Second Reaction: Equity is Still an Issue—Women’s Stories in History


Becky McCraw

The women who have come before us and have forged the way for greater equity have often been the renegades of their day. Their stories remind us that it takes courage to challenge the status quo. Two children’s books that chronicle the lives of the women who did just that include *Bring Me Some Apples and I’ll Make You a Pie: A Story about Edna Lewis* by Robbin Gourley and *I’ll Pass for Your Comrade: Women Soldiers in the Civil War* by Anita Silvey.

In her picture book, *Bring Me Some Apples and I’ll Make You a Pie*, Gourley provides a fictionalized account of Edna Lewis’s childhood. Beautifully crafted prose and catchy
rhymes make this a captivating read aloud for children of all ages. The endnotes provide a more extensive account of Edna Lewis’s life as one of the first female, African-American master chefs. Several recipes following the endnotes invite the reader to head to the kitchen and start cooking.

Gourley masterfully captures the sights, smells, and sounds of the seasons as Edna's family plants, harvests, and preserves food for the coming winter. These experiences led Edna Lewis to her passion for cooking and ultimately led her to her life's work as a chef. The illustrations are done in watercolor and have a child-like charm. The washes and seasonal splashes of color provide strong pictorial support to the text.

As I read this book to a group of fourth grade students, I could barely get through a page without a hand shooting up to share a personal connection: “My granddaddy has a garden, and we grow corn and tomatoes and cucumbers”; “I remember this time that we made peach ice cream”; and “We say things like that in our family.” The students were not familiar with Edna Lewis and her life as a master chef, but that did not seem to matter to them as they enjoyed the lyrical tale that “sounds like poetry” when read aloud.

*Bring Me Some Apples and I'll Make You a Pie* is a testimony to the power and influence of family as children grow toward their dreams. Edna Lewis challenged the status quo and went on to become a master chef at a time that few women, let alone African-American women, were successful in that field. I would highly recommend this book to educators and parents.

*I'll Pass for Your Comrade* by Silvey also tells the story of women who have challenged the status quo. The result of over thirty years of research on the Civil War, this narrative nonfiction book offers a perfect blend of factual information and primary sources for intermediate and middle grade readers.

The text tells the story of the many women who assumed male identities, donned Confederate or Union uniforms, and went off to fight in the Civil War. These women became soldiers to be near loved ones, to make money, or to avenge a death. For whatever reason, they risked their lives to take part in some of the bloodiest battles in the annals of history. Their stories could have been lost forever, but instead, their voices are lifted through the anecdotes included in this book from their letters, diary entries, and memoirs.

I shared this text with a small group of fifth grade girls by reading some of it aloud, discussing it, and then sending it with them to read independently. They were fascinated by the topic. Several of them knew that there had been women in the war, but they never realized these women had to actually pretend to be men. They were particularly fascinated by the account of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman and what daily life was like as described in her letters. One student said, “To me, it was the best part of the book. It was like learning about how things worked in the war.”

I hesitated to share the text with an entire class because of the length. In the future, I will read selectively from the text and provide a book talk for the entire class before invit-
ing students to read it independently. I also think it would be effective to make a copy of one of the diary entries and have students write observations they learned from it along with new questions they encounter.

*I’ll Pass for Your Comrade* could be used as a mentor text when teaching memoir and expository writing. While the book could be used as a social studies reference text, it offers much more than mere facts. The writing is well crafted, and the varied sentence structure makes it quite pleasurable to read. I read the first chapter aloud with a third grade class, and they seemed to find it very engaging. The relatively short chapters make the content more accessible, and the use of excerpts from primary sources and period illustrations add to the appeal. Each chapter has a quote from one of the primary sources included in that chapter as part of the title. “The music of regimental bands” leads the reader into the chapter entitled “The First Battle of Bull Run.” These quotes are written in a calligraphy-like font above the chapter titles. The quotes stand to remind readers that these words were penned long ago by these women who risked it all to be a “part of something greater than themselves” (50).

It is obvious that Silvey’s documented history has been carefully researched and written. Her curiosity and admiration for these women is apparent and inspires that same curiosity in the reader. Reading her narrative made me reflect on the rights and privileges afforded to women in our society today as well as how very young these rights really are when put in historical perspective. These are critical issues students need to discuss and come to understand. *I’ll Pass for Your Comrade* would help generate these kinds of conversations. I strongly recommend the book for elementary and middle-school English language arts and social studies teachers.

While women have indeed come a long way in the past one hundred years, equity is still an issue as long as any woman in the world is subjected to inequitable practices based on her gender and as long as the history that is written to chronicle the events of a society does not include her story.

**About the Author**

**Becky McCraw** is a literacy coach in Gaffney, South Carolina. She is a former classroom teacher, having taught third and fifth grades. She received her undergraduate degree in elementary education from Limestone College, her Master’s degree in elementary education from The University of South Carolina at Spartanburg, and is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of South Carolina in the area of language and literacy. She is national board certified as a Middle Childhood Generalist. She is a site-based literacy coach and provides professional development for kindergarten through fifth grade classroom teachers.