



EJOURNAL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

VOLUME 10 | ISSUE 3

Book Review: Run: Book One, by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, L. Fury, and Nate Powell

Allison Bannister
Independent Scholar

Discussed in this review:

Run: Book One. By John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, L. Fury, and Nate Powell. Abrams ComicArts. August 2021. ISBN: 978-1419730696. 160 pages. Hardcover, \$24.99.

March. By John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell. Top Shelf Productions. September 2016. ISBN: 978-1603093958. 560 pages. Trilogy Slipcase Edition, \$49.99.

Author Note

Allison Bannister, Independent Scholar.

Correspondence concerning this book review should be addressed to Allison Bannister, Independent Scholar. Email: allisoncbannister@gmail.com

“Everybody can read comics” (Lewis et. al., 2021, p. 82), a young John Lewis notes in the pages of his posthumous graphic novel *Run: Book One*. The comment refers ostensibly to the educational comics produced and distributed by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Lowndes County in 1966, but ultimately it echoes, with self-reference, an acknowledgment of the rhetorical work Lewis hoped to complete, first with his award-winning graphic novel series *March* (2016) and then with the follow-up series *Run*. Both series are co-written by John Lewis and Andrew Aydin; Nate Powell, the cartoonist for *March*, returns to illustrate the prologue for *Run* before handing off the reins to L. Fury. *Run* is inextricably tied up with *March*; thus, this review reflects necessarily on the earlier series as well as the newest publication.

Run picks up where *March* left off, beginning with the aftermath of *March*'s major victory, the signing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. It introduces (or reintroduces) dozens of activists involved with the civil rights movement and touches on major events between August 1965 and July 1966. While *March* follows the action of John Lewis as a young activist at the heart of the civil rights movement, *Run* deals primarily with reaction—that is, with the fallout and transformation of the work depicted in the first series. Lewis is engaged with some of the protests and campaigns described in this volume but not all of them; he observes and comments on national and international events, painting a broader picture of the way different threads of activism, local elections, and larger issues around race and racism unfold in the year described. *Run* is a dense and sometimes dry book, laying the groundwork for additional installments of the series and, presumably, setting the stage for John Lewis's initial run for political office.

Despite the terrible and tragic acts of violence and racism depicted in *March*, that series is ultimately hopeful. It sets Lewis's reflection on his life and on his early work within the framing narrative of attending President Barack Obama's inauguration, a celebration of the changes occurring in Lewis's lifetime and the hard-won progress in the fight for racial equality. Read today, the victory of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, where *March* ends, feels less conclusively victorious. In 2021, challenges to voting rights have once again become a national crisis, with states across the country making voting more difficult in ways that actively disenfranchise communities of color, and with the U.S. Senate unable to agree to new federal protections, allowing a voting rights bill honoring the legacy of John Lewis to languish under threat of filibuster.

Within this political environment, the first installment of *Run* has been released, and it is bleaker than *March*. Written during the Trump presidency and completed during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Run* recognizes the complexities of victory and the necessity of continued, ongoing work. It expresses both frustration and determination, a willingness to get knocked down and show up again the next day, ready to do it all again. It highlights the pushback against progress, the insidious depths of racism, and the challenges of bringing people together, even when their goals are largely aligned. Over the course of the year depicted, Lewis becomes increasingly isolated as philosophical differences at SNCC fracture the organization's leadership, eventually leading to the end of his time as the chairman and of his involvement with the organization. Although it hints that new opportunities are just around the corner, the book ends on a down note, with Lewis alone and unmoored.

Throughout *March* and *Run*, Lewis-the-protagonist and Lewis-the-co-author demonstrate

consistent attention to rhetoric—to the power of words, images, and actions—to shape minds and create change. The books are works of history and would be useful texts in courses focusing on the civil rights movement, but they are also rhetorical tools for the present, teaching readers the tenets of non-violent protest and laying uncomfortably bare how relevant the battles of the civil rights movement are to the politics of today.

In her work on the impact of television on the evolution of rhetoric, Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1988) noted that,

The civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's was catalyzed not by eloquent words but by eloquent pictures. The most moving words of spring 1963 were written by Martin Luther King, Jr., from a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama.... But pictures from Birmingham, not words, precipitated passage of the Civil Rights Act. (p. 58)

Lewis understood the power of those images: Repeatedly he went to jail as a non-violent protester, using his own body as a medium for visual rhetoric and protest (Haiman, 1967), and he was among those brutalized at Selma. Jamieson (1988) wrote that,

ABC cut from its broadcast of the film *Judgement at Nuremberg* to carry the bloodbath [at Selma].... Ten days later in a nationally broadcast address to a joint session of Congress, President Lyndon Johnson urged adoption of his Voting Rights Act. (p. 59)

Scholars such as Dale Jacobs (2007) have argued that comics can serve as valuable teaching tools, not only by making important topics more appealing and approachable to reluctant readers, but also through their complexity as multimodal texts requiring high levels of visual literacy. These graphic novels lend themselves particularly well to the classroom, offering powerfully resonant lessons on American history, civil rights, and civic engagement, as well as lessons in visual and multimodal rhetoric. John Lewis's decision to spend his final years writing comic books was no impulsive whim: These books represent continued steps in a life committed to justice, non-violent protest, and the power of visual rhetoric.

Although *Run: Book One* provides an excellent overview and illustration of key events in 1965 and 1966, Lewis's own disempowerment during that time, the frustrations and losses faced, and the broad but shallow detail of the historical account leave the book unsatisfying and the narrative arc incomplete. It is a useful follow up to *March* but does not yet stand up well on its own. Despite Lewis's death in 2020, the publisher has indicated that there will be future books, and hopefully the completed series will build upon the foundations established in *Run: Book One* and offer further insight into the political life of the Congressman. There is great potential here to illustrate the work of running for office and of serving a community and a nation in that way; however, *Book One* is transitional, building on the activism of *March* while still setting the stage for John Lewis to "run." I look forward to future installments of the series and am eager to see where this builds. For now, I recommend *March* over *Run* as a more complete work on visual rhetoric and American history.

References

- Haiman, F. (1967). The rhetoric of the streets: Some legal and ethical considerations. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 53(2), 99–114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335636709382822>
- Jacobs, D. (2007). More than words: Comics as a means of teaching multiple literacies. *English Journal*, 96(3), 19–25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/30047289>
- Jamieson, K. H. (1988). *Eloquence in an electronic age: The transformation of political speechmaking*. Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, J., Aydin, A., Fury, L., & Powell, N. (2021). *Run: Book One*. Abrams ComicArts.
- Lewis, J., Aydin, A., & Powell, N. (2016). *March* (trilogy slipcase ed.). Top Shelf Productions.

Author



Allison Bannister is a cartoonist and comics scholar, with an MFA from the Center for Cartoon Studies and a Ph.D. in Communication and Rhetoric from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Her scholarship explores multimodal composition and design practices as well as multimodal rhetoric, with a focus on comics. As a cartoonist, she has published work in more than a dozen anthologies and literary journals in the US and Canada, and served as an editor on the anthology *Who is the Silhouette?*. In 2020, she was awarded a Swann Foundation Library of Congress Fellowship to perform archival research with comics artwork from across the last century. Her current work expands upon her doctoral research.