

# Maine writer and civil rights pioneer team up on new kids' book

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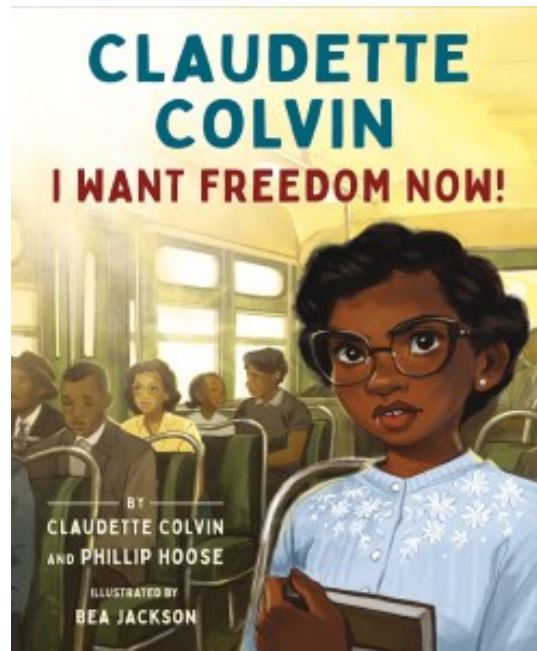


Portland author Phillip Hoose collaborated on the new children's book "Claudette Colvin: I Want Freedom Now!" *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Portland Press Herald*

It took nearly four years for Portland author Phillip Hoose to find and talk to Claudette Colvin.

Hoose was persistent because he was fascinated with Colvin's story, and wanted to share it with the wider world. Colvin was 15 in 1955 when she refused to give up her seat to a white person on a Montgomery, Alabama bus. Her action, and arrest, came some nine months before Rosa Parks' similar but more famous protest. Colvin became a plaintiff in a court case that led to the desegregation of public buses in Alabama.

But for years Colvin kept a low profile and her story was not widely known. So when Hoose finally got to talk to Colvin and say he'd like to write a book about her experience, she responded with a question: Can you get it to kids?



Hoose said he could, and ended up writing the young adult book “Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice,” which won a National Book Award in 2009. But Hoose and Colvin were not done sharing Colvin’s story. They collaborated again on a picture book for younger children called “Claudette Colvin: I Want Freedom Now!” which came out in November.



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“What Claudette did (in 1955) was really unexpected and it ended up being a jolt to the Black community, she was really a spark that got things going,” said Hoose, 77. “It was quite a shock that this girl had done this, and she was scorned by classmates, people made fun of her.”

Colvin, now 85, said she wanted to collaborate with Hoose on this second book because she fears many children today have no idea what life in the segregated South, or what Black people like her had to go through. Colvin, who lives in Texas, feels the lessons that can be learned from that time are still valid today.

“There is plenty of injustice going around now, and kids need to know they can fight back. Books are being banned, including children’s books,” Colvin told Hoose, in response to questions from the Press Herald. “My story gives them an example of someone who took a stand at a younger age. I was 15.”



One day when I was fifteen, I boarded the bus home from school. I daydreamed in an empty row as the bus filled. Suddenly, I realized a white passenger wanted my seat. She was angry. "Get up, gal!" the white bus driver was yelling. But this time, I didn't.

Claudette Colvin was 15 in 1955 when she refused to give up her bus seat to a white person. *Photo courtesy of Macmillan Children's Publishing Group*

Colvin's story and her role as a teenage civil rights pioneer has gotten some attention from Hollywood in recent years, with help from Hoose. In 2022 a group of filmmakers, including Anthony Mackie of "Captain America" fame, announced plans to make a movie about Colvin called "Spark" and had secured the rights to Hoose's first book about her.

At the time, Mackie told the entertainment website Deadline he first heard about Colvin while visiting the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis. Mackie had said he hopes to direct the movie, and has met with Hoose, but when the film might be shot or released has not been announced.

"Not only was I moved, I was inspired," Mackie told Deadline in 2022. "It's great to be a superhero in movies, but she's a real live one living amongst us and I'm honored to tell her story."

## **TAKING A SEAT, MAKING A STAND**

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The picture book, geared toward ages 4 to 8, was illustrated by Bea Jackson. It explains the crux of Colvin's ordeal in about 40 pages, while the earlier book was about 150 pages. So some details had to be left out, Hoose said, though he feels "the heart of who Claudette is and what she did" remains.



The book starts by showing a glum-faced Colvin riding a bus, looking out the window at “whites only” signs on Montgomery’s streets, and lamenting the segregation she lived with but couldn’t quite understand.



A page from “Claudette Colvin: I Want Freedom Now!” *Photo courtesy of Macmillan Children’s Publishing Group*

“Signs across Montgomery, Alabama, where I lived, told me where I could and couldn’t go — restrooms, stores, drinking fountains and restaurants,” one passage reads. “When I needed shoes, Mom had to trace my foot onto a grocery bag and carry the tracing to the store, because whites didn’t want our feet in their shoes.”

The fact that grown-ups told her “this is just how things are” made her angry, Colvin says in the book. She had been studying Black history in her segregated school, and started to think about the need for change, the need for action.

Then one day in March 1955, while coming home from school on a city bus, a white passenger wanted her seat. She didn’t move. She says that while the bus driver yelled at her to move, she thought about strong Black women she’d read about, like Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. Soon two police officers arrived, yanked her from her seat, arrested her, and put her in the local jail.



As the driver kept shouting at me, I felt the weight of strong Black women pressing down on me—Sojourner Truth on one shoulder, Harriet Tubman on the other. HISTORY kept me glued to my seat.

Soon, two police officers came storming down the aisle, but I didn't move. I shouted, "It's my constitutional right to sit here!" My struggle for freedom was about to start—on this bus. The officers yanked me from my seat. My schoolbooks went flying.

A page from "Claudette Colvin: I Want Freedom Now!" Photo courtesy of Macmillan Children's Publishing Group

Black leaders hired a lawyer, Fred Gray, to represent her. She was found guilty of assaulting the officers who arrested her, but the judge told her she could live at home, as long as she didn't get in any more trouble.

Colvin's arrest was not the first instance of a Black person refusing to give up their seat, but it did help spark action and activism in Montgomery's Black community. About nine months after Colvin's arrest, a seamstress named Rosa Parks also refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus. Soon after that a boycott of city buses was organized.

In early 1956, Gray, who was Colvin's attorney, helped bring a case in U.S. District Court challenging the constitutionality of bus segregation in Alabama, with Colvin as one of the named plaintiffs. The case went to the U.S. Supreme Court, which upheld a lower court ruling that bus segregation was unconstitutional. The Montgomery bus boycott, considered by many the first large-scale U.S. demonstration against segregation, ended in December 1956.

Colvin moved to New York a few years later and didn't talk publicly about her ordeal for years. In the 1970s, she did talk to an Alabama reporter for a story, and was contacted by other newspaper reporters later. Hoose first learned about Colvin while researching his 2001 book, "We Were There, Too! Young People in U.S. History," which was a finalist for a National Book Award.



Portland author Phillip Hoose and Claudette Colvin, in 2023. *Photo courtesy of Phillip Hoose*

Hoose began looking for Colvin and during his lengthy search reached out to a USA Today reporter who had been in contact with her. That reporter passed along a message to Colvin which resulted in her, many months later, talking to Hoose.

Colvin said that people have asked her over the years why she decided to work with a white author to tell her story.

“First off, no Black author approached me. Phil contacted me just after I retired. I thought, “Why not? The truth is the truth regardless of the color of the author,” Colvin said.

Hoose, an Indiana native who has lived in Portland since the mid-1980s, has written several nonfiction books about nature and history, and worked for more than 35 years for The Nature Conservancy. Some of Hoose’s other books include “Attucks!: Oscar Robertson and the Basketball Team That Awakened a City,” “The Race to Save the Lord God Bird,” “The Boys Who Challenged Hitler: Knud Pedersen and The Churchill Club” and “We Were There, Too!: Young People in U.S. History.”

Hoose thinks Colvin's story has power, especially for young people, because she was only 15 when she made her stand. And he's grateful that after so many years, she's still committed to sharing her story with others.

"Claudette's cooperation and her willingness to tell her story was so important because she was only 15, not 18 or 19, so she was at an age that a lot of young readers can identify with," said Hoose. "She was an amazing interviewee. She had the ability to tell what happened and tell how it felt, and she could still feel it."

Comments are not available on this story.

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