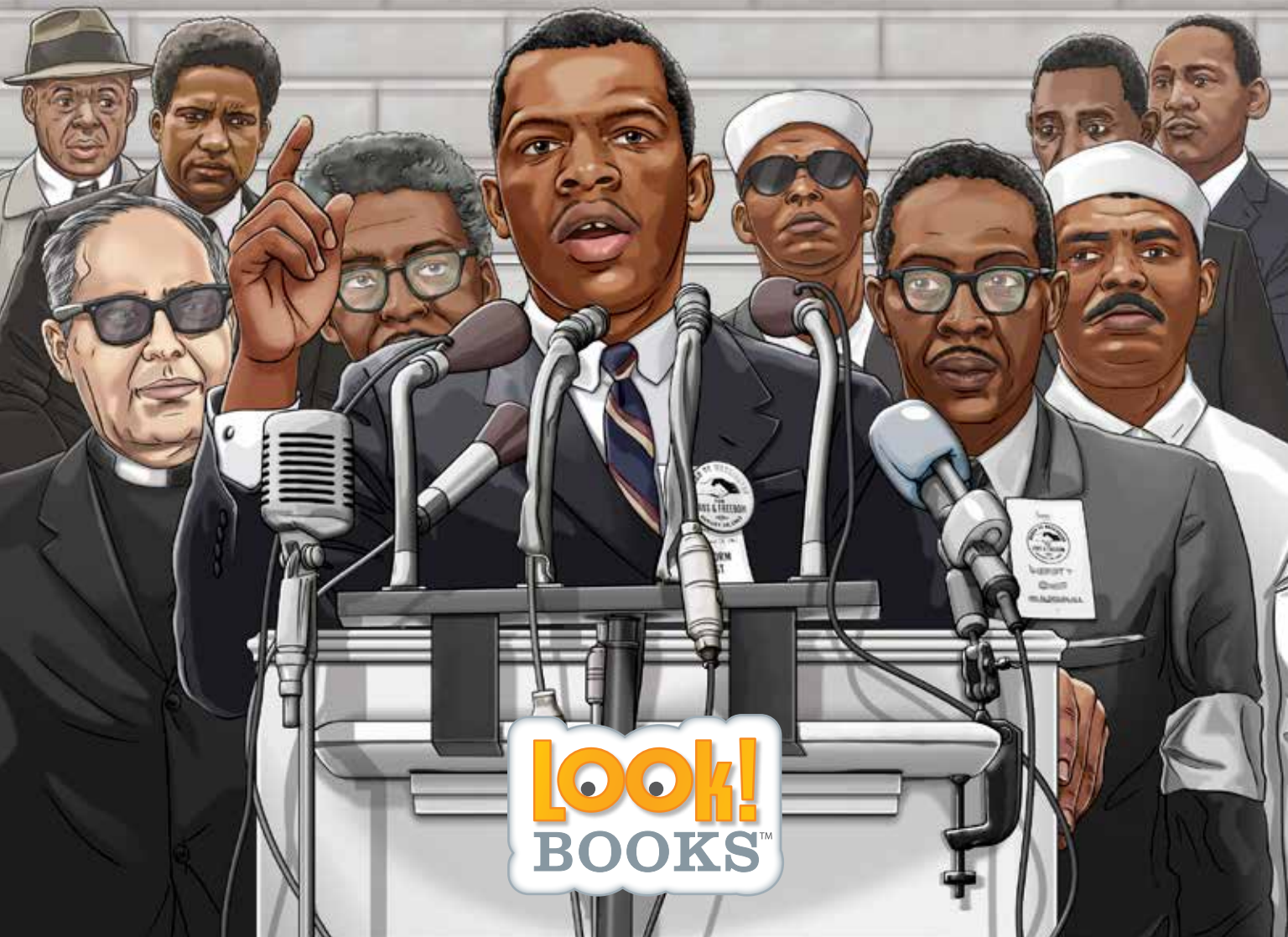


Beginner Biography

Congressman John Lewis

A Man on a Mission to Seek Justice for All



Look!
BOOKS™

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Congressman John Lewis

A Man on a Mission to Seek Justice for All



by Jennifer Marino Walters
illustrated by Niall Harding

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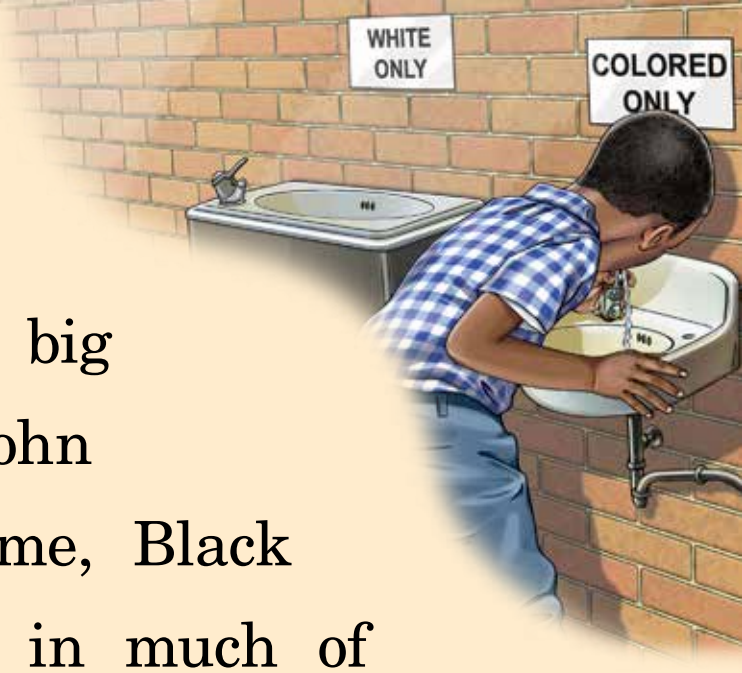
Segregation in the South

John Robert Lewis was a mostly happy child. He was born on February 21, 1940 outside Troy, Alabama. His parents were **sharecroppers**. John liked to help on the family's farm. He took care of the chickens and picked cotton, peanuts, and corn.

Good to Know

In 1954, the Supreme Court case *Brown v. the Board of Education* ruled that racial segregation of public schools went against the U.S. Constitution. But most schools in the South remained segregated for many more years.

But there was one big thing that made John unhappy. At the time, Black and white children in much of the South had to go to segregated (separate) schools. Blacks and whites also had to use separate restrooms, water fountains, libraries, and more. John knew that was unfair. But his parents told him that's just the way it was.



Peaceful Protests

John did not accept that. As he grew up, he became inspired by **civil rights** leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. When he was a teenager, John began to organize and participate in sit-ins at segregated lunch counters.



Good to Know

A sit-in is a form of peaceful protest in which people sit or stay in a place and refuse to leave until they are given what they ask for or are removed by force.



Even though these protests were peaceful, John was often arrested, beaten, and spat upon. His parents urged him to stop his civil rights work. They worried about his safety. But John was brave and kept up the work.

Freedom Rider

In 1961, John took part in the famous Freedom Rides. He and 12 other Freedom Riders rode buses through the South to challenge segregation on buses and in bus stations. John and the other Freedom Riders were badly beaten and arrested.

Good to Know

John became known as one of the "Big Six" leaders of the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King Jr. was also one of the Big Six.



In 1963, John moved to Atlanta, Georgia to become chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. It was a group of mostly Black college students who practiced peaceful protests.

A Historic Act

That same year, John helped plan the famous March on Washington. Over 200,000 people gathered in Washington, D.C. to demand equal rights for all people. John Lewis was the youngest person to speak at the event.

Good to Know

Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. He shared his wish that people of every race could live together peacefully.

The following year, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. That law banned **discrimination** based on race, color, religion, sex, or national **origin**. But Black people still had to pass reading and writing tests or own property in order to vote, something white people did not have to do.



Leaders from the March on Washington, including Lewis, second from far right.

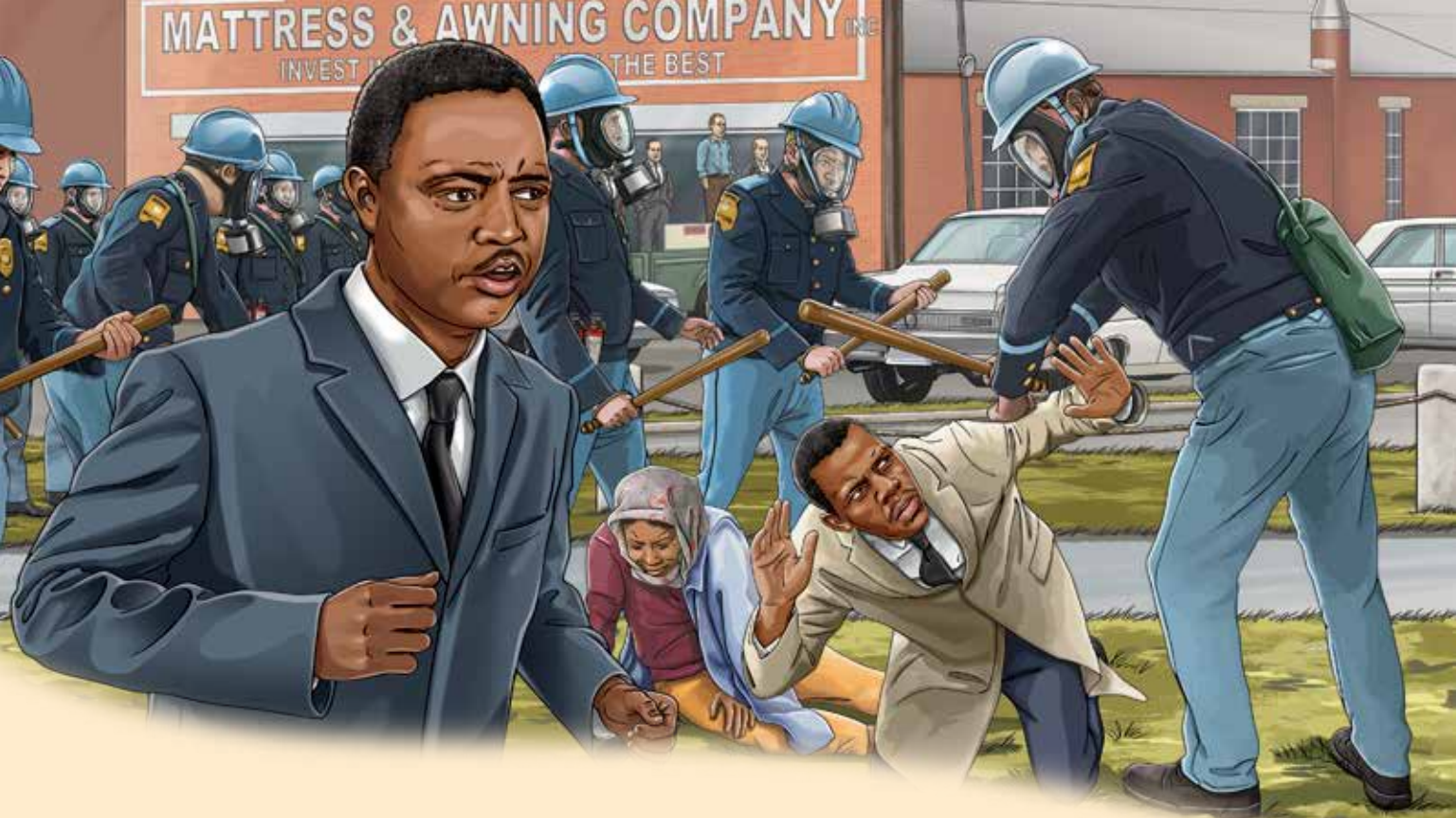
Bloody Sunday

In protest, John and a man named Hosea Williams led over 600 marchers from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama on March 7, 1965. State troopers attacked the marchers and beat them with clubs as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama.



Good to Know

John was arrested more than 40 times between 1960 and 1966.



John was beaten so badly that his skull was broken. He and over 50 other marchers were hospitalized. That day came to be known as “Bloody Sunday.”

The Right to Vote

But the march called attention to voting **inequality**. Many people who saw it on TV were angry with how the marchers were treated. That helped to get 1965's Voting Rights Act passed more quickly. The new law banned racial discrimination in voting once and for all.

Good to Know

John married Lillian Miles in 1968. They remained married until her death in 2012.

But John's work was not done.
In 1970, he became director
of the Voter Education Project.
He helped nearly 4 million
minorities register to vote.



Congressman

John then turned to politics.

In 1981, he won a seat on Georgia's Atlanta City Council.

In 1986, he was elected to the House of Representatives to represent Georgia's 5th District.



John soon become one of the most **respected** members of Congress. He worked to fight poverty and gun violence, improve education, and change healthcare.



He spoke out against racism. And he worked to get the Voting Rights Act renewed several times.

Inspiring Kids

John wanted to inspire kids to continue fighting for civil rights. So, he helped to create a series of graphic novels about his work. In 2016, he won a National Book Award for the third book in the series.



“I grew up very poor, very few books in our home,” John said. “I remember... when I was 16 years old, going to the public library... and we were told the library was for whites only and not for coloreds. And to come here and receive this honor, it’s too much.”





John also received several awards for his civil rights work. They included the Presidential Medal of Freedom (one of the nation's highest honors) in 2011.

John remained in Congress until his death from cancer on July 17, 2020 at age 80. He left behind a son, John-Miles Lewis. John will always be remembered for his tireless fight for equality for all people.

Congressman John Lewis was given a rare honor of having his casket lay in the U.S. Capitol so the public and officials could pay their respect.



Timeline: Big Dates in John's Life

- 1940:** John is born on February 21 in Alabama.
- 1961:** He takes part in the Freedom Rides to protest segregation on buses and in bus terminals.
- 1963:** John helps plan the March on Washington. He is the youngest person to speak there.
- 1964:** The Civil Rights Act is passed.
- 1965:** John co-leads a march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama to fight for voting equality. The Voting Rights Act is passed.
- 1968:** John marries Lillian Miles, who died December 31, 2012.
- 1970:** He becomes director of the Voter Education Project.
- 1986:** John is elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, representing Georgia's 5th District.
- 2011:** He receives the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama.
- 2020:** John dies of cancer on July 17 at age 80.



Words to Know

civil rights: rights that every person should have regardless of race, gender, or religion

discrimination: unfairly treating a group of people differently from another group of people

inequality: an unfair situation in which some people have more rights or better opportunities than other people

origin: the place where something begins

respected: admired by many people

sharecroppers: farmers who raise crops for a landowner and get paid part of the money from the sale of the crops

Learn More at the Library

(Check out these books to read with others)

Davis Pinkney, Andrea. *Because of You, John Lewis.* Scholastic Press, 2022.

Leslie, Tonya. *The Story of John Lewis.* Rockridge Press, 2021.

Lewis, John and Aydin, Andrew. *March (Trilogy Slipcase Set).* Top Shelf Productions, 2016.

Meltzer, Brad. *I am John Lewis.* Rocky Pond Books, 2023.

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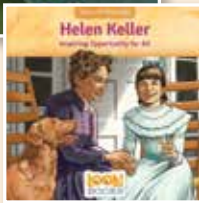
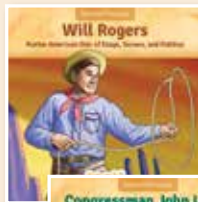
About the Author

Jennifer Marino Walters is grateful for role models like Congressman John Lewis. She and her husband live with their twin boys and daughter in the Washington D.C. area of Virginia.

Beginner Biography



John Lewis, a Black American civil rights activist, was one of the original Big Six leaders of the nonviolent movement along with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He said his hero was Rosa Parks who told him it was okay to get into “good trouble” in fighting for justice and equal rights. Lewis took her advice all the way to the US Congress.



Look for these other books, too—

Wilma Rudolph: Fastest Runner on Earth
Ruby Bridges: A Brave Child Who Made History
Maria Tallchief: Native America's Prima Ballerina
Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Fighter for Womens' Rights

Cesar Chavez: Friend to Farm Workers
Daniel Inouye: World War II Hero and Senator
Sequoyah: Man of Many Words
Sojourner Truth: Fighting for Freedom



Books for kids who want to know.

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