

Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice

By Phillip Hoose

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Grade Range: 5 and up

Age Range: 13 and up

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ABOUT THE BOOK

“... when it comes to justice, there is no easy way to get it. You can't sugarcoat it. You have to take a stand and say, 'This is not right.'” —Claudette Colvin

On March 2, 1955, an impassioned teenager, fed up with the daily injustices of Jim Crow segregation, refused to give her seat to a white woman on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Instead of being celebrated as Rosa Parks would be just nine months later, fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin found herself shunned by her classmates and dismissed by community leaders. Undaunted, a year later she dared to challenge segregation again as a key plaintiff in *Browder v. Gayle*, the landmark case that struck down the segregation laws of Montgomery and swept away the legal underpinnings of the Jim Crow South.

Based on extensive interviews with Colvin and many others, Phillip Hoose presents the first in-depth account of an important, yet largely unknown Civil-Rights figure, skillfully weaving her dramatic story into the fabric of the historic Montgomery Bus Boycott and court case that would change the course of American history.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phillip Hoose's distinguished nonfiction includes the National Book Award Finalist *We Were There, Too!: Young People in U.S. History* and *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird*, winner of the Boston Globe–Horn Book Award for Nonfiction. His other acclaimed work includes the award-winning picture book, *Hey, Little Ant*, which he cowrote with his daughter, Hannah, and a memoir for the teens and adults, *Perfect, Once Removed: When Baseball Was All the World to Me*. Hoose lives in Portland, Maine, and works for the Nature Conservancy. Learn more at www.philliphoose.com

"This is a story that, if taught in every classroom in the nation, might well inspire a new generation of young activists to join the ongoing struggle for social justice." —Howard Zinn, author of *A People's History of the United States*

"This inspiring title shows the incredible difference that a single young person can make."
—*Booklist*, Starred Review

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Book Discussion Part 1 (HC: pp. 1–75 / TP: pp. 1–71)

- 1) How did each of the experiences listed below contribute to Claudette's refusal to give up her seat on the bus?
 - "... how I learned I should never touch another white person again." (HC and TP: p. 3)
 - The stories about shopping in downtown Montgomery (HC: pp. 16–18 / TP: pp. 17–18)
 - Jeremiah Reeves's arrest (HC: pp. 23–25 / TP: pp. 23–26)
 - *Brown v. Board of Education*
 - Miss Nesbit and Miss Lawrence team-teaching Black History Month (HC: pp. 25–27/ TP: pp. 26–29)
- 2) How and why is Claudette's description of the events leading up to her arrest different from the incident as described in the Montgomery Police Department report?
- 3) How and why was Claudette's arrest different from the earlier arrests of Geneva Johnson (1946), Viola White and Katie Wingfield (1949), and Edwina and Marshall Johnson (1949)?
- 4) Why do you think Claudette refused to plead guilty?
- 5) Reverend H. H. Johnson told Claudette, "... I think you just brought the revolution to Montgomery." (HC: p. 35 / TP: p. 37) Do you agree with this? Why or why not?
- 6) Why do you think Claudette's classmates and neighbors did not treat her as a hero after she was arrested?
- 7) How was Rosa Parks's arrest both similar to and different from Claudette Colvin's?
- 8) Claudette Colvin said, "When I heard on the news that it was Rosa Parks, I had several feelings: I was glad an adult had finally stood up to the system, but I felt left out. I was thinking, Hey, I did that months ago and everybody dropped me." (HC: p.61 / TP: p. 67) She goes on to share some ideas about why she thinks the black leaders chose to use Rosa Parks's case as inspiration for the bus boycott rather than her own. What do you think?



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Book Discussion Part 2 (HC: pp. 76–10 / TP: pp. 72–101)

- 1) Claudette Colvin said, “There was a time when I thought I would be the centerpiece of the bus case. I was eager to keep going in court. I had wanted them to keep appealing my case. I had enough self confidence to keep going.” (HC: p.63 / TP: p. 67). Only a few months later, the NAACP asked Claudette to participate in another court case. Why do you think they wanted Claudette for the second court case?
- 2) How were Claudette’s two court cases different?
- 3) Why was courage the number one requirement for plaintiffs?
- 4) While Claudette practiced for her second day in court, her mother gave her this advice: “If you can even talk to a white person without lowering your eyes you’re really doing something.” Why did she give Claudette this particular advice? Do you think it was helpful? Why or why not?
- 5) One of the lawyers for the plaintiffs in *Browder v. Gayle* said, “If there was a star witness in the boycott case . . . it had to be Claudette Colvin.” (HC: p. 88 / TP: pp. 99–100) Reread the description of the testimony, especially Claudette’s testimony (pp. 82–88 / TP: pp. 83–85). Why do you think the lawyer called Claudette Colvin the star witness? Do you agree? Why or why not?
- 6) Why do we call the Montgomery Bus Boycott and *Browder v. Gayle* successful when the following things occurred?
 - “*Browder v. Gayle* may have ended legal segregation on the buses, but it did not end racial prejudice.” (HC: p. 97 / TP: p. 109)
 - “Violence and threats of revenge were everywhere in the first days of integrated buses.” (HC: p. 98 / TP: p. 110)
 - “It was clear that anyone connected to the boycott, anyone whose name or picture had been the paper—was now in grave danger.” (HC: p. 98 / TP: p. 110)
- 7) After the U.S. Supreme Court upheld *Browder v. Gayle* and the Montgomery Bus Boycott ended, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. thanked Claudette Colvin for serving as a plaintiff in the court case. He then said to her, “You’re a brave young lady.” Claudette said, “Meeting Dr. King didn’t pay my bills or stop people from gossiping about me and Raymond. It sure didn’t make me any safer. But I have to say those few words of praise from him on that evening felt very good.” (HC: p. 99 / TP: p. 111) Considering how much Claudette had been through and how she felt abandoned by the black leadership in Montgomery and by her community, why would she say that those few kind words, spoken privately to her, after it was all over, “felt very good” and were worth remembering decades later?

Discussion questions created by Kelley McDaniel, Librarian of King Middle School, Portland, Maine. For questions and suggestions, contact her at: mcdank@portlandschools.org, (207) 400-4621.



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SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT

Understanding Courage:

Community Interaction with the Story of Unsung Civil Rights Hero, Claudette Colvin

Schools have chosen not only to read and discuss Claudette Colvin's story, but to bring that story to the community by illustrating her act of courage to current bus riders. Using existing bus advertising placement as exhibit space, schools have created an installment of student-generated art pieces that tell the story of Claudette Colvin's act of courage.

Why Bus Riders?

Because Claudette Colvin's act of courage aboard a Montgomery city bus was a decisive step to ending segregation on U.S. transportation, the "Understanding Courage" project brings Claudette Colvin's story to town, city, or school bus riders.

Why Teenagers?

Because Claudette Colvin's act of courage came from the assurance and strength of a teenager, the project uses middle- and high-school students to tell Claudette's story to the public.

Who Are Potential Community Partners?

Organizers have approached town and city officials and their local bus company to discuss a partnership with the school in telling Claudette Colvin's story to the public.

Organizers have partnered for funding with area humanities organizations, local chapters of the NAACP, local peace and justice organizations, churches, universities, bookstores, and other organizations.

The Project:

- 1) Self-selected and faculty-recommended students read the book, *Claudette Colvin: Twice Towards Justice* by Phillip Hoose. Grant funding has included the purchase of a complete classroom set of the book.
- 2) Students discuss the book with the guidance of a librarian, or language arts or history teacher.
- 3) Following the discussions, each student selects a quote by Claudette Colvin or an aspect of her story to focus on. With the assistance of the teacher, the students craft a description of her quote or story, and potentially, their reaction to it.
- 4) That description and reaction become the central component of an art piece created by the student with the guidance of art educators. Past groups have used as their "canvas," the backsides of old bus advertisements donated by the bus company.
- 5) Those art pieces are then to be displayed in the interior advertising slots of a town, city, or school buses.
- 6) One central sign for the bus can be created to explain the project to the community.
- 7) The exhibit can be centralized for citizens to view and/or allowed to tour various bus routes where it will be viewed by bus riders.

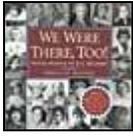
Detailed instructions, suggestions, budgets, grant samples, and templates on building a service-learning project like this are available at <http://www.understandingcourage.blogspot.com>.

The original "Understanding Courage" project was created by Kirsten Cappy of Curious City; Kelley McDaniel, Librarian at King Middle School in Portland, Maine; and Simon Adams and other art education majors at Maine College of Art.



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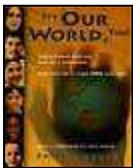
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