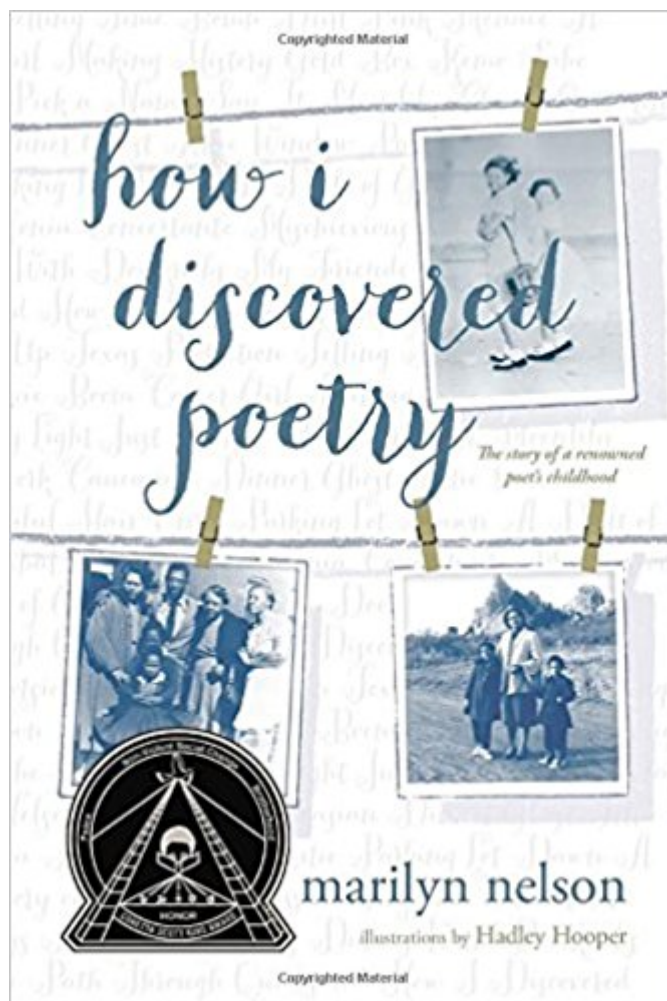


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# How I Discovered Poetry



## 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

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Age Range: 12 - 17 years

Grade Level: 7 and up

## Customer Reviews

Gr 6 Up • Nelson traces her childhood and developing awareness of civil rights issues in this eloquent collection of 50 unrhymed sonnets. In 1950, her father, one of the first African American Air Force officers, is recalled to duty, launching the family on the first of several cross-country moves. Her father takes a leave from law school, her mother takes leave from teaching, and: "Our leaves become feathers. With wings we wave good-bye to our cousins." Their travels take them from Cleveland to Texas, Colorado, Kansas, California, Maine, and Oklahoma; the leave-takings are always painful. In "Traveling Light," she muses over the family dogs (Pudgy, Lady, and General) left behind. "Daddy explains. We've been transferred again. We stand numb as he gives away our

toys." Close family ties help them confront the small-mindedness and racism encountered along the way. In "Bad Name," she observes: "TV is black-and-white, but people aren't. There's a bad name mean people might call you, but words aren't sticks and stones." Books, television shows, and friends provide a respite from the menace of the Cold War. Through snatches of grown-up conversation, she learns of Rosa Parks, Emmett Till, and Little Rock. She overcomes school yard bullies, wonders about boys, and is humiliated by a teacher who makes her read aloud a racist poem: "She smiled harder and harder until I stood and opened my mouth to banjo-playing darkies." This hurtful episode only underscores the awesome power of words and leads Nelson to wonder whether "there's a poet behind my face." Altogether, Nelson's poems offer a candid portrait of her formative years as well as a triumphant message, which will resonate with readers, young and old, who cherish and recognize the power of words and stories. •Marilyn Taniguchi, Beverly Hills Public Library, CA --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

In this fictionalized memoir in verse, renowned poet Nelson lyrically recounts her passage from ages 4 to 14, from numerous military base homes; through friends, schools, and dogs; and from developmental stages of initiative through industry to identity. Chronicling the decade of 1950s America, a young self-aware speaker connects national events to daily life experiences. In the author's note of her self-ascribed "portrait of an artist as a young American Negro girl," Nelson disclaims that the "I" in the title is she. Rather, her autobiographically inspired collection of 50 nonrhyming sonnets is enhanced by research and imagination. The title poem comes near the end and is breathtaking in the perverse cruelty the young speaker experiences from an educator. Hooper's line-and-shade illustrations, along with Nelson's family photos, set a quiet and respectful tone and offer readers the feeling of taking an unsolicited peek behind a heavy curtain. For fans of Nelson's impressive body of children's and adult poetry, including the brilliant *A Wreath for Emmett Till* (2005), this insight into her modulated memories gratifies that heartfelt belief that here writes a woman of great substance. Grades 7-12. --Gail Bush --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

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.

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.

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.

Beautiful, moving work by one of our best poets.

Ok

Banal. Disconnected

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.

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