



Jay Blades: a household name in Britain

# Learning to read at 51

Als Teenager war Jay Blades ein unterprivilegierter Legastheniker ohne Schulabschluss. Heute ist er als Moderator, Möbelrestaurateur und Initiator sozialer Projekte erfolgreich – und wurde für seine Verdienste in den Ritterorden aufgenommen. Von LORRAINE MALLINDER

## ADVANCED

Things could have turned out so differently for Jay Blades. Let's face it: what are the average life chances of a black guy raised by an impoverished single mother on an East London council estate? He experienced extreme racism as a child and left school with no qualifications, a life path that suggested it would have a less-than-happy ending.

But Blades is no ordinary individual. He discovered he possessed a rare talent – finally finding his true calling in life. To summarize what it says on the back cover of *Making It*, his autobiography, for the past three decades, he has specialized in repairs – of things, of people and of himself.

Blades is now a household name in Britain, best known for his successful TV show, *The Repair Shop*. Now in its fifth year, the show has a simple but emotionally powerful format. Under Blades's empathetic watch, people give their most treasured items to a team of craftspeople, who then fix them. The show has seen hundreds of weird and wonderful objects – a fireman's helmet, a ventriloquist's dummy and an old pipe organ, to name just three.

### Fighting back

Jay Blades's story is almost miraculous. It began on a council estate in Hackney, where he and his brother were raised by Barbadian mum Barbara. His Jamaican-born father had made

off with Barbara's savings, leaving the family destitute. Eventually, they rebuilt their lives without The Man Who Contributed Towards My Birth, or TMWCTMB, as Blades refers to him. He would later discover that his father had "contributed" to many other births, giving him 27 brothers and sisters.

But his early life wasn't all doom and gloom. In TV interviews, Blades has spoken about the sense of community on the estate. "I had the best time," he said in a 2022 interview. It was a childhood of sunny memories, picking blackberries and collecting chestnuts. However, the idyll was smashed when he started secondary school, experiencing racism for the first time.

Seeing his best mate, Iqbal, getting his glasses smashed, little Blades hit back, gaining a reputation as a fighter. His fellow pupils paid him in puddings for protection. In his book, he describes how he would sit at the table at lunchtimes, with a feast before him, "like King Henry VIII". "My mum told me to fight back, so if someone said something to me, I was like, BAM! Instant violence," he said in an interview with *The Times* last year.

### A gift for helping others

Blades left school early, with the reading age of an 11-year-old. He found himself doing one dead-end job after another: at a sausage factory, in a car plant, on building sites and elsewhere.

**Name:** Jason ("Jay") Blades  
**Born:** Hackney, London, 1970  
**Famous as:** Modern furniture restorer, eco-designer and television presenter  
**Passions:** Sustainability, social enterprise, inclusion  
**Website:** jayblades.co.uk

#### impoverished

[ɪmˈpɒvərɪʃt]  
 • in Armut lebend

#### single

• hier: alleinerziehend

#### council estate

['kaʊnsəl] (UK)  
 • Siedlung mit Sozialwohnungen

#### household name

• allgemein bekannter Name, ein Begriff

#### ventriloquist's dummy

[venˈtrɪləkwɪsts]  
 • Bauchrednerpuppe

#### pipe organ

• (Pfeifen)Orgel

#### make off (ifml.)

• sich aus dem Staub machen

#### destitute ['destɪtʃtɪt]

• mittellos

#### doom and gloom

• Grund zur Verzweiflung

#### blackberry ['blækberi]

• Brombeere

#### chestnut ['tʃesnʌt]

• Kastanie

#### secondary school (UK)

• weiterführende Schule, Sekundarstufe

#### mate (UK ifml.)

• Kumpel, Freund

#### pudding (UK)

• Dessert

#### feast

• Fest, Gelage

#### dead-end

• ausweglos





Upcoming new episode of the TV series *The Repair Shop: The Royal Visit*



Jay Blades with his former partner, Christine Goodman, at the Virgin Media BAFTA TV Awards, Royal Festival Hall, May 2022

Also, without realizing it, Blades was repeating his father's womanizing behaviour. By the age of 20, he'd had his first son, Levi, with Maria. Then he left Maria for Romany. When she threw him out, Blades ended up in a hostel for the homeless.

As luck would have it, one of the social workers, recognizing the young man's human touch, suggested he volunteer at a hostel in Oxford, in exchange for board. He stayed for four years, discovering his gift for helping others. Lisa, the finance officer at the hostel, gave him a second son, Dior. But things didn't work out, so he left her for Tracey, moving to the town of High Wycombe, where he started working with disadvantaged local youth. When the relationship with Tracey came to an end, he found himself alone and miserable.

"I lay on my bed, in my latest rented room, and thought about my string of failed relationships, and my own two kids who didn't live with me. What the hell was wrong with me?" he wrote in *Making It*.

His landlady suggested a solution: university. Hearing that he was interested in crime, an admissions officer at Buckinghamshire New University (BNU) suggested criminology. "Criminology? What's that?" he replied. Now aged 31, Blades was a mature student. In the early days, before his dyslexia

was diagnosed, he struggled to keep up. But then he discovered Dragon voice recognition software, which enabled him to listen to reading material and write his papers. With the tailored digital learning support offered by the university, he earned his degree in criminology and philosophy in 2004.

### Sweet dreams

At university, he met fellow student Jade, who also happened to be a champion basketball player, a woman with the drive and vision to spur him on to greater things. Seeing her beat the lads on the basketball court, it was love at first sight. It was about this time that his "fairy godmother", Chief Superintendent McWhirter, turned up, having heard of his talent for turning troubled young people around. "You're doing everything wrong!" he told McWhirter, who then offered him a job to train his force on race relations.

The Jay and Jade team spent a year "policing the police", as he puts it. After graduating – an important step in the life of a man who'd left school with no qualifications – they set up Sweet Dreams, a charity aimed at getting kids off the streets. They suited each other perfectly, Jade taking care of the big-picture project management and Jay providing the street-level gut instinct. The two soon became three, with the arrival of little Zola.

#### womanizing behaviour

['wɒmənəɪzɪŋ bi, heɪv.jə]

• viele kurze Beziehungen zu Frauen haben

#### board

• hier: Verpflegung

#### finance officer

• Finanzverwalter, -verwalterin

#### landlady

• Vermieterin

#### admissions officer

• Angestellte(r) bei einer Zulassungsstelle

#### mature

[mə'tʃʊə]

• reif, erwachsen

#### dyslexia

[ˌdɪs'leksɪə]

• Legasthenie

#### paper

• hier: Aufsatz, Referat

#### spur sb. on to sth.

• jmdn. zu etw.

anspornen

#### lad

• Kerl, Typ

#### fairy godmother

• gute Fee

#### chief superintendent

['su:pərɪn,tendənt]

• Hauptkommissar(in)

#### force

• hier: Truppe

#### police sb.

• jmdn. überwachen, kontrollieren

#### graduate

['grædʒueɪt]

• einen (Hoch)Schulabschluss machen

#### gut instinct

• Bauchgefühl

## In need of restoration

But then, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, funding for projects dried up. Full of ideas as ever, Jay and Jade had plans to start a charity called Out of the Dark, which would allow disadvantaged kids to repair old furniture so that it could be sold. In High Wycombe, home of famous furniture brands such as Ercol and Parker Knoll, there were plenty of experienced people willing to pass on their skills.

Jade set up a visit from *The Guardian* newspaper, which made a short film, also called *Out of the Dark*, about the charity in 2014. Watching the film now, it's easy to see how it went viral. Blades lights up the screen. Interviewed while driving his car, he explains how the battered furniture and the marginalized kids in the workshop were quite similar. Both were in need of restoration.

Things were going so well. But Blades had been putting himself under immense pressure, and the need to pay the rent for the workshop was always on his mind. After 15 years with Jade, he'd fallen out of love. On the edge of a breakdown, he got in his car and drove down the M40, thinking about ending it all. In Wolverhampton, he sat in a McDonald's car park for five days. The police eventually tracked him down, and then businessman Gerard Bailey turned up – a man he'd met only once before, when Bailey had commissioned furniture from the charity.

Blades broke down in front of Bailey. "Growing up in Hackney, you didn't show your vulnerability. You didn't show yourself as a victim," he recalls in his book. But being able to cry in front of another man changed everything. Bailey encouraged him to move in with his mum and stepdad, in a farmhouse outside Wolverhampton. There, safe in a cocoon of warmth and support, he began to rebuild himself.

## Winning the nation's heart

Meanwhile, Blades's career was moving to a new level. A TV production team working on a BBC series called *Money for Nothing* had contacted him and he was soon given some slots on the show. By series three, he was presenting it. But it was a series called *The Repair Shop*, launched in 2017, that made him



At his workshop in Ironbridge, Shropshire, with upcycled chairs created for the London Square Community Garden at the 2023 Chelsea Flower Show

famous. An antidote to today's throw-away culture, the charm of the show lies in the love that people feel for their treasured possessions.

Blades's personal favourite was the pipe organ mentioned earlier, which a Jamaican lady had brought with her on the *Windrush* ship carrying Caribbean immigrants to Britain in the late 1940s. Her daughters, who had taken the family heirloom to the show, fought back tears when they saw the restored organ. Blades wrote in his book: "It made me realize. These aren't just items that we're fixing. They're family members!"

But it was with the BBC documentary *Jay Blades: Learning to Read at 51* that Blades won the nation's heart. Hiding nothing, the presenter began the painful process of learning to read, using a series of audio workbooks. Until then, his career had been built on bluffing his way through situations. It had given him that spontaneity that would have been killed by autocue. By the end of the documentary, he'd achieved his dream of reading a book to his 15-year-old daughter, Zola.

Now 53 and married to fitness trainer Lisa Zbozen, whom he courted after following her online workouts, Blades is thinking about moving to Barbados, where his mum has resettled. He received an MBE in 2021, and became the first Chancellor of BNU in March 2023. He was awarded an honorary doctorate for his contribution to furniture-making and crafts and community work. His is a modern-day fairy tale. Blades shows us Britain as we want it to be. A place where anyone can make it – if their heart is in the right place.



"Jay can teach us all something about the simple power of compassion and creativity" – *Radio Times*

**wake: in the ~ of sth.**  
• als Folge von etw.

**battered**  
• ramponiert, abgenutzt

**marginalized**  
• an den Rand gedrängt

**vulnerability**  
[ˌvʌlnərəˈbɪləti]  
• Verletzlichkeit

**stepdad**  
• Stiefvater

**slot**  
• hier: Sendeplatz

**heirloom** ['eɪluːm]  
• Erbstück

**autocue** ['ɔːtəʊkjuː]  
• Teleprompter

**court sb.**  
• jmdn. umwerben

**MBE**  
• Member of the British Empire

**honorary doctorate**  
['ɒnərəˈrɪ]  
• Ehrendoktorwürde

**fairy tale**  
• Märchen