First Opinion: Seeing With New Eyes


Holly Isserstedt

Sometimes, young women are compelled to “live a different life from the rest,” and it is that difference that makes history. Two new books, *Georgia Rises: A Day in the Life of Georgia O’Keeffe* by Kathryn Lasky and *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice* by Philip Hoose, are part of a growing collection of children’s literature intended to broaden and sometimes amend American history. It would seem that a young black girl coming of age in Jim Crow Montgomery and a white abstract artist in New Mexico nearly sixty years her senior would have little in common. But both of these stories illuminate the powerful impact of women driven by passion and propelled by self efficacy.

Nine months before Rosa Parks was arrested in 1955 for openly refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Claudette Colvin
was arrested, verbally abused, and jailed for the same act. She was only fifteen years old at the time and was already a participating member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Youth Council. Colvin said much of her motivation came after studying her heritage in school and hearing teachers talk about the injustices against African-Americans. Her act of civil defiance is largely unrecognized in history books, perhaps because of the controversy surrounding the use of Colvin as a test case to challenge bus laws in Montgomery. Civil rights leaders were reluctant to use Colvin's story because she became pregnant, giving birth about a year after her arrest. While she was not the one who sparked the bus boycott in Alabama, her documented act of resistance is important historical evidence of the rising discontent of African-Americans in the South, which was instrumental in gaining momentum for the Civil Rights Movement. Colvin later testified in a Montgomery federal court hearing, in the *Browder v. Gayle* case, which declared segregated busing in Montgomery unconstitutional.

Hoose has assembled an extensive collection of historical documents, including photographs, diagrams, public records, and newspaper clippings in *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice*, which causes his historical account to read more like a junior Civil Rights Handbook than simply a retelling of Colvin's story. Much of the book is taken from the author's exhaustive interviews with Colvin over the course of a year. Hoose personalizes the oppression of a generation of African-Americans through the experiences of one woman in a way that is both heart wrenching and empowering. For young readers who are nearly six decades removed from segregation, Hoose's descriptive passages and account of Colvin's personal anecdotes make the racial tension of the 1950s immediate and accessible. It is not only a painful reminder of where we have been, but what we can continue to do to eradicate racial inequality and promote social justice.

While Hoose chronicles many years of Claudette Colvin's life, author Lasky and illustrator Eitan use evocative language and deeply hued illustrations to capture a single day in the life of the aging Georgia O’Keeffe in the picture book, *Georgia Rises: A Day in the Life of Georgia O’Keeffe*. Richly illustrated by Ora Eitan, *Georgia Rises* begins as the artist awakes early to capture the lavender sky over her desert home and spends the day admiring the stunning, stark landscape of New Mexico. Lasky's clarity of diction describes the simplicity of each daily task: "Walks briskly," "Climbs a ladder to the roof," "Sets down her tea." And yet these tasks are a part of the creative process, each one endowed with meaning. The colors described in the passages mirror those in the accompanying illustrations reminiscent of O’Keeffe's style. There is an unexpected calm that occurs when *Georgia Rises* is read aloud that suggests it is possible for language to capture the natural world in much the same way as the images reflected on O'Keefe's canvas—"The lavender has faded from the sky. It is now the color of eggshells" (unpaged). The story reflects the same intimacy and stark precision reflected in O'Keeffe's work.

Lasky's greatest accomplishment in *Georgia Rises* is to emphasize, subtly and perhaps
unconsciously, the treasures of existing in the present. For young readers inundated by technology and often immersed in chaotic surroundings, this book is a reminder to find pleasure in “the slice of moon” hanging in the “mysterious blue sky.” It is a reminder to live in anticipation of the next day, even if comprised of repetitive duties. For O’Keeffe, the intricacies of the day made life not only worth painting, but worth living.

Both Hoose and Laskey have created biographies that express the extraordinary possibilities of any ordinary day. A most striking connection between Colvin and O’Keefe is that they are both subversive in their recounting two women living lives directed by conviction. Both women attest to what can happen when we look at life with discerning eyes. We can be an instrument to paint a world more beautiful than our own, even if it takes a revolution.

About the Author

Holly Isserstedt is a high school English teacher in Atlanta, Georgia, and she earned a Ph.D. in Language and Literacy Education from the University of Georgia.