederick Joseph**

## Love Sketches

**I begin each day honestly,  
“we are imperfect.”  
Sometimes, we laugh,  
until the air seems thin, climbing peaks.  
Other times, we hurt,  
scraping ourselves stumbling into valleys.  
But I end each night honestly,  
“we will take what we learned,  
and be better tomorrow.”**

**Our love is not built to be perfect—  
it is built to grow.**

**—Frederick Joseph**

users leaving the platform en masse as hate and disinformation proliferate, it's a shell of its former self. And for people like Joseph, who found not only a large audience but an informed community, the realization stings. “Twitter is probably most heartbreaking of all because that's kind of what started me in a public space, right? I look at it now—I have something like, maybe 110,000 followers—I used to be able to actually engage with people and have important conversations or bring perspective to spaces that needed them. And now it's just a right-wing dumpster fire, you know?” says Joseph.

Since the 2020 presidential election and the racial justice protests that roiled that summer, Joseph's seen an increase in censorship,

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sometimes for seemingly no legitimate reason. After the Dobbs decision was leaked, he attended an abortion rights protest and posted video to Instagram. Though Joseph claims the caption contained nothing incendiary, the post was still flagged and taken down. He says he then received a notification that his account could be removed for simply being at the protest.

Not surprisingly, Joseph's looking to broaden his media reach, having recently launched a Substack, “In Retrospect.” (For what it's worth, Joseph doesn't support a ban on TikTok and believes it's a crucial means of disseminating news and information, particularly for Gen Z.) And he hasn't given up on Instagram, where he still posts poems most Sundays. A gifted wordsmith and longtime lover of clever hip-hop hooks, Joseph began keeping a rhyme book when he was younger. His mother and grandmother encouraged the interest with the caveat, “We're not sure if you're gonna be the next Jay-Z,” Joseph recalls, laughing. Still, poetry stuck, and it's what brings a wrenching, visceral immediacy to *Blues'* collection of essays and reflections. Joseph's also at work on another book, *Color Me Grateful*, which he describes as “just all-out joy,” adding, “It's kind of the antithesis, to a certain extent, of some of the things I've written thus far.”

Not everyone is happy with Joseph's creative output—proof that he's doing something right. Recently the author found himself part of a growing club of dubious distinction: writers whose books have been banned in local school districts. This past January, Joseph learned that *The Black Friend* had been removed from middle schools and restricted in high schools in Spring Branch Independent School District in Harris County, Texas, outside of Houston. One parent complained to the school board that the book incited racism and hate speech, along with promoting “critical race theory.” (A local ABC news affiliate revealed that it cost the district over \$30,000 just to ban Joseph's book as part of its “review” process. That money, the author points out, could have been invested in students, or given to teachers in the form of supplies or raises.)

The same school district made news again in March when the ACLU and family attorneys for a 16-year-old Black cross-country athlete alleged she was being discriminated against. By instituting a sexist dress-code policy—and enforcing it only when she, the sole Black member of the team, participated—the district was not complying with Title IX legislation and the Constitution, they say. When asked about the ACLU's accusation, Joseph said it was predictable, unfortunately, and basically dovetailed with everything else going on right now: “I think the reality of it is, it's not about books. It's not about sports bras. It's a culture war, right? And I don't think that people understand that. I said it years ago to a group that I was talking to. I said, ‘Hey, everyone has to be prepared to fight, because they are trying to actively erase all of us. It's not solely a matter of Black people or brown people or queer people. It's everybody.’”

*@fredtjoseph on Instagram*