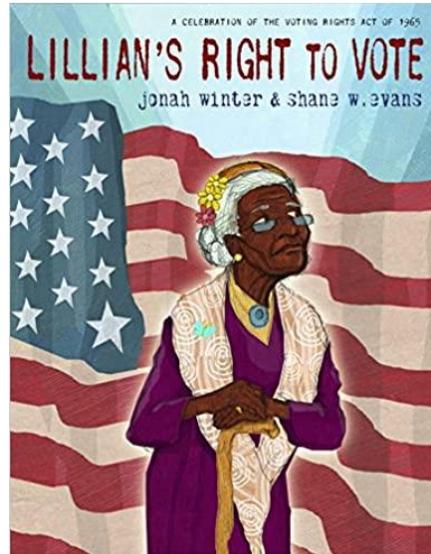


Second Reaction: Re-historicizing Voting Equity for Young Readers

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

Lenny Sánchez and Lauren Hunt



At the beginning of the story, Lillian, who is over 100 years old, is seen at the bottom of a steep hill in the middle of her town. With cane in hand, she makes a slow walk up the hill across the pages of the book towards a polling site. Her ascent is not just an opportunity to cast a vote but marks important life experiences and events that helped pave the way for African American voting rights. With each step, Lillian retraces her family enslavement histories and other struggles of discrimination that led to unequal and unprotected voting rights for African Americans. She also recounts important victories in the fight for civil rights and racial justice. Although author Winter and illustrator Evans use this book to celebrate moments of progress towards racial equity, Lillian's journey also reveals that substantial challenges still persist and that new sanctions continue to be legalized to reify systemic discrimination.

Lillian's Right to Vote is an inspiring book for readers of all ages. In our separate readings to our individual families, our children paid close attention to the symbolism of the hill. As one child noted, "It's like a hill of memories where she sees all these things through the city

and her life.” As another child observed, “She slowly but surely gets up the hill.” Lillian’s uphill climb is a notable storyline in the book and brilliantly runs parallel to the social gravity that often underlines stories of racial determination and struggle in the U.S. The children’s responses throughout the book seemed to recognize that the hill is Lillian’s path to vote as well as a backdrop to broader issues and struggles.

The illustrations in the book also work to bring life to complex understandings on how the present is rooted in ongoing, converging histories of the past. On nearly every page, readers see ghost-like images of past people and events that provide insight to Lillian’s life experiences and show that she is not alone in advancing causes for justice. As one of our children voiced, “I would call this an imagination book because of all these people and things that make her life.” We actually find this reference to imagination particularly insightful as it perceptively recognizes the need for individual and social experiences to be understood within an historical context. In fact, on some pages, Lillian’s present-day self can be seen standing next to herself as a young girl and also herself as a young woman. As some of the children noted, those experiences in the past “helped her vote today.” In other words, these illustrations of connecting Lillian across time and space can help readers examine how events of the past can shape the future, which is such a powerful disposition to develop in examining institutional issues such as voting equity.

We want to point out that Lillian’s story is one that needs to be heard and shared multiple times. While this book is engaging for young readers, the presented historical concepts call for multiple readings to fully grasp their importance and relevance for each reader. For our children, the first reading seemed to act as introduction to challenges faced by Lillian and countless other African Americans throughout history. However, we saw the need to provide additional readings that could allow young readers to further examine the historical references to people and events in U.S. history and to better understand and empathize with the plight of African Americans across time, especially to critically examine racial tensions and disparities that still remain today.

This book is a vital resource to read and unpack with young children amid the upcoming elections considering the racial tensions of our time. Lillian’s story provides a way for young readers to develop a better understanding of Lillian’s struggles for equality and allows readers to recognize the importance of using their own voices to enact their own rights to vote, an act once reserved only for a privileged group of wealthy, white male landowners. As one of our children noticed, regarding the image of Lillian with her cane raised high in the air, just as Lillian is

“standing up for something,” so should we. We must work to protect the right to vote for marginalized communities and stand in unity for justice.

About the Authors

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