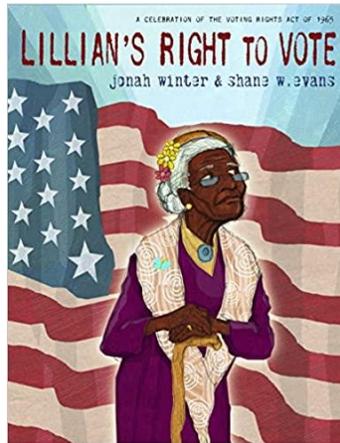


## **First Opinion: Lillian Has Been Climbing This Hill for Generations: The Impacts of The Voting Rights Act of 1965**

Winter, Jonah. *Lillian's Right to Vote*. Illustrated by Shane Evans. New York: Schwartz and Wade, 2015. Print.

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As a child, I had a skewed understanding of voting, partly because I grew up in a small town where politics were akin to a sport and also because my grandmother, Josie Fox, worked every single election as a poll worker. “Kid,” she said to my six-year-old self when I asked what that meant, “it means I make sure people can vote.” I remember, in 2013, when the Supreme Court invalidated certain provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, allowing states to change voting laws without federal oversight, Josie fretting over the implications of the ruling. A woman of complicated politics, even she recognized the potential of the ruling to marginalize and alienate people from voting, the exact action she wanted to provide access to.

Author Jonah Winters draws upon the true story of another woman whose belief in voting is resolute: Lillian Allen, a Pittsburgh resident who, at the age of 100, cast her vote to Barack Obama after volunteering for his campaign (Murray). Lillian is a fascinating character through which the reader comes to understand the hard-won right for Black Americans to vote. At the onset of the book, Lillian prepares to climb a steep hill, at the summit of which is her polling place and, “by God, she is going to vote” (Winter, unpagged). It’s her climb, the story of which is told in a voice that is both familiar and full of

determination, that provides the structure of the picture book and is a metaphor for the trials and tribulations faced by Black Americans from slavery to modern day as they seek equal citizenship in the United States. The structure is useful as it's a literal uphill battle. As she climbs, Lillian encounters figures both familiar to her—her great-great-grandparents on the slavery auction block, her great-grandmother, Ida, standing behind her husband as he votes for the first time (it is not yet legal for her to cast a ballot), as well as historical figures such as Jimmie Lee Jackson who was shot by an Alabama state trooper during a peaceful voting right march and Martin Luther King Jr., whose “words still lift up Lillian, who, seeing the top of the hill is not about to stop” (Winter, unpagged). As Lillian climbs this hill, “though her feet and legs ache with one hundred years of walking” (unpagged), the woven narratives of her own life and the lives of her relatives convey to the reader just how hard won the right to vote has been. By the close of the book, Lillian has reached her polling place, standing in the voting booth just as she had the first year she was able to vote, 1965. It was the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that secured her right to vote, though an author’s note reiterates that voting rights continued to be under assault. Lillian’s climb, in combination with her remembrances of both family and history, link past and present, providing rich opportunities for exploring complex political issues. The right to vote is still not guaranteed and still under assault which the author reminds us.

Shane W. Evans conveys the richness of the story through his mixed media artwork, bringing together rich colors and textures to create powerful images within each spread of the book. Evans is particularly adept at constructing a dual timeline throughout the book, keeping Lillian in full color while portraying historical figures in tonal monochromatics. This artistic decision allows readers to juxtapose what is happening to Lillian during her uphill climb and what she is remembering. A layering of color and pattern energizes the picture spreads, giving the reader an immense level of detail to appreciate. The endpapers are a particularly entertaining detail, framing the story with a depiction of Lillian beginning her ascent up the hill and returning home again.

In my own version of this story, my grandmother is one of the poll workers at the top of the hill, ensuring that Lillian can, indeed, vote. While this book is written as a celebration of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, that same act has lost much of its power in protecting the rights of voters. Lillian’s right to vote is not assured and can be seen in the realities of voting in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin primary, where lines for polling places in the city stretched around entire blocks. In an age where there is a circulating public discourse about limiting voting to those who really want it, who are willing to jump through numerous hoops in order to cast their ballot, *Lillian’s Right to Vote* reminds readers that voting has

never been easy, particularly for people who are neither white nor male and that care must be taken to ensure that right for all citizens.

### **Works Cited**

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### **About the Author**

**Nicholas E. Husbye** is a teacher educator and literacy education researcher at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln. He is planning on following in his grandmother's footsteps and will work the polls for the first time in the 2020 election.