Second Reaction: Presenting Women in History


Heather Scarano

Similar to his other non-fiction works, Phillip Hoose’s *Claudette Colvin* is a text that illustrates the often overlooked, yet important and socially relevant, roles young adults can and do play in our world.

Hoose’s work follows the little known story of a young African-American teenager who played a major role in the 1956 *Browder v. Gayle* case—the case that officially ended bus segregation in Montgomery, Alabama. Though not represented in the history books, Colvin was the first to refuse to vacate her seat as she rode the bus through Montgomery, and Hoose uses her story to educate readers about Civil Rights and Colvin’s role in the movement. However, his work does much more than recount the important case that was *Browder v. Gayle*. It is a work that presents the ups and downs of everyday life for an ordinary, yet courageous, young girl.

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Though Hoose narrates much of Colvin’s story, he spends considerable time weaving in numerous personal interviews with Colvin and other key figures of the Civil Rights movement. Reading Colvin’s words and seeing the numerous photographs of her, her family, segregated Montgomery shops, bombed buildings, and the other images that adorn the pages of the text, brings the Civil Rights Movement and Colvin’s experiences alive for the reader. Hoose also incorporates various newspaper clippings and other primary documents that undeniably add an element of authenticity to the work.

This work has many wonderful implications for the classroom. Though it is important for students to look at Colvin’s story within its historical context and to discuss the lesser-known figures of the bus boycott presented in this text, Hoose purposefully presents the teenage issues—such as teenage pregnancy—Colvin faced to help her story connect with the audience on a more personal level.

This book also provides numerous opportunities for reading images. One can use the images in this work to discuss visuals and the stories they tell. The extensive visuals in this text provide many opportunities for analysis. Because many of the images Hoose integrates into his text are rather poignant and emotionally charged, it would be very worthwhile for students to respond to the images and explain their responses.

This text also has potential for generating writing assignments. Teachers can create assignments that allow students to respond to the text or to write about their own personal experiences, struggles, goals, and accomplishments. Such personal, narrative writing can be very beneficial and important to students, for it allows them a means of self-expression. One could also have students, after examining the newspaper clippings in the text, create their own newspaper articles addressing historical events or cases during the Civil rights movement. Students could also write articles addressing current issues that impact their lives as students and/or young adults.

This text presents many possibilities for teachers and students—possibilities that not only create a space for students to write about the text itself, but opportunities for examining their own lives and the lives of other young adults. Whether one teaches this text on its own, or incorporates it into an already established curriculum, Colvin’s story and Hoose’s telling of it would be a valuable addition to the classroom—an addition that could engage young readers and help them see that at any age, one can have an impact on society and make a difference.

Like Hoose, who spends much time recounting the daily life of an important female figure in history, Kathryn Lasky, in her children’s book Georgia Rises, tells a detailed story of the day-to-day life of the famed artist Georgia O’Keeffe. The beautifully saturated, yet minimalistic illustrations by Ora Eitan that accompany this text work in unison with Lasky’s words as they detail an elderly O’Keeffe’s waking hours to her evening dreams of “green skies…and the raven’s wings” (unpaged) as she sleeps soundly under the shadow of the moon.
As Lasky’s story takes the reader on a guided tour through “A Day in the Life of Georgia O’Keeffe,” the descriptive language so eloquently and artistically conveys what a day in O’Keeffe’s life might have looked like. As Lasky opens the text, she writes of O’Keeffe’s waking moment: “the old lady’s back feels crooked as a coiled rattlesnake…still she wants to get up and get going” (unpaged). Such descriptive language will resonate with the youngest of readers.

Lasky and Eitan clearly communicate O’Keeffe’s love of painting, natural elements, and the colors of the morning, afternoon, and evening as they describe and illustrate how O’Keeffe engaged with the world. As Lasky presents O’Keeffe, she is a woman who “all day long…will paint and think” (unpaged) on the nature she encountered in the morning hours. But along with O’Keeffe’s love of painting, Lasky also presents the resilient, determined woman behind the art.

At the end of the text, Lasky provides a short synopsis of O’Keeffe’s life, complete with bibliographic references. In this portion of the text, the reader gets a brief glimpse into O’Keeffe’s life. One rather striking element of this portion of the text is Lasky’s concentration on O’Keeffe’s steadfast perseverance that helped her become the famous artist many still love today. She writes that as a young girl, O’Keeffe was “not a favorite child” (unpaged), and she often retreated to her own “imaginary worlds” (unpaged). As a young child, she knew she would be an artist, and she pursued this dream until it became so.

Like a middle or high school teacher might use Colvin’s story to discuss the perseverance of an important female figure in American history, so might an elementary teacher use Georgia Rises—albeit in a different light. Teachers could use this text not only to discuss language, colors, and description, but also to discuss O’Keeffe’s, and the students’ own, sense of determination and passion. As Lasky makes a point to follow the daily habits of O’Keeffe as she brushes her hair, drinks tea, and eats dinner, one can see this text communicates that the ordinary is still a part of the extraordinary.

About the Author

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