

★ **54 Miles**

Leonard Pitts, Jr.

Agate Bolden (Jul 23, 2024)

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Family wounds are reopened in Leonard Pitts Jr.'s gripping historical novel *54 Miles*, a coming-of-age story set during the civil rights movement.

Adam was raised in New York by his attentive white father and somewhat distant Black mother. When he goes to Alabama, where his parents are from, against their wishes, this singular act forces his family to confront the traumas they sustained in the South. And Adam is unprepared for the experiences he faces: the voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery leaves him brutalized and in a state of turmoil when the marchers are attacked and forced to turn back; later, the soldiers sent to protect the marchers seem to resent their task.

Discrimination is detailed with horrifying clarity, from a two-hour-long lynching in which children jostle for body parts as souvenirs to a vicious rape that includes taunting, racist chants. And Adam's paternal uncle, who disapproves of his brother's relationship, insists, "God has decreed that on this Earth, there are superior races and inferior races... . By trying to change that, you are messing with God's design."

After the march, Adam's mother returns to Alabama to save him and mend the rift in their relationship. Meanwhile, Luther, Adam's uncle, is drawn into the widening mess, facing reignited trauma after stumbling onto his parents' murderer in a rest home while visiting a friend. As Martin Luther King Jr. calls for nonviolent protests, Luther scoffs—but he can't deny the stirring in his heart as he listens to Dr. King and bears witness to the changing atmosphere. And in time, Adam finds peace in a newfound mission too—and learns to extend grace to his mother.

Hard decisions and sacrifices are made as the struggle for freedom intensifies in the historical novel *54 Miles*.

GABRIELLA HARRISON (July / August 2024)

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