**Talk About Literature in Kansas** is a program for every Kansan who loves to read and discuss good books. For more information about TALK and other programs for libraries, museums, and non-profit groups, contact

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**Civil Rights, Revisited**

When poet Langston Hughes attended middle school in Lawrence, Kansas in the nineteen tens his teacher placed all the black students in a single row of desks in the classroom, effectively segregating him and the other African American students from their white classmates. Hughes, who grew up in a progressive household, protested this treatment by placing signs on the desks of his fellow African American classmates that read “Jim Crow row.” When his teacher grew angry and removed the signs, Hughes ran through the halls of the school and into the courtyard shouting, “Jim Crow row! Jim Crow row!” The literal and figurative disruption he caused led to a meeting between African American parents and community leaders and school officials, and the segregation of students in the classroom ceased.

The story of Hughes’s act of resistance towards racism and injustice highlights two points. First, the actions of one person can make a difference. Hughes’s act of disruption affected change. Second, the story represents one episode in the fight for equality and dignity for African Americans in Kansas.

The books in this series offer a look at Civil Rights from the launch pad of the twenty-first century. John Lewis’s memoirs in graphic novel form reveal the power of pictures and words in his intimate retelling of pivotal events of the Civil Rights Movement and how his actions along with countless others can be directly linked to the election of this country’s first African American president. Coates, Rankine, and Alexander forefront the injustices that still exist and remain to be eradicated be it systemic racism, microaggressions, or outright hostility. Themes of the body, citizenship, and dreams—deferred (to invoke Hughes)—and otherwise thread all of these volumes together.

***March* by John Lewis**

Civil Rights icon and United States Congressman John Lewis wrote this series of three graphic novels based on his experiences in the Civil Rights Movement during the early 1960s. A 1958 comic about Martin Luther King, Jr. inspired him as a young man growing up in rural Alabama, and he sought to instill that same sense of pride in a new generation of youth. The illustrations and first-hand account bring this period to life.

**Book 1**

This volume begins the day of the inauguration of Barack Obama and through a series of flashbacks Lewis recalls the impact of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the philosophy of nonviolence on him personally and the Movement as a whole. He explains how he and other young activists became frustrated with the conservatism of the folks in the Civil Rights Movement from an earlier generation and that this led to the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC’s policy, while still following the philosophy of nonviolence, leaned towards direct confrontation.

**Book 2**

Book 2 follows Lewis’s rise within SNCC and the growing influence of the organization on the Civil Rights Movement as a whole. We witness the struggles of the 1961 Freedom Rides, the voter registration campaign in Mississippi, and the 1963 March on Washington. As Lewis states, “Human dignity is the most important thing in my life.”

**Book 3**

The final volume in the trilogy focuses on the Selma to Montgomery march which led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The longest of the three volumes, it covers the death of the three girls in the Birmingham church bombing and Freedom Summer in Mississippi.

***Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates**

Author Ta-Nehisi Coates won the National Book Award for this searingly honest reflection on contemporary race relations in the United States. Written as a letter to his teenage son, this slim volume provokes a myriad of emotions. Part autobiography, part history lesson, Coates forces the reader to grapple with the meaning of being American.

***Citizen* by Claudia Rankine**

This poetic work crosses boundaries in its sojourn into American race relations in the twenty-first century. Rankine turns a critical eye to everything from tennis superstar Serena Williams to everyday microaggressions on the subway. As one of the blurbs on the back of her book reads, “[Citizen] lovingly embraces and articulates the trauma and contradictions of what happens when one person is spat upon and another person spits.”

***The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander**

Author Michelle Alexander meticulously examines the role of race in the American judicial system. In a powerful tour de force she steps back and by looking at the big picture forces the reader to concede the point: that the prison industrial complex picks up where slavery and Jim Crow segregation left off. She demonstrates how today’s conditions were planned to perpetuate a system that discriminates against people of color through the War on Drugs. “no other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities,” Alexander writes. In fact, “the United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid.” Beyond this lurks the fact that once a person is branded a felon, it is perfectly legal to discriminate against him or her in employment, housing, and education. He or she is further excluded from voting and jury service and the state more then likely will deny that person public benefits. All of this adds up to effectively creating a caste system as a result of mass incarceration.