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and they also force me to engage with subject matter that I'm not familiar with or have very little familiarity with, so it's also expanding my knowledge base."

Jackson said he was 21 and in prison, where he was sent on drug offenses, before he knew he wanted to be a writer.

"Even then, I wasn't even considering being a writer," he said. "It was like, 'Oh, I want to write a book.' It still took me a long time to figure out what it meant to be a writer as an identity, as a profession. I was probably in graduate school, really my second graduate program."

After serving time in prison, he went to

Portland State University, where he was part of its then-new masters writing program's first class. "And then I went straight to NYU, so I went back-to-back. I didn't really know what a writer was until I got to NYU.

He stayed in New York, where he wrote and taught until last summer, when he and his family moved to Chicago, where he teaches at the University of Chicago.

In typical years he returns to Portland frequently, about every three months, to visit family still living there, "so it kind of tempers my longing," he said. "You know, no place like home for me."

Unfortunately, this past year has been anything but typical.

"I do miss it," he said on Inauguration Day. "All of my family is there still. I go back often enough. Actually, this is the longest that I have not been back for a while. It's approaching a year now."

That last visit was in February 2020, during promotion of "Survival Math," which had been released in paperback. The idea behind the title occurred to him from an incident that happened to him in his early 20s.

"I was still selling drugs, and I was getting in altercations with different people. And a guy tried to break into my house," Jackson said. "I ended up seeing him very early in the morning, and he pulled a gun on me, and threatened my life. And he asked me a question. He was like, 'Do we have a problem?'"

In that moment, a flurry of quick calculations raced through his mind, Jackson said.

"In between him asking and me answering, I looked down the street, I was (like), 'Are there witnesses? What's the chances of him shooting me? And if he shoots me, where will he shoot me?' All these calculations. And I ultimately said, 'No, I'm not looking for you.' It turned out to be something that saved my life because he did end up murdering more than one person."

Years later, he thought to himself "What would I call that?" he said. "And I called those calculations 'survival math.' So the shorthand definition is the calculations one must make when faced with a mortal threat. But then I also think it's also like the calculations one needs to make just to survive any kind of trauma or opposition in the world. So I was saying, like, as a country, we've been in survival math for the last four years."

He was, of course, referring to the rhetoric, racial hostilities and general chaos engendered by, in part, the Trump administration, which came to a head with the Jan. 6 storming of the U.S. Capitol, in which five people died.

"We didn't even know. That's the thing. We were scared, and we had no idea it was going to get this bad," he said. "That's the thing that's really scary."

Inauguration Day came as a relief, he said.

"I hear several people comment, espe-



National Book Award winner Ta-Nehisi Coates is the author of "We Were Eight Years in Power" and "Between the World and Me" along with a number of Black Panther titles for Marvel. He joins Mitchell S. Jackson in conversation Sunday for the second installment of the 2021 Author! Author! series.

Photo: Gregory Halpern

cially people of color, talking about Biden's objective of, like, unity, and how it seems a little naive when people who basically don't want to see any other alive, but I like his hopefulness," Jackson said.

"Because if the president isn't hopeful, even blindly or naively hopeful, or even unrealistically hopeful, then what of the rest of us? What can we be? ... I don't have that same kind of hopefulness, but I do think we can get back to regular oppression, like, pre-Obama oppression, which I've been navigating all my life."

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