

**March,**  
**by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin and Nate Powell**

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**Abstract**

The graphic novel trilogy *March* tells the story of United States Congressman John Lewis and his pivotal role in the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Book One depicts Congressman Lewis' upbringing in Alabama, his desire to be a minister and his inspiration towards non-violent means of protest. Congressman Lewis is influenced by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and has the opportunity to meet him. In Book Two Congressman Lewis grows into prominence and is one of the speakers on the March on Washington, speaking before Dr. King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Book Three chronicles the many attacks and arrests Lewis encounters, culminating in the March to Selma, Alabama, where the brutal attack on the marchers made national television news and helped change public opinion regarding

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.26590/madang..31.201906.143>

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the civil rights movement. All three volumes were co-written by Andrew Aydin with Nate Powell providing the art. March has won numerous awards, with Book Three winning the prestigious National Book Award, the first graphic novel to do so.

- **Keywords**

civil rights, civil disobedience, graphic novel, Social Gospel, desegregation, voting rights



Congressman John Lewis has represented the Fifth District of Georgia since 1986, but he made his name as one of the most courageous civil rights leaders of the 1960s. He was awarded the Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the United States by President Barack Obama in 2011. Arrested more than 40 times, humiliated, and attacked, John Lewis remained steadfast in his belief in non-violence. One of the ten speakers in the March on Washington D.C. in 1963, made famous by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, John Lewis remains one of the most important voices in American civil rights.

A graphic novel may seem like a unique vehicle to tell such a serious and powerful first-hand account of civil disobedience, but Congressman Lewis was inspired as a teen reading the comic book *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*, and wanted to motivate a younger generation, too. Teaming with Andrew Aydin, a policy advisor to Representative Lewis, and Nate Powell, an award-winning graphic artist, Lewis tells the story of his upbringing and his inspira-

tion towards non-violent means of protest. Produced in black and white, Powell's images do not shy away from the brutality that Lewis and his colleagues faced in multiple protests. A particularly powerful image is that of a stained-glass window, where Jesus' face has been shattered as the church was bombed at the end of Book Two.

All three volumes were nominated for the Eisner Award in the non-fiction category, as the best graphic novel of the year, with Book Two winning this most prestigious award. Book Three won the National Book Award, the first graphic novel to do so, and multiple awards from the American Library Association.

### Book One

Focusing on his upbringing, Lewis recounts an uncle giving him a Bible for Christmas when he turned four, and learning to read it on his own by age five. Saying that he always wanted to be a preacher, he used to preach to his chickens on the small family farm. Lewis actually preached for the first time in his church at the age of 16.

Well aware of the discrepancies between what was available to his family compared to what was available to Caucasian children, Lewis also noticed when Black ministers failed to mention the injustices around him. Hearing Dr. King's sermon on the radio applying the principles of the church to current events, calling it the Social Gospel, made a great impact on him. "Dr. King's example showed me that it was possible to do more as a minister than what I had witnessed in my own church." While studying religion and philosophy in college, and learning the way of peace, love and non-violence Lewis couldn't stop thinking about the Social Gospel and wanted to do more. Work-

ing with other students to desegregate department store lunch counters in restaurants in Nashville in 1959, Lewis learned the importance of disarming their attackers by connecting with their humanity—and how important eye contact was in this. Eventually successful with the sit-ins, it would be many years before Lewis ate in a restaurant for the first time in his life, having only gone as part of protests.

## Book Two

Encouraged by the success of the Nashville sit-in campaign, Lewis and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) brought their protests to other restaurants and movie theaters. Facing violence from the community and the police—especially the police—civil disobedience becomes riskier and riskier, particularly when the SNCC chooses to desegregate interstate buses following the Supreme Court decision in *Boynton v. Virginia* stating that segregated buses were unconstitutional. Lewis continues his rise to prominence throughout Book Two, leading to his meeting with President John F. Kennedy before the March on Washington, made famous by Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. This volume ends with behind the scenes discord about Lewis' first draft of his speech in the March on Washington, considered too radical for some. You can read this first draft in its entirety at the end of the volume.

## Book Three

Starting with the bombing of a church that kills four little girls, Lewis and colleagues face high levels of violence throughout the summer of

1963. In the State of Mississippi alone, the SNCC and allied groups suffered more than 1,000 arrests, 80 beatings, 35 church burnings and 30 bombings. Black churches played a critical role in the civil rights movement in the South as gathering places and providing structure and support for the protesters. Lewis makes it clear that his emphasis here is voting rights, borrowing the phrase “One Man, One Vote” from civil rights protesters in Africa. He drives the point home by stating that only 2.1% of adult African-Americans in Dallas County, Mississippi were registered to vote in 1963. The majority kept the minority from voting through Poll Tests, arbitrarily and inconsistently administered literacy tests designed to keep African-Americans from voting.

Much of Book Three deals with the inner workings of the SNCC and the Democratic Party—although Lewis holds both major political parties responsible for the social injustices he sees around him every day. The climax of all three volumes comes towards the end as Lewis takes part in the peaceful protest of over 600 people that was met with brutal violence, and shown nationally on the TV news that evening. Lewis himself was severely injured in the march to Selma, Alabama that turned the nation’s attention to the disenfranchisement of so many citizens and provided a major push for enactment of new laws.

## Conclusion

March is written with a younger audience in mind, but it is a well-crafted piece of art and is great storytelling and deserved the many awards it has won.