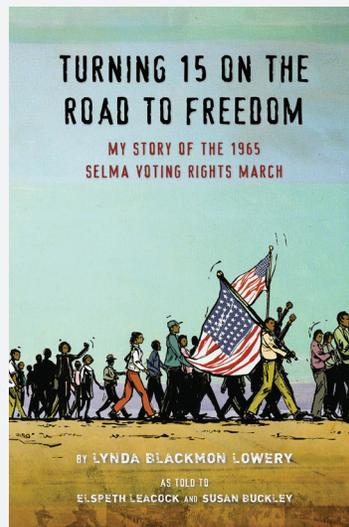


## Second Reaction: Young Adults Can Be Heroes

Lowery, Linda Blackmon. *Turning 15 on the Road to Freedom: My Story of the Selma Voting Rights March*. New York: Dial Books, 2015. Print.

*Ariel Cornelissen*



Brave. Determined. Courageous. Strong. These are just a few words students used to describe Lynda Blackmon Lowery after reading her memoir, *Turning 15 on the Road to Freedom*, set in 1965 during a heightened period of the American Civil Rights Movement. In her memoir, Lowery details her involvement as a young girl in the American Civil Rights Movement in Selma, Alabama. This memoir focuses specifically on Lowery's involvement in the marches led by the youth of Selma in demanding the right to vote, a right that had illegally been denied African Americans in many of the southern states.

Lowery's memoir is a beautiful reminder of the strength of young people, and it serves as an inspiration as well as a call to action for today's youth who see injustices all around them. She encourages young readers by telling them they can make a difference in the world. Although it is often easy for youth to take a position of complacency because they feel as if they are ignored and lack the ability to create change where they think it necessary, Lowery proves through her book that everyone has the ability to move mountains when detailing the Voting Rights March and the coinciding movements that were rooted in the nonviolent activism of Selma's youth.

I read this book with a group of eighth graders who are struggling readers and are often reluctant to read. As a result, they often find it difficult to engage with the literature they

read. The language in Lowery's book makes her story easily understood; it was perfect for my students. The straightforward nature of the language, coupled with the illustrations and photographs from the time period, create a young adult, reader-friendly work of nonfiction. My students adored this book, and they were always asking to read out loud for the class. To see struggling readers openly engage with a text is an encouraging sight and speaks volumes about the accessibility of the text. My students particularly appreciated Lowery's honesty about the situations to which she was subjected. The descriptions of her treatment while jailed and during the incident of Bloody Sunday disallowed any reader to negate the severity of the violence and injustice with which she and the others with her were treated. At the same time, as an educator, I appreciated that it was not needlessly graphic in its details when it could have been. The imagery in the book paired with a few shared video clips of footage from the marches helped make the events even more real for my students.

While reading Lowery's memoir as a class, students were able to discuss numerous themes that are present in the story and relevant to today's youth and society. One topic that unfortunately is still relevant is racial injustice. In light of recent racially charged conflicts across our nation, this memoir is a demonstration of the ability to overcome the ignorance and hatred of others. It provided students an opportunity to openly discuss their thoughts on the subject of race and its role in our country's past and present.

Another topic this book allowed us to discuss was voting, which is especially pertinent considering that it is an election year. We were able to discuss why people deserved the right to vote and the importance of it then and now. It is certainly my hope that the message of the importance of voting and being an active member of a community is a message that will continue to follow and inspire them to embrace the actions of an active community member.

Politics aside, being able to discuss the value of courage and standing up for what is right and doing it in a manner that earns respect, is one the most powerful messages Lowery creates with her memoir. Students shared in writing their ideas on what they could do to make a difference in their community, and their responses served to solidify my belief in the power of young people standing together for the greater good.

Although my class was unable to spend a lot of time with this book, it could be used in many other ways in different classrooms. It could be a great entry into a social studies unit or literacy lesson. Regardless of its use, I have no doubt that when incorporated into the classroom, *Turning 15 on the Road to Freedom* will inspire younger generations to embrace their power to create social change.

## About the Author

**Ariel Cornelissen** is an eighth grade language arts teacher at Klondike Middle School in West Lafayette, Indiana. She is currently working on her master's degree at Purdue University in English education with a focus on developing empathy through literature. Like any good Boilermaker, she regularly attends Purdue sporting events and loyally cheers on her fellow Boilermakers.