

This Monday was Martin Luther King Jr. Day. I spent it more or less like any other day. But wanting not to waste it, I took a moment and read Dr. King's Letter from Birmingham Jail in its entirety for the first time. We cut it into pieces to serve our agendas or to spur ourselves to action when our conscience won't suffice, but it is a wonderfully complete message. I read it with a certain solemnity, in the quiet of my bedroom with the memory of young men no longer with us. It was somber and cathartic and reverent. It's time came and was good and went. Two days later I sat on a subway car through three boroughs of New York, surrounded by strangers of all creeds and colors, reading a comic book. The themes were similar and the words echoed one another. They were very similar in their way, but it was March: Book Two that nearly brought me to tears. This second chapter in Congressman John Lewis' graphic novel trilogy picks up fairly immediately from the first. It's clear that the trio will benefit from the ability to read all three as one story. Despite this, where I called the tone of Book One one of optimism, this book is darker and heavier. There are surely happy moments, some of the great successes of Lewis' career are contained within this volume, but not even the promise of Barack Obama's presidency can lift the foreboding shroud off of the story. As in the first book, co-writer Andrew Aydin captures the spirit of John Lewis and the power of his oration in the telling of the story. It's familiar yet statuesque, talking down from above but directly to you. The form the writers have chosen is technically still somewhat remote, hovering above the action as often as it gets down in it, but the force of the narration and the collaboration between the writers and artist Nate Powell makes it hard to believe that anyone could deny the harshly personal flavor of the tale being told. As I said, the character of this book is changed. Maybe it's just me, but the story cut deeply and personally. The content is so real, almost too real. If it were fiction, there would be several moments I would call ham-handed. But that's the trick, especially after a moving first volume, you know that this is deadly truth. If the story doesn't connect with you the way it did to me, this may seem hyperbolic, but for me this was an experience to read. Lewis and Aydin bring home the reality of the Civil Rights era more clearly than the previous installment dared to dream, perhaps more clearly than any story I've ever read. One moment in particular stands out as demonstrating the number of layers with which I experienced the story. Meeting in a church in Montgomery, Lewis and his allies in SNCC are surrounded by an enormous mob, waiting for them beyond the doors. As Robert Kennedy promises aid, the situation is tense but stable and the community must decide whether to head the government's requests to hold off further protests or risk the increasingly violent resistance they've encountered without support. It's a dangerous choice either way, but SNCC decides that the Freedom Rides must continue. Suddenly someone in the mob outside hurls a brick through one of the churches stained glass windows. Something about it stops me. Watching brick crash through the image of Christ supposedly in the name of keeping God's order. It's a large image, full of symbolic resonance, designed by Powell to draw the eye. And then that brick promptly crashes into an old woman's face. As she lies in her own blood - her attacker faceless, not even knowing he's hit her - someone rushes over and calls out to her. "Bernice! Bernice!" My grandmother's name. I knew before and I know now. This could be me. It could be me at my grandmother's funeral. It could be me on the floor of the place I feel safest, wondering what I did to earn such contempt. That's what this book is about. That's why it's ok that it talks at you a little too much. Because even if the narration comes down at you, the dialogue and the artwork is looking you straight in the eyes. This is a comic you have to stare down. This is a comic about fear and, as is the purpose of non-violent resistance, you are confronted with that fear and that injustice. From where we are now, of course the marches and the rides had to continue. Of course it was right to hold to a

non-violent course, but the book does a great job of planting the question in your mind: would you? Would you really? Even if you were unmoved by the protestors training each other to resist cruel words and cold water in the last volume, it's hard to keep a hard heart when watching the sacrifices these young people made and the hatred they encountered. One sequence where Lewis and his fellow Freedom Riders have been sent to Mississippi state penitentiary is somewhat different from the rest of the book but very significant in my mind. Trapped in one of the most dangerous places for them on Earth, the Freedom Riders protest by resisting that very fear I mentioned earlier. For perhaps the first and last concentrated time in the book, humor becomes a very real part of their story and suddenly it hits you how young these people were. Admittedly, it's a little odd how rarely this side of them appears when they are free to plan protests, but it's not so disconnected from the rest of their portrayal that it will take you out of the experience and it does do something to cover a necessary part of the story that's missing from other sections. At some point our respect for these men and women also becomes a threat to their humanity and these moments of humor are essential in reminding us that there was nothing separating us from them but courage and will. One other thing that I found fascinating is Lewis' willingness to express displeasure with some of the giants of the age. The portrayal of Robert Kennedy balances appreciation with frustration and neither understates his importance to the movement nor erases his less favorable qualities. Even more impressive is Lewis' frustration with Dr. King. While those who have studied more fully will understand that King was playing a slightly different game to a very different audience and the demands that placed on him, Lewis firmly presents King from his own perspective at the time, along with all the skepticism that entailed. It's a bold move in a country that treats King like a saint. Indeed, particularly as Lewis and Aydin dive into the complex world of necessary tone policing within such a movement, you become aware of how carefully crafted this story is. But where that could be a problem for a memoir, to me, March owned this, trusting us with the knowledge that politics, even movement politics, requires some level of tact and restraint. It's also nice to see that even the great leaders of the Civil Rights Movement struggled with the threat of extremity and the desire to support causes that occasionally go farther than we are comfortable or refuse to take a stand when it's needed. The struggle over Lewis' March for Jobs and Freedom speech and the kind inclusion of the original draft illustrate Lewis and SNCC's frustration with the white establishment's lukewarm support, ironically echoing sentiments from Dr. King's Letter from Birmingham Jail despite the preacher's hesitance towards the speech. The inclusion of thanks to honest, supportive politicians, "There are exceptions, of course. We salute those", reads quite a bit more like an exasperated response to modern calls of 'Not All Men' once you know that Lewis originally thought it self-evident. Just the same, Lewis is also respectfully, if forcefully, critical of the more extreme elements of SNCC that began to gain power within the organization, with the very idea of SNCC ceasing to be a multi-racial organization depicted as a punch in the face. The contrasts between the two positions are thought provoking and, I think, lead to a more nuanced version of the history than a simplified message would be capable of. If there's one thing that I think makes March: Book Two difficult to read, it's the sheer number of names and dates. There are many characters who appear only for a brief moment but are given introductions comparable to any of the major players. With so many introductions, it's not hard to get overwhelmed. It also can make it difficult to follow other characters' stories, hard as it is to remember if it was the same person you're thinking of. It's admittedly a complicating factor, but I think I understand why Lewis and Aydin made that decision. Especially considering how many people I know, intelligent and politically engaged

people even, don't recognize the name John Lewis, my guess is that Congressman Lewis is attempting to give some of the forgotten names of the movement a place to be recognized. I know a review is supposed to mention weaknesses in a work, but it seems like whenever I think I've found something technically uneven about this comic, it's got an intelligent rationalization that convinces me of its validity. While it can be a tad difficult to keep track of all the players' stories, those that Lewis gives special attention are pretty great. The portrayal of Bayard Rustin is particularly moving and Rustin's final appearance, tellingly one of the very few scenes not to feature or transition to Lewis, is a tear-jerker. All throughout Nate Powell is a powerhouse. It's not easy to breathe life into debate and, especially, oration in the graphic novel form, but Powell does a truly impressive job. Though his art is frequently simple, Powell packs it with emotion, still a master of using shadow to bring out the beauty of his black and white compositions. Though you could call his work stylized, obviously indebted to cartooning as much as comic art, Powell's panels only occasionally draw attention to themselves. Most of the time the emphasis is laid on the storytelling between panels and the content of the page. That said, don't mistake that for a criticism of the artwork, it feels utterly intentional and only reinforces the power of those panels that simply demand your attention. The linework is simple but out of simple lines comes full and weighty portraits of the men and women behind the Civil Rights Movement. Admittedly, there are panels where characters can look a little squished, but overall the technique is impressive and Powell's skill for shading and composition guide us gracefully through the story. The post March: Book Two appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

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