

Directions:

1. Show evidence of a close reading.
2. Answer the questions at the end of the text.
3. Write a one-page reflection in your WN.

A Forgotten Contribution

Before Rosa Parks, 15-year-old Claudette Colvin refused to give up her seat on the bus.

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NEWSWEEK

Rosa Parks's name is known round the world, but what about Claudette Colvin? On March 2, 1955, nine months before Parks famously refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Ala., a skinny, 15-year-old schoolgirl was yanked by both wrists and dragged off a very similar bus.

A new book by Phillip Hoose, "Claudette Colvin, Twice Toward Justice," describes how the girl stood her ground, yelling, "It's my constitutional right" as the cops pulled her off the bus, threw her into the back of a cop car, and handcuffed her through the window. In Hoose's telling, a teacher named Geraldine Nesbitt had emboldened her students, teaching them about the 14th Amendment. "It just so happens they picked me at the wrong time—it was Negro History Month, and I was filled up like a computer," Colvin tells NEWSWEEK, "I felt like Sojourner Truth was pushing down on one shoulder and Harriet Tubman was pushing down on the other—saying, 'Sit down girl!' I was glued to my seat."

Today, Colvin is 69 years old and is a retired nursing-home nurse living in New York City—her bold actions largely forgotten and long ago eclipsed by Parks. "I just dropped out of sight," she says of her move to New York in 1958. "The people in Montgomery, they didn't try to find me. I didn't look for them and they didn't look for me." In the years that followed her heroism, Colvin felt completely isolated from the Alabama activists who had once been so interested in her case.

But at the time, as Hoose describes, Colvin's dramatic arrest did not go unnoticed; energized by the prospect of using her case to challenge the segregation laws in court, black leaders hired an ambitious young lawyer to defend her and raised funds from the community for her trial. A 26-year-old Martin Luther King Jr. accompanied black leaders to the police commissioner to plead her case. Colvin was convicted nonetheless, and the news tore across Montgomery. There was talk of a bus boycott—African-Americans made up three fourths of the passengers and the Women's Political Council, headed by Jo Anne Robinson (a professor at the historically black Alabama State College) had long known a boycott would be their most powerful weapon.

But leaders were unsure about Colvin. Hoose describes their thoughts at the time: "'Some felt she was too young to be the trigger that precipitated the movement,' wrote Robinson. E. D. Nixon, an influential black leader heavily involved with the case, said, 'I had to be sure that I had somebody I could win with'."

Despite Colvin's lack of fame, Hoose believes she was an instrumental predecessor to Parks's actions nine months later. Before Colvin, Hoose tells NEWSWEEK, civil-rights leaders in Montgomery had been taking measured steps. Colvin "threw the stone in the water and forced them to jump in and think about what they had to do," he explains. Colvin's attorney, Fred Gray, a civil-rights activist who still practices law in Alabama, agrees: "Claudette gave all of us moral courage. If she had not done what she did, I am not sure that we would have been able to mount the support for Mrs. Parks."

When Parks was arrested on Dec. 1, 1955, Montgomery was ready. Within days, Robinson and the Women's Political Council had organized a wildly successful and crippling bus boycott, and snapped the whole country to attention. Unlike Colvin, Parks was a refined and grandmotherly seamstress completely above reproach—she was the face that leaders had been searching for.

Colvin remained anonymous. She knew Parks, often spending the night at her house after weekly NAACP youth meetings, which she had gotten involved with after her arrest. Some time during the summer of 1955, Colvin became pregnant by an older, married man. Nixon would later say the pregnancy was part of the reason activists chose not to use Colvin as the face of their boycott. Still, in May 1956, Colvin testified with three other women in a successful class-action suit that ultimately desegregated the Montgomery buses.

Hoose hopes his book will introduce Colvin's contributions to a larger audience. "I want it to be impossible to tell the story of the civil-rights movement without Claudette" he says. "Rosa Parks has to scoot over a little bit." The civil-rights movement was made up of a million tiny acts by anonymous individuals, says Richard Willing, a former USA Today reporter who wrote a story about Colvin in 1995. Rosa Parks makes a "great book mark," he says, pointing out that even she lived in obscurity for many years working in a congressman's office in Detroit. Historian David Garrow, a biographer of Dr. King, adds that oversimplifying the story to only include Parks sends "the implicit message that everything in history happens only because of unusually great individuals." The reality is usually more complex than that, he says.

While she's glad Hoose has told her whole story, Colvin says she's satisfied with a bigger reward. "Being dragged off that bus was worth it just to see Barack Obama become president, because so many others gave their lives and didn't get to see it, and I thank God for letting me see it."

Write a thesis statement for this article:

Who is the intended audience?