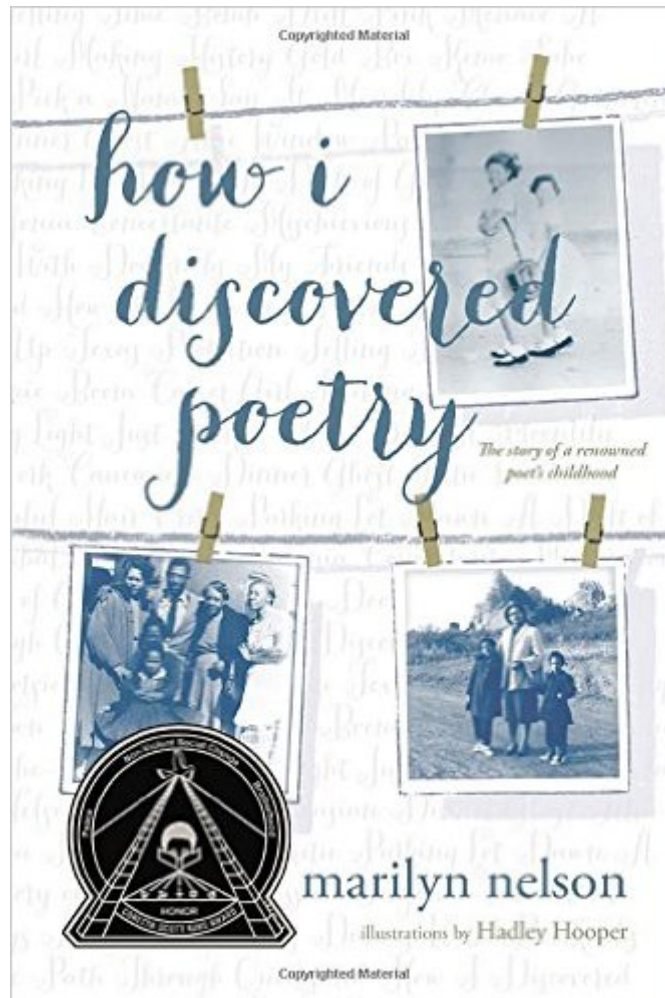


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How I Discovered Poetry



Synopsis

A powerful and thought-provoking Civil Rights era memoir from one of America's most celebrated poets. Looking back on her childhood in the 1950s, Newbery Honor winner and National Book Award finalist Marilyn Nelson tells the story of her development as an artist and young woman through fifty eye-opening poems. Readers are given an intimate portrait of her growing self-awareness and artistic inspiration along with a larger view of the world around her: racial tensions, the Cold War era, and the first stirrings of the feminist movement. A first-person account of African-American history, this is a book to study, discuss, and treasure.

Book Information

Lexile Measure: NP (What's this?)

Paperback: 112 pages

Publisher: Speak; Reprint edition (March 8, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0147510058

ISBN-13: 978-0147510051

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.2 x 8.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

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Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

Customer Reviews

These deceptively simple poems, from a young African-American girl trying to understand, and later, act upon, the world of America in the fifties and sixties, touched my heart. I love the poems, the pictures, the layout, and the depth under the simplicity. Well done, Marilyn Nelson! I heard the author read from the book at the Furious Flower Poetry Conference a week ago and made a little YouTube if other viewers want to see it. Just Google her name and mine, and it should show up.

Marilyn Nelson's poems charmingly evoke her younger self, exploring the wonders of poetry while experiencing life as a girl before and during the Civil Rights era. Her masterful use of language

shines through, even as she describes the plainest pleasures of life in maritime Maine, and her dawning realizations of American injustice, black culture, family life, and poetry as a transformative force.

Review Copy: Purchased

Reading How I Discovered Poetry is like looking through a photo album with a loved one while they share memories. Here a laugh, there a tear, sometimes even an admission of mischievousness. Marilyn Nelson has crafted fifty sonnets that begin with the simplicity of a pre-schooler and progress to the complexity of the early teen years. Each sonnet is a snapshot of family life, but many also give glimpses of the cultural changes that were occurring in the wider world. What I loved was the voice that truly seemed to mature. I could just see a young child asking, "Why did Lot have to take his wife and flee from the bad city like the angel said?" She is truly puzzled about that flea as she sits there in church. She has many such misunderstandings as she grows up. Over time, they become less about vocabulary issues and more about the deeper questioning she is doing concerning the world and her place in it. As she learns, grows and experiences life, the sonnets show her increasing sense of self. She begins to find her voice "the voice of a poet." There are so many ways that readers can connect to this book. Nelson throws the door open so we can see into the life of a military family on the move. There are sibling and family interactions that I know I could sympathize with as an older sister. She includes civil rights issues and instances of prejudice. With so many brief moments of time highlighted, there are many opportunities for readers to see echoes of their own life. As a military family, they move all over the country. In most of the places they are stationed, they are the first or only Negro family. This makes for a lot of what she calls "First Negro" moments. Some of the experiences are positive like her mother being the first Negro teacher of the all white class on base. Some are negative like the racial name calling that happens. In the midst of her personal stories, she also embeds stories from the Civil Rights movement including people like Emmett Till and Rosa Parks. Humor is present here along with the serious matters. I enjoyed the poem "Fieldwork" where Daddy says, "Let's pretend we're researching an unknown civilian Caucasian tribe," when they move to New Hampshire. The poet goes on to explain the eating habits and vocabulary of the locals. If you know any of Marilyn Nelson's previous work, you won't be surprised to find out that there is also beauty among the poems. There is beauty that she describes, but there is also simple beauty in her words. Recommendation: Get it soon especially if you are a poetry lover. Even if you don't typically read poetry, this is a great book for history buffs or those who enjoy memoirs. Besides,

reading *How I Discovered Poetry* would be a perfect way to celebrate Poetry Month. This review was originally posted on the blog Rich in Color at [...]

This is a short book of poetry, however loaded with so many powerful verses. What I value in quality poetry is that it is not the words that are written but the empty spaces that fill your brain with thought, ideas, and questions. Marilyn Nelson writes through the voice of a kid growing up during Civil Rights. I am amazed by how adults can speak a genuine voice of adolescence. These are poems that need to be read slowly so that the reader can process the time period, the emotions, and how kids see the world. Through their eyes that are naive the world of serious conflict does not seem so massive, but still influential. Reading this book has reignited my passion for reading other poetry. This would also be a great addition to a classroom that studies this time period.

Accessible poetry. Well written. Heard the author speak and ordered this book and *A Wreath for Emmett Till* as well. I'm thinking that these will both be great resources for my middle school classroom this summer.

Outstanding verse autobiography of growing up in the 1950's. Ms. Nelson's poetry uses unrhymed sonnet form to great advantage here, exposing the innermost thoughts of a young girl in a military family always on the move. A military family headed by a rare African American officer during a time of atomic fears, Red Scare, horrors being heard about the south. None of these topical elements overwhelm the voice of a young girl, trying, an almost succeeding at times to understand her ever-changing world and her heart's opening to poetry. As the Speaker gets older there is less misunderstanding in her understanding and more certainty. Family love and stability are strong elements as well. An absolutely lovely book to share with older children and teens, or for adults to enjoy by themselves. I am almost the exact same age as Ms. Nelson and experienced some of the outer events of the times, which made it even more resonant for me. Plainspoken, honest, and beautifully written.

Beautiful, moving work by one of our best poets.

Marilyn Nelson is a real charmer, whose poems and this story of how she became a poet are interesting. A good buy. A good reading experience.

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