

# Claudette Colvin

## The Girl Who Got Arrested

An Original Play from  
the Montgomery  
Bus Boycott

Aligns to  
Common  
Core

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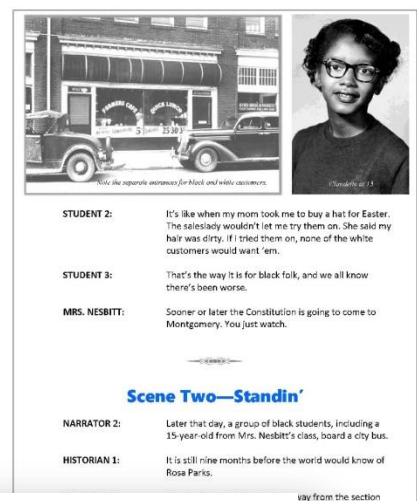
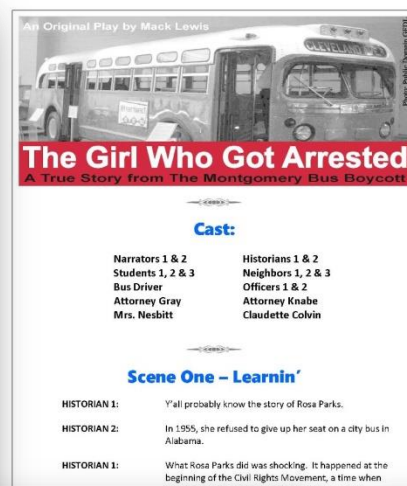
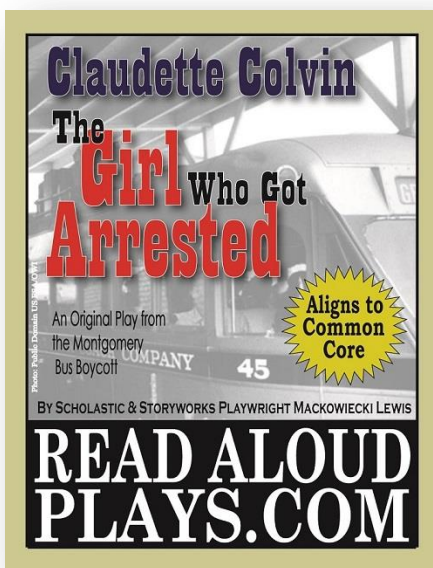
BY SCHOLASTIC & STORYWORKS PLAYWRIGHT MACKOWIECKI LEWIS

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*The Girl Who Got Arrested* tells the true story of Claudette Colvin. Nearly a year before Rosa Parks was famously arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a city bus, Claudette was dragged off a bus, jailed, and prosecuted for doing much the same. While some historians believe the Parks arrest was largely planned and orchestrated by Civil Rights leaders as a way to bring attention to the discriminatory bus laws, Claudette stood up for her "Constitutional rights" on the spur of the moment--*without* their backing. Not only did it lead to her conviction, but she was ostracized by her peers and forgotten by history for nearly fifty years. Suitable for reader's theater, podcast, or a discussion-based classroom reading. The play is aimed at grades 4 through 8, but given the subject matter, be sure to preview and pre-teach before assigning. There are parts for 11 to 17 students.

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TOR 1: This is the story of the first brave soul who dared challenge Jim Crow on a city bus.

NARRATOR 2: It's 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama. The students in Mrs. Nesbitt's class at Booker T. Washington High are finishing their presentations on famous Black Americans.

STUDENT 1: During the Civil War, Harriet Tubman escaped slavery, but she returned to the south to free others. Harriet Tubman demonstrated great courage. That's why I want to be like Harriet Tubman.

STUDENT 2: Mrs. Nesbitt, why does History remember Harriet Tubman and not others?

STUDENT 3: Didn't other people risk their life doing the same thing?

MRS. NESBITT: That seems likely, doesn't it? History can be rather fickle about who and what it remembers.

NARRATOR 1: The discussion moves toward Jim Crow laws. Such laws were created to keep Black citizens apart from whites.

MRS. NESBITT: Sometimes justice is slow. Here in Alabama it seems as slow as molasses. But the Constitution says all men have equal rights.

STUDENT 3: I'm not sure that's true in Montgomery, Mrs. Nesbitt.

MRS. NESBITT: How do you mean?

STUDENT 1: I remember when the rodeo was comin' to town. We were real excited. Dad bought me a cowboy hat and my sister cowboy boots. But it turned out the rodeo was only for white folks, so we never got to go. That doesn't sound equal to me.

**The Girl Who Got Arrested**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Select the best answer for each question. Be prepared to support your answers by locating evidence in the story. (CCSS 10, 10 items 1, 2, 3, 4, 10)

- How old is Claudette when she is arrested?
  - O Nineteen.
  - O Fifteen.
  - O Twelve.
  - O Twenty-four.
- In Scene One, what are the students doing in class?
  - O Discussing segregation and the Constitution
  - O Giving presentations on famous people from history.
  - O Giving presentations on famous Black Americans.
  - O All of the above.
- What is the meaning of the word "fickle" in the first scene?
  - O ally.
  - O careless
  - O unpredictable
  - O specific.
- Hyperbole is a literary term to describe exaggeration. Which phrase from the play best demonstrates hyperbole?
  - O "...the sound of the door clunking shut hurt the worst."
  - O "...the Constitution is going to come to Montgomery."
  - O "My momma always said I can talk like two lawyers put together."
  - O "...such laws were created to keep black citizens apart from whites."
- Why isn't Claudette willing to give up her seat?
  - O Because she's been inspired by Rosa Parks.
  - O Because she is prejudiced toward white people.
  - O Because there weren't any seats in back.
  - O Because she's thinking about the courage of Harriet Tubman.
- What was Claudette's career goal prior to getting convicted?
  - O To be a lawyer.
  - O To be a civil rights activist.
  - O To be a saleslady.
  - O To be a bus driver.
- What set of adjectives are not used in the play to describe Claudette?
  - O courageous and influential
  - O angry and forgiving
  - O cautious and low class
  - O dirty and easy
- What's this play really all about? Be prepared to support your answer with evidence from the play.
  - O Discrimination - Claudette is determined to stand up for her Constitutional rights
  - O Fear - Claudette fears for her safety because of Jim Crow laws and racial prejudice
  - O Courage - Claudette demonstrates courage in the face of rejection
  - O Something else:

9. Respond in detail to one of the following questions, using evidence from the play whenever possible.

A. Our character traits reveal who we are inside. What are Claudette's character traits?

B. Was Claudette's decision to refuse to give up her seat a good one? How did it impact her life? How did it impact the world?

C. How is Claudette different than and the same as Harriet Tubman or Rosa Parks?



An Original Play by Mack Lewis



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# The Girl Who Got Arrested

A True Story from The Montgomery Bus Boycott

## Cast:

Narrators 1 & 2  
Students 1, 2 & 3  
Bus Driver  
Attorney Gray  
Mrs. Nesbitt

Historians 1 & 2  
Neighbors 1, 2 & 3  
Officers 1 & 2  
Attorney Knabe  
Claudette Colvin

## Scene One – Learnin’

**HISTORIAN 1:**

Y’all probably know the story of Rosa Parks.

**HISTORIAN 2:**

In 1955, she refused to give up her seat on a city bus in Alabama.

**HISTORIAN 1:**

What Rosa Parks did was shocking. It happened at the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, a time when people were working to get unfair laws changed.

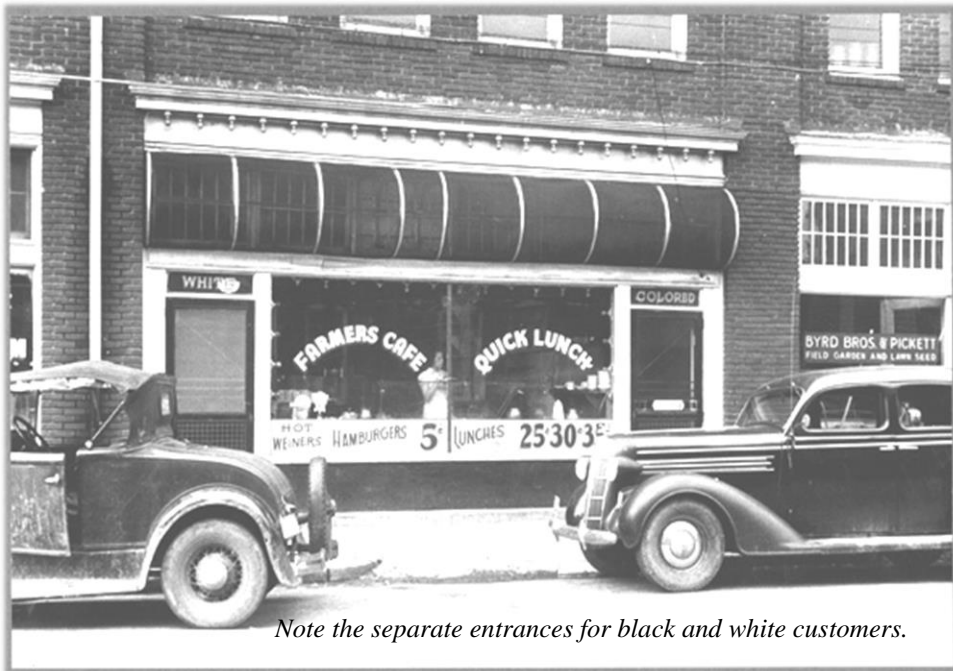
**HISTORIAN 2:**

But did you know *before* Rosa there were others?

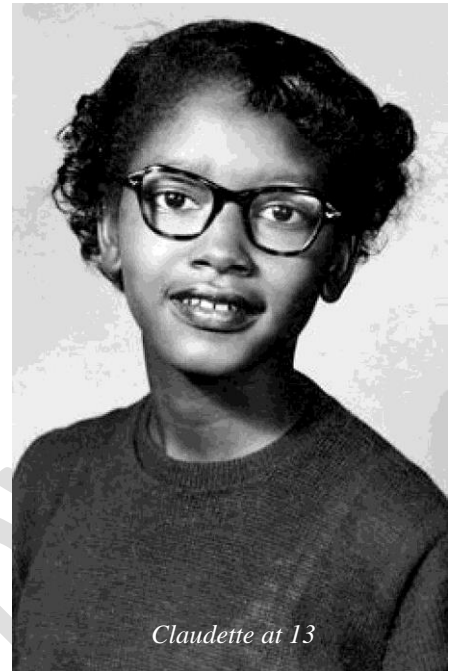
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- NARRATOR 1:** This is the story of the *first* brave soul who dared challenge Jim Crow on a city bus.
- NARRATOR 2:** It's 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama. The students in Mrs. Nesbitt's class at Booker T. Washington High are finishing their presentations on famous Black Americans.
- STUDENT 1:** During the Civil War, Harriet Tubman escaped slavery, but she returned to the south to free others. Harriet Tubman demonstrated great courage. That's why I want to be like Harriet Tubman.
- STUDENT 2:** Mrs. Nesbitt, why does History remember Harriet Tubman and not others?
- STUDENT 3:** Didn't other people risk their life doing the same thing?
- MRS. NESBITT:** That seems likely, doesn't it? History can be rather fickle about who and what it remembers.
- NARRATOR 1:** The discussion moves toward **Jim Crow laws**. Such laws were created to keep Black citizens apart from whites.
- MRS. NESBITT:** Sometimes justice is slow. Here in Alabama it seems as slow as **molasses**. But the Constitution says all men have equal rights.
- STUDENT 3:** I'm not sure that's true in Montgomery, Mrs. Nesbitt.
- MRS. NESBITT:** How do you mean?
- STUDENT 1:** I remember when the rodeo was comin' to town. We was real excited. Dad bought me a cowboy hat and my sister cowboy boots. But it turned out the rodeo was only for white folks, so we never got to go. That doesn't sound equal to me.





*Note the separate entrances for black and white customers.*



*Claudette at 13*

**STUDENT 2:**

It's like when my mom took me to buy a hat for Easter. The saleslady wouldn't let me try them on. She said my hair was dirty. If I tried them on, none of the white customers would want 'em.

**STUDENT 3:**

That's the way it is for Black folk, and we all know there's been worse.

**MRS. NESBITT:**

Sooner or later the Constitution is going to come to Montgomery. You just watch.



## Scene Two—Standin'

**NARRATOR 2:**

Later that day, a group of Black students, including a 15-year-old from Mrs. Nesbitt's class, board a city bus.

**HISTORIAN 1:**

It is still nine months before the world would know of Rosa Parks.

**NARRATOR 1:**

The students seat themselves away from the section

- STUDENT 1:** for white passengers.  
That was a good report you gave, Claudette. You sure can talk.
- CLAUDETTE:** Thanks. My momma always says I can talk more than ten lawyers put together.
- NARRATOR 2:** Soon the bus gets crowded.
- STUDENT 1:** Claudette, we've got to move. This white lady wants our seats.
- NARRATOR 1:** Claudette sees a woman standing nearby. The bus driver notices too.
- DRIVER:** I need those seats!
- NARRATOR 2:** Claudette's schoolmates go stand in back, but Claudette's mind is still swirling with thoughts from the classroom discussion about the Constitution.
- NARRATOR 1:** She thinks about her dream of becoming a lawyer and the courage of Harriet Tubman.
- NARRATOR 2:** She knows the law: she only has to give up her seat if others are available further back.
- DRIVER:** Why you still sittin' there? I need that seat!
- NARRATOR 1:** The driver **summons** the police. He points out Claudette.
- OFFICER 1:** That's nothin' new. I had trouble out of that thing before.
- OFFICER 2:** You gonna to get up?
- CLAUDETTE (meekly):** No, sir.

**NARRATOR 2:** Claudette begins to cry.  
**OFFICER 1:** Get up!

**CLAUDETTE:** It's my **constitutional** right to sit here as much as that lady. I paid my fare. It's my constitutional right!

**NARRATOR 1:** The bus is full of people, but no one speaks up for Claudette.

**NARRATOR 2:** The officers yank her from the seat. One of them kicks her.

**CLAUDETTE** (*crying*): It's my constitutional right! It's my constitutional right!

**NARRATOR 1:** They drag her out, handcuff her, and push her into a police car. Claudette worries they'll try to hurt her.

**NARRATOR 2:** But at the City Jail, it's the sound of the iron door clanking shut that hurts the worst. Alone in a cell, she falls to her knees and cries.



## Scene Three—Sufferin’

**NARRATOR 1:** That night Claudette is bailed out of jail.

**NARRATOR 2:** Her neighbors rally around her.

**NEIGHBOR 1:** It was your squeaky little voice that kept you from gettin’ beat up.

**NEIGHBOR 2:** We'll have to keep on our guard. They've killed people for less.

**NEIGHBOR 3:** I'm proud of you, Claudette. I think you've brought the revolution to Montgomery.

**HISTORIAN 2:** Claudette had done something most adults hadn't: she'd stood up for her rights. Black leaders talked about using her case to challenge segregation.

**NARRATOR 1:** At school, she's a celebrity.

**STUDENT 1:** Look, there's the girl who got arrested!

**STUDENT 2:** She refused to let Jim Crow push her 'round!

**STUDENT 3:** I wish I had courage like that.

**NARRATOR 2:** But in court, Claudette is declared guilty of violating **segregation** laws.

**NARRATOR 1:** And because one officer claimed she'd scratched him, she's also convicted of assault.

**NARRATOR 2:** She's put on probation, but with a criminal record, her dreams of becoming a lawyer are over.

**NARRATOR 1:** Civil Rights leaders decide she's too emotional and low class. When she returns to school, her classmates turn against her as well.

**STUDENT 1:** Oh look, there's that crazy bus girl.

**STUDENT 2:** Who does she think she is? She's just made it tougher for the rest of us.

**STUDENT 3:** She must think she's just as good as white people. If you ask me, she got what she deserved.



**NARRATOR 2:** With no friends and no future, Claudette is soon forgotten.



## Scene Four—Returnin’

**HISTORIAN 1:** In the months following, others were arrested for the same thing. By the time Rosa Parks was arrested in December, the Black community was ready for action.

**HISTORIAN 2:** Dr. Martin Luther King helped organize the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Black people refused to ride the buses until the unfair rules were changed.

**HISTORIAN 1:** While the **boycott** dragged on, they went to court claiming Montgomery’s bus laws violated the Constitution—just as Claudette had claimed eleven months earlier.

**NARRATOR 1:** It is dangerous for African Americans to stand up in public and fight for equality. But Claudette is willing to testify. In a sense, she becomes a present-day Harriet Tubman.

**GRAY:** I call Claudette Colvin to the stand.

**NARRATOR 2:** Claudette tells the court how she was mistreated.

**CLAUDETTE:** The policeman asked if I was going to get up. I was crying then. I was very hurt because I didn’t know white people would act like that.

**NARRATOR 1:** The judges listen closely.

**CLAUDETTE:** I didn’t move at all. I just acted like a big baby. The

policeman kicked me, and then they just drug me out. I was very pitiful. It really hurt me to see that I'd have to give a person a seat when all those Black people were standing and there were not any more vacant seats.

**GRAY:** What happened when you got to jail?

**CLAUDETTE:** Well, all the people were staring at me. The policeman said, "She didn't want to sit back there with the others!" So they put me in a cell and locked the door.

**NARRATOR 2:** When the lawyer for the City questions Claudette, he tries to trick her into saying it was Dr. King who made them stop riding the buses.

**KNABE:** Did you have a leader when you started this boycott?

**CLAUDETTE:** Our leaders is just we, ourself.

**KNABE:** Be honest, Miss Colvin, why did you stop riding the buses?

**CLAUDETTE:** Because we were treated wrong—dirty and nasty.

**KNABE:** Wasn't it because of certain things Reverend King said?

**CLAUDETTE:** No, sir. It was in the beginning when they arrested me. We were gettin' treated like that all the time. Some of us just didn't have the guts to stand up.

**HISTORIAN 2:** The Court ruled that Montgomery's bus segregation laws were unconstitutional.

**HISTORIAN 1:** If there was a star witness, it was Claudette Colvin.

**NARRATOR 1:** Through all her sufferin', Claudette had brought the Constitution to Montgomery. ♦



“The Girl Who Got Arrested” was originally published in the Jan/Feb 2011 issue of Scholastic’s *Storyworks* magazine and most recently republished in 2020. It tells the true story of Claudette Colvin, an African-American teen who was dragged off a bus, jailed, and prosecuted. While some historians believe the Rosa Parks arrest 11 months later was largely planned and orchestrated by Civil Rights leaders as a way to bring attention to the discriminatory bus laws, Claudette stood up for her “Constitutional rights” on the spur of the moment--without their backing. Not only did it lead to her conviction, but she was ostracized by her peers and

forgotten by history for nearly fifty years (note the irony of the classroom discussion in scene one). Also note that the court scene is based on the actual transcripts from the civil trial.

**Pair with** Philip Hoose’s award-winning book, *Twice Toward Justice*. Consider reading the play first, using it as a platform to engage students in reviewing Hoose’s non-fiction work. What elements of the play are corroborated by the text and vice-versa? Use a simple t-chart to identify similarities and differences. (Note the playwright’s source material below.) **The Play:** Parts for 11 to 17 students and innumerable extras. Written for grades 4 – 8, but consider the subject matter before assigning.



**Instructions:** 1. Print a class set and assign parts. 2. Have students use highlighters to mark their individual roles. 3. Meet regularly for guided reading practice while having students practice their individual parts independently (such as for homework). 4. When ready, practice “on stage.” 5. Perform in front of an audience or create a podcast. 6. Hold a feedback and self-assessment session. 7. Use of the comprehension activities.

**Tech Note:** Having trouble printing? Pictures not showing up? Try opening your PDF viewer (such as Adobe) before opening the play. If this fails to fix the problem, visit the FAQ page on the site from which you purchased it. To maintain photo quality, print directly from an open PDF (rather than photocopying a printed copy).

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**Bubble Test Comprehension Activity** (CCSS RL & RI items 1, 2, 3, 4, 10). These questions are designed to invoke discussion. Have students cite evidence from the text when completing and reviewing. **Key:** 1. **b**; 2. **d** (their presentations about famous Black Americans led to discussion about Jim Crow; also, if one is a famous Black American, he or she is also a famous figure from history); 3. **c** (an argument could be made for “b. careless” so a teacher could accept that answer if a student can justify it); 4. **c**; 5. **d**; 6. **a**; 7. **d** (Claudette uses these phrases to describe how they were treated); 8. **all** are correct provided evidence can be cited; 9. answers vary.

**Key Vocabulary** (shown in bold within text; recommended to introduce before reading the play): **molasses, constitutional, segregation, summons, boycott, Jim Crow.**

**Sources:** *The Thunder of Angels* by Donnie Williams (2006, Lawrence Hill Books), *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice* by Phillip Hoose (2009, Melanie Kroupa Books), which includes first person interviews with Claudette, and *Daybreak of Freedom* by Stewart Burns (ed.), (1997, University of North Carolina Press), which includes transcripts from the Browder v. Gayle court case.



## The Girl Who Got Arrested

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Select the best answer for each question. Be prepared to support your answers by locating evidence in the story. (CCSS RL & RI items 1, 2, 3, 4, 10)

1. How old is Claudette when she is arrested?

- a. ☐ Nineteen.
- b. ☐ Fifteen.
- c. ☐ Twelve.
- d. ☐ Twenty-four.

2. In Scene One, what are the students doing in class?

- a. ☐ Discussing segregation and the Constitution
- b. ☐ Giving presentations on famous people from history.
- c. ☐ Giving presentations on famous Black Americans.
- d. ☐ All of the above.

3. What is the meaning of the word 'fickle' in the first scene?

- a. ☐ silly
- b. ☐ careless
- c. ☐ unpredictable
- d. ☐ specific

4. Hyperbole is a literary term to describe exaggeration. Which phrase from the play best demonstrates hyperbole?

- a. ☐ "...the sound of the iron door clanking shut hurt the worst."
- b. ☐ "...the Constitution is going to come to Montgomery."
- c. ☐ "My Momma always said I can talk like ten lawyers put together."
- d. ☐ "Such laws were created to keep black citizens apart from whites."

5. Why isn't Claudette willing to give up her seat?

- a. ☐ Because she's been inspired by Rosa Parks.
- b. ☐ Because she is prejudiced toward white people.
- c. ☐ Because there weren't any seats in back.
- d. ☐ Because she's thinking about the courage of Harriet Tubman.

6. What was Claudette's career goal prior to getting convicted?

- a. ☐ to be a lawyer
- b. ☐ to be a Civil Rights activist
- c. ☐ to be a saleslady
- d. ☐ to be a bus driver

7. What set of adjectives are *not* used in the play to describe Claudette

- a. ☐ courageous and talkative
- b. ☐ crazy and forgotten
- c. ☐ emotional and low class
- d. ☐ dirty and nasty

8. What's this play really all about? Be prepared to defend your answer with evidence from the play.

- a. ☐ Determination—Claudette is determined to stand up for her Constitutional rights
- b. ☐ Fear—Claudette fears for her safety because of Jim Crow laws and racial prejudice
- c. ☐ Courage—Claudette demonstrates courage in the face of injustice
- d. ☐ Something else:

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9. Respond in detail to one of the following questions, using *evidence* from the play whenever possible.

A. Our character traits reveal who we are inside. What are Claudette's character traits?

B. Was Claudette's decision to refuse to give up her seat a good one? How did it impact her life? How did it impact the world?

C. How is Claudette different than and the same as Harriet Tubman or Rosa Parks?