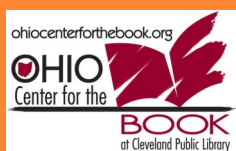


This toolkit is one of the many resources offered by Get Graphic! with the Ohio Center for the Book at Cleveland Public Library.

We aim to promote the study of comics in spaces from public libraries to academic institutions and all outside and between.

Toolkit created by Ohio Center for the Book Scholar-in-Residence, Valentino L. Zullo



Get Graphic! Toolkit

March

by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell

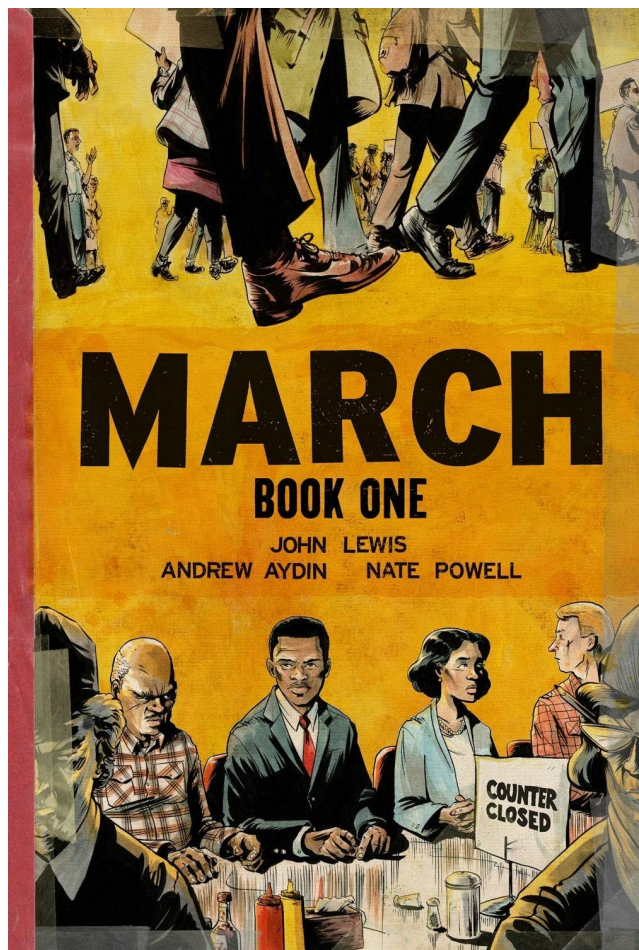
About the Comic

March is an autobiographical comic which illustrates the story of civil rights activist and Congressman John Lewis. Beginning in his early years, *March* documents Lewis's trauma living through Jim Crow America. As the story unfolds, we bear witness to Lewis's journey to become one of the leaders (known as the Big Six) of the Civil Rights movement who organized the March on Washington in 1963.

Lewis's story, told with the help of Andrew Aydin and drawn by Nate Powell, powerfully documents the history of the Civil Rights movement for a new generation. The decision to tell the story as a comic was at the suggestion of Andrew Aydin, Lewis's Digital Director & Policy Advisor. Aydin thought that Congressman Lewis's story needed to reach a new generation and that the comics form would be a good

way to reach that new audience. With Nate Powell as artist, the book became a major success and would go on to receive many accolades including winning the National Book Award for Young People's Literature, the first graphic novel to ever receive a National Book Award.

The purpose of the book was achieved, serving as a testament to the power of comics.



Who is John Lewis?

John Lewis (1940-2020) was an American politician and civil rights leader. He served as the United States Representative for Georgia's 5th Congressional district from 1987 to 2020. Prior to being an elected politician, Lewis chaired the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee from 1963-1966. He was also integral in organizing the March on Washington in 1963 (at which Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his "I Have A Dream Speech"). As documented in his comic, he was one of the most important leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, participating in countless peaceful protests and being arrested for "good trouble." During his time in Congress, he was part of the Democratic party leadership as Chief Deputy Whip and later Senior Chief Deputy Whip (1991 - 2020). He received several honorary degrees and awards for his work including the Presidential Medal of Freedom. His comic documents his life and shares the story of the Civil Rights Movement from a very personal perspective.

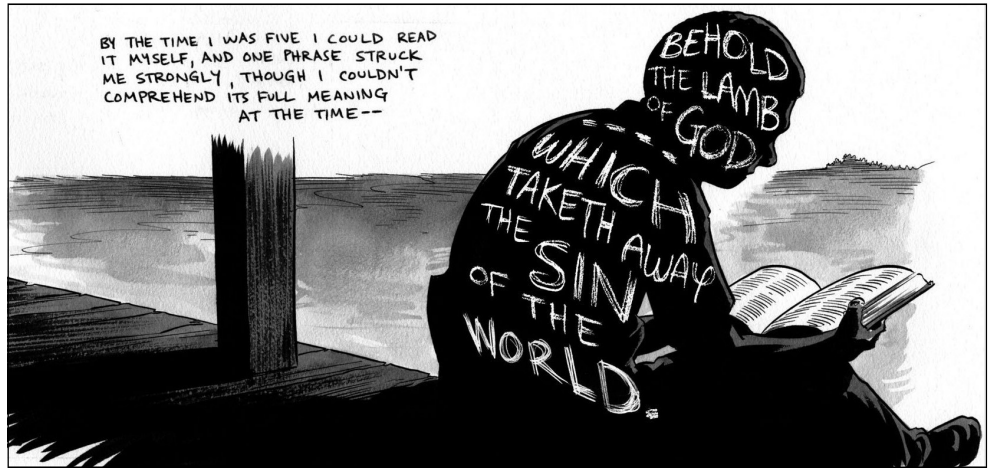


Figure 2 *March Book One*, p. 27.

Context: The Civil Rights Movement

The American civil rights movement was a decades-long fight in the United States to end legalized discrimination and segregation based on race. The movement today is recognized most for its legislative achievements which emerged after much activism, protests, sit-ins, and marches that drew attention to the cause from 1955 to 1968. Though, of course, the fight for civil rights for African Americans began before those years and continues to this day, this particular time period of American history would define the story John Lewis tells in this memoir. Because of the success of the protests at both the local and federal levels, many of the civil rights activists began working with Congress to create several pieces of legislation that would enshrine the governmental support of Black life and race in the United States. There were three particularly significant laws written during this time. *The Civil Rights Act of 1964* outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in employment practices. *The Voting Rights Act of 1965* reinforced and protected the right of minorities to vote by creating federal oversight of registration and elections in areas of the country with historic disenfranchisement. Finally, *The Fair Housing Act of 1968* made any discrimination in the sale or rental of housing illegal. While these laws are monuments to the success of the Civil Rights Movement, many including the *Voting Rights Act* have been systematically dismantled since being passed. Although the movement during the 1950s and 1960s would come to be known for its many achievements, we know there remains much work still to be done.

Questions for Discussion

1. There are numerous recognizable scenes depicted in *March*, ranging from the sit-ins to the inauguration of Barack Obama. How does the cartooning of these iconic events affect our connection to them? How do we process it differently? What unique aspects of these images can the comics portray or stress that a photograph, for example, would do differently?
2. Lewis finds a love for organizing and motivating others in his preaching to the chickens. By locating his understanding of interpersonal relationships in his connection with animals, he connects the fight for human rights with that of understanding the “other.” How do these scenes help us to think about the intersectional dynamics of the fight against other forms of oppression and destruction?
3. Many of the most well-known comics explore intergenerational relations, though often the passing down of trauma. Here Lewis uses the images of the two boys visiting his office as well as the Obama inauguration to offer a hopeful vision of legacy. How else does the comic display his influence and the impact of his legacy? How does the comics form use the visual medium to convey this passing on of legacy?
4. While this is Lewis’s story, it is told with the help of Andrew Aydin and Nate Powell. How do the multiple hands and influences on the story affect the reading experience? How does it affect the feeling of this being an autobiography?
5. As the story goes, Andrew Aydin had to persuade Lewis to tell his story in comics form although Lewis does admit that it was a comic book about Martin Luther King, Jr., that inspired him many years before. Why are comics so suited to telling auto/biographical stories and the fight for freedom? And what has it done for Lewis’s story now that it is in this mass media form?
6. In 2020 and beyond, we once again witnessed the largest civil rights demonstrations since the era documented in Lewis’s story. What connections can we make to the earlier time? What lessons can we take away? What parts of history seem to be repeating themselves?
7. Technology plays an intriguing role in this series as the shift in communication methods is highlighted throughout the narrative. The story even ends with a cell phone ringing. What is the significance of the focus on technological developments?
8. This is a story about witnessing and documenting violence. How does the comic deal with the violence against Lewis and other civil rights leaders? How does it address the resistance to them?

Interviews & Additional Questions

- Joseph Hughes, "Congressman John Lewis and Andrew Aydin talk Inspiring the 'Children of the Movement' with *'March'*" *Comics Alliance*, September 16, 2013. <https://comicsalliance.com/congressman-john-lewis-interview-march-andrew-aydin-top-shelf/>
 - In the interview, Hughes asks Lewis if the translation into the visual makes these scenes more impactful. Lewis responds, "Well, it's the way it happened, and you had to make it real, make it plain. It's tough, when you go through role-playing of social drama, and pretend that you're going to pull someone off the lunch counter, spit on them, blow smoke in their face, pour hot water or hot chocolate or coffee on them, or just harass them and call them all types of names. These are your friends, your classmates, your schoolmates. It's tough, but that's the role you played and it's sort of dehumanizing. But to do this to someone who may have been your roommate, and sometimes using the N-word to make the point, and to have someone like a Nate Powell, to come and make that as real and as simple as possible; it is much stronger and much better than just simple words."
 - Does the comics form make these historical moments more horrifying than photography? Are we just more emotionally affected by the cartooned image of history?
- Lincoln Anthony Blades, "Civil Rights Icon John Lewis Speaks About His *'March'* Graphic Novels and Political Activism," *Teen Vogue*, February 9, 2017. <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/john-lewis-congressman-civil-rights-icon-march-graphic-novels>
 - Nate Powell reflects on his experience drawing *March*. He notes the abstract nature of the history he already knew but had not contended with fully, stating "It was a multi-tiered experience in that way. I'm from the American South and so is every generation in my family, going back hundreds of years. I was born in the '70s and my parents were baby boomers. So my work on *March* was, in a lot of ways, a reckoning with my own experience as a kid, learning about the civil rights movement in the very towns where I lived from my parents, from history, and from personal anecdotes. My experience of that history as a kid always had this level of abstraction and unreality to it. Even though I was hearing about events that happened 15 years before I was born, there was always a part of it that never seemed completely real. So once I started work on *March* and working through the process of developing an aesthetic that would help make these stories personal and emotional and gripping, one of my priorities as a cartoonist was to destroy that level of abstraction."
 - How does the comics form challenge the abstraction nature of other forms of history and documentary?
- Greg Herbowy, "Congressman John Lewis, Andrew Aydin and Nate Powell on their National Book Award-Winning *'March'*" SVA NYC, November 17, 2016. <https://sva.edu/features/congressman-john-lewis-andrew-aydin-and-nate-powell-on-their-national-book-award-winning-march>
 - In this interview, Nate Powell reflects on the importance of telling a story about the movement. He says, "Yes. It's very important to me and the congressman also that this not only be a story of his life, but a story of his role within a much larger movement of people. So the fact that this is a highly visible book that covers the Freedom Rides, and there were 289 Freedom Riders who ended up getting arrested total—there's a certain amount of responsibility to honor everyone involved. I draw the actual people whenever I'm given the chance."
 - While this is Lewis's story, in what ways does *March* also honor the history of the Civil Rights movement and the many involved?

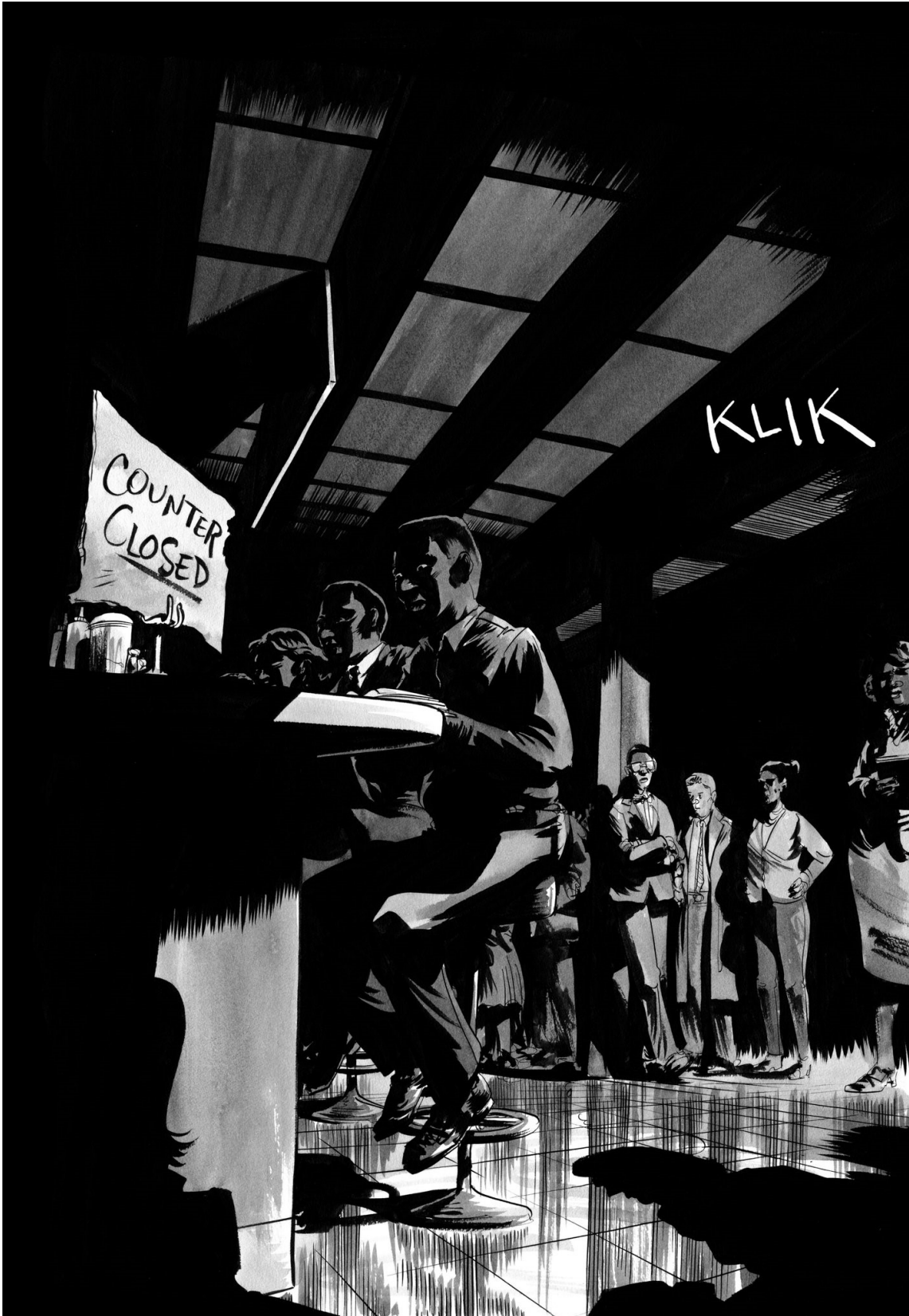


Figure 2 *March Book One*, p. 93.

Scholarship & Additional Questions

- Joanna C. Davis-McElligatt, “‘Walk Together, Children’: The Function and Interplay of Comics, History, and Memory in Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story and John Lewis’s *March: Book One*,” 298-311 in *Graphic Novels for Children and Young Adults* edited by Michelle Ann Abate & Gwen Athene Tarbox (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2017).
 - Davis-McElligatt highlights the ways that Lewis’s story does not limit itself to chronological storytelling, thus emphasizing the effects of the past on the present as she writes, “Despite the fact that the comic is narrated from the perspective of an older man reflecting back on his youth, the stories are geared to a youth readership. As a result, the narrative is a circular motion, moving fluidly between the present and Lewis’s past. In so doing, *March* not only underscores the powerful relationships between these two time periods, but it also counters arguments that the past has little or even no bearing on our present” (308-9).
 - What connection can we make between the past that Lewis depicts and our current moment? How has the civil rights movement influenced other contemporary moments?
- Johannes C.P. Schmid, “Graphic Nonviolence: Framing ‘Good Trouble’ in John Lewis’ *March*,” *European Journal of American Studies* 13-4 (2018).
 - Schmid reflects on the generic conventions of “trauma narratives,” a type of story told often in comics, noting that *March* does something different. He observes that “*March* is not a trauma narrative in a narrow sense. While the work produces affect in its readers, it presents the traumatic experience as a catalyst for the eventual goal of the movement. At the beginning of the first book, after Lewis is being beaten and thus forcefully silenced, the page turns towards an impressive double page inside cover that allows readers to gaze over the Lincoln Memorial and towards the sunrise behind the Washington Monument. ...Rather than ‘working through’ the trauma, the traumatic experience becomes a noble and necessary sacrifice that is presented as part of raising ‘good trouble.’ The sheer horror of traumatizing violence is paired with the promise of the better future”
 - Lewis’s story is a testament to the process of sublimation, turning trauma into something creative. He turns the pain he suffered into motivation for changing the future. How does Lewis’s story understand the experience of trauma differently than other trauma narratives? How does his sublimation ask us to think about healing from trauma through activism?
- Michael A. Chaney, *Reading Lessons in Seeing: Mirrors, Masks, and Mazes in Autobiographical Graphic Novel* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2016).
 - Chaney observes that *March* does something different as it tells the story of not just Lewis but a movement which “[i]n its historiographic orientations, *March* represents a hybrid approach to Civil Rights. It riffs off of the traditional ‘King-centric’ biographical treatment of the era... However, by focusing on a relatively lesser-known figure, *March* aligns with more recent Civil Rights Historiography” (170).
 - Chaney’s observation about Civil Rights narratives offers an important thought about context for what tropes *March* follows and what it does differently. How does *March* relate to other Civil Rights narratives? In what ways does it change the genre?



Figure 3 *March Book One*, p. 30.

Further Supplemental Materials

Additional resources to supplement this toolkit:

- Talks at Google, [“March: Book One | Rep. John Lewis | Talks at Google”](https://youtu.be/NRtrKp1bsPU)
(<https://youtu.be/NRtrKp1bsPU>)
- Politics and Prose, [“Congressman John Lewis “March: Book One”](https://youtu.be/hQU8rMufqLQ)
(<https://youtu.be/hQU8rMufqLQ>)
- Vermont PBS, [“Vermont Reads: March – Book One - A Visit with Congressman John Lewis and co-author Andrew Aydin”](https://youtu.be/7xoWQRr-erw)
(<https://youtu.be/7xoWQRr-erw>)
- Teaching Tolerance, [“John Lewis on His Graphic Novel Memoir”](https://youtu.be/cKYKyMQVRcY)
(<https://youtu.be/cKYKyMQVRcY>)
- Eagleton Institute of Politics, [“MARCH” book talk w/ Rep. John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, Nate Powell](https://youtu.be/VOtQNC_DcJM)
(https://youtu.be/VOtQNC_DcJM)

Further Reading

If you are interested in other works, which document the civil rights movement:

- *King* by Ho Che Anderson (Fantagraphics, 2010).
- *The Silence of Our Friends* by Mark Long Jim Demonakos and Nate Powell (Square Fish, 2018).
- *Incognegro* by Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece (Berger Books, 2018).

If you are interested in other works about the experiences of black identity:

- *Hot Comb* by Ebony Flowers (Drawn & Quarterly, 2019).
- *Bingo Love* by Tee Franklin and Jenn St. Onge and Joy San (Image, 2018).
- *Your Black Freind* by Ben Passmore (Silver Sprocket, 2018).

If you are interested in other comics documenting history:

- *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio* by Derf Backderf (Abrams ComicsArt, 2020).
- *Paying the Land* by Joe Sacco (Metropolitan Books, 2020).
- *Grass* by Keum Suk Gendry-Kim (Drawn & Quarterly, 2019).