

Lift every voice

February offers fresh looks at freedom fighters John Lewis, Harriet Tubman and Medgar and Myrlie Evers.

★ John Lewis

Like his mentor Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis had a dream. Amid the turmoil and violence of a segregated South and a nation embroiled in the struggle for racial reconciliation, Lewis envisioned and championed what he called a “Beloved Community” in America, “a society based on simple justice that values the dignity and the worth of every human being.” In his captivating **John Lewis: In Search of Beloved Community** (Yale University, \$35, 9780300253757), Raymond Arsenault narrates the mesmerizing story of Lewis’ evolution from a Civil Rights activist to an eminent congressman who never lost sight of his vision for a just and equitable society.

Drawing on archival materials and interviews with Lewis and his friends, family and associates, Arsenault traces Lewis from his childhood in Troy, Alabama, where he daily witnessed the indignities and violence of racial segregation. Inspired by the Montgomery Bus Boycott, he entered American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, Tennessee, and began his storied activism in earnest. Lewis and his contemporaries incorporated the principles of rightness and righteousness with methods of nonviolent resistance.

Lewis was elected to Congress in 1986 with a commitment to carry on the spirit, goals and principles of nonviolence and social action. In a 2020 speech, Lewis uttered the remarks that cemented his legacy: “We cannot give up now. We cannot give in. . . . Go out there, speak up, speak out, get in the way. Get in good trouble, necessary trouble.”

Arsenault offers the first comprehensive biography of the icon, an inspiring portrait of a man whose vision and moral courage propelled him to share his belief in the Beloved Community and inspire generations.

—Henry L. Carrigan, Jr.

Combee

Edda L. Fields-Black’s extraordinary **Combee: Harriet Tubman, the Combahee River Raid, and Black Freedom During the Civil War** (Oxford University, \$39.99, 978019752797) will not be for every reader. It is long and very detailed. Reading it is sometimes like watching the slow, painstaking process of an archaeological dig—but readers who stick with the book will come away satisfied by Fields-Black’s patient unearthing.

The event at the center of her excavation is the June 20, 1863, Combahee River Raid, when 300 Black Union soldiers torched seven South Carolina rice plantations along a 15-mile stretch of the river, causing millions of dollars of damage to crops and property and striking “fear into the heart of the rebellion.” Their guide was Harriet Tubman—today known around the world for her work in the Underground Railroad, but less so for her courageous military history. With Tubman acting as intermediary, 746 people fled to the river’s edge and boarded the Union boats to escape slavery. The raid served notice that Black men—both formerly enslaved and free—could become effective, disciplined Union soldiers.

These events are narrated with a passion for factual depth and precision. **Combee** is often revelatory. Fields-Black conveys that the South Carolina rice economy was essential to the Confederacy and involved remarkable feats of technology and engineering, much of them performed by enslaved people taken from rice growing regions of Africa. Fields-Black’s approach also provides insight into the remarkable abilities of Tubman to communicate across linguistic and cultural barriers and to move stealthily through the South unnoticed.

Prior to this account, many of these freedom seekers had been lost to history. Most, like Tubman, were illiterate and did not record their experiences; plantation records were destroyed in the raid. Through herculean research and cross-referencing of land, bank, U.S. Army pension and slavery transaction records, Fields-Black is able to name names and offer readers a sense of who these people were and what their lives were like. **Combee** holds many additional revelatory threads and insights, but this act of resurrection alone makes the book profoundly important.

—Alden Mudge

★ Medgar and Myrlie

Civil rights activist and World War II veteran Medgar Evers met the love of his life, 17-year-old Myrlie Louise Beasley, in 1950. They married a year later, forming a bond that is the heart of Joy-Ann Reid’s moving biography, **Medgar and Myrlie: Medgar Evers and the Love Story That Awakened America** (Mariner, \$30, 9780063068797).

The passionate voice of Reid, the host of MSNBC’s “The ReidOut,” guides this love story; it’s also, she writes, about Medgar’s “deep and unfaltering love for Mississippi,” as well as “the higher love it took for Black Americans to love America and to fight for it, even in a state that butchered more Black bodies via lynching than any other.”

Reid argues that Medgar’s accomplishments have been overshadowed by the many events and assassinations that took place after he was gunned down in 1963, leaving the quiet, formidable Myrlie to raise their three children and carry on her husband’s legacy. Readers will long remember Medgar’s courage and Myrlie’s devotion and bravery, especially since the couple knew Medgar was likely to be the victim of an assassination attempt. Their house had no front door because that might have left them too vulnerable, and the children regularly practiced shooting drills, preparing for the horrors that soon arrived on their doorstep.

Reid draws on a variety of sources, including her own recent interviews with Myrlie, who never stopped fighting to see her husband’s killer prosecuted. It took 30 years for Klansman Byron De La Beckwith to be convicted of homicide and sentenced to life in prison; without Myrlie, justice would never have prevailed.

Page by page, **Medgar and Myrlie** paints unforgettable portraits of two American heroes who faced racism with unimaginable courage.

—Alice Cary

