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Talking with Phillip Hoose



Phillip Hoose, whose last name is pronounced to rhyme with *rose*, says he loves to interview people. That's a good thing since he spends a great deal of time asking questions and listening to sources while conducting research for his books. Preferring to work with primary sources and firsthand experiences, Hoose writes narrative nonfiction that is dramatic, engaging, multifaceted, and informative. His work is also deeply inspirational, encouraging readers to learn more about his subjects and take action to be part of the solution to social and environmental problems.

His journey as a writer has spanned most of his adult life, beginning with articles and material for his work with the Nature Conservancy before he moved on to books. Although his first titles were for adults, including three books on sports, Hoose found his niche writing nonfiction books for young people that focus on causes, conservation, and community. *It's Our World, Too!*, first published in 1993, was inspired by his young daughter's efforts to raise funds for a local homeless shelter, and it received the Christopher Award, given to books that "affirm the highest values of the human spirit." Part history, part activist manual, that book, which remains in print 20 years later, typifies most of Hoose's work: solid information is tied to contemporary and historical events through stories that make the reader care.

The enthusiasm and passion Hoose puts into his books have served him well, not only in readership but also in acclaim. *We Were There, Too!* was a finalist for the 2001 National Book Award for Young People, an honor he won in 2009 for *Claudette Colvin: Twice toward Justice*, which was also named a Newbery Honor Book, a Robert F. Sibert Award Honor Book, and a YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction Finalist. *Moonbird* was also a Sibert Honor Book and a YALSA Award Finalist, while *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird* won a Boston Globe–Horn Book Award for nonfiction.

We learn in *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird* that by the time the threat of the birds' extinction was identified, nothing could have saved the ivory-billed woodpecker. In *Moonbird*, though, Hoose offers hope for the endangered rufa redknott—as well as ensuring the future of great narrative nonfiction. I recently had the opportunity to speak with Phillip Hoose about his environmental work, his writing, and the ways each of us can make a difference in our world.

BKL: You have written books on very diverse subjects, ranging from baseball's World Series to an extinct bird. How do you decide on a subject?

HOOSE: This is a pretty personal decision. I have to be moved and engaged by the subject. I have to care enough to spend years of my life on a topic. I've long been interested in birds and extinction. The trick is to find stories with strong characters and compelling relationships that will bring people closer to the concepts. These can't be abstract ideas like "extinction." Readers turn to the next page because they want to know what's going to happen to someone or something they care about.

BKL: For more than 35 years, you have worked with the Nature Conservancy. How has your experience there influenced your writing and the topics you write about?

HOOSE: My conservation work directly influenced *Moonbird*; *Hey, Little Ant*; and *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird*. In each case, I was seeking stories to encourage caring about the natural world. But, in general, one project often contains the seed for another. For example, *It's Our World, Too!* is about social activists. One of them, Sarah Rosen, led her school in a protest demonstration because her sixth-grade teacher would not allow girls to participate in a reenactment of the Constitutional Convention of 1787. The principal ruled that because women were not present at the historic event, girls could not participate now. So Sarah staged a well-publicized counterconvention protesting the school's decision. That brought her to my attention. During our conversation, Sarah commented that the problem is not just "girls." She said that all young people were invisible in U.S. history—and that it hurt. She challenged me to find any person her age represented in history books. After looking at a ponderous history book, I discovered only two teens—Sacagawea and Pocahontas. Sarah's comment that she still had another decade to go before she would be historically eligible led me to spend the next six years writing and researching *We Were There, Too! Young People in U.S. History*. And during that research, I found the subject of a subsequent book, Claudette Colvin, who, as a 15-year-old, refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white woman nine months before Rosa Parks became famous for the same act.

BKL: Most of your books are published for young people, but the information is so extensive that they're also perfect for most adults. What makes your books, like *Moonbird*, for example, a book for children?

HOOSE: Well, I don't write for children. I write for myself; I write for my inner Phil, and that person has no age. I try to write good books for good readers using language accessible to adults and younger readers. I strive to provide a clear, compelling, suspenseful, and moving account of the subject. Any person of any age who wants to learn about the extinction of a species and the rise of environmental groups should be able to enjoy *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird* because all the research I did gave me a suspenseful story with strong characters.

I sort of moved into the young adult marketplace after I had made a name with *We Were There, Too!*, which was nominated for the National Book Award. That is something that doesn't happen for many nonfiction books, and it got me a niche in the youth market. There are advantages to publishing books for the youth market—schools and libraries are main distribution points, and the American Library Association puts a bright spotlight on children's books. But I present my books to a lot of adult audiences, too. Very few adults I meet seem to think the books are not for them.

BKL: *It's often said that a good book for young people should also be a good book for anyone. But is it important that your books be read by young people?*

HOOSE: It's very important for them to be read by young people. Those readers will inherit the world! They take the messages seriously. At school presentations for *Moonbird*, there are always hands in the air. Young people ask: "What can we do?" "Is there a fund to raise money for?" "Is there a club to join?" The books provide a chance to inspire activism.

BKL: *Your research is so meticulous, and it includes a fair amount of firsthand experience and primary-source research. How long does it take you to get ready to start writing? How important is tenacity and perseverance in your work?*

HOOSE: It probably takes me longer than most writers. You're right; I do a lot of fieldwork, and I amass a lot of material. Once I have gathered a mountain of material, I often have trouble plunging in, but I really love to write once I do. It helps that I tend to write long and detailed book proposals. When the moment comes to actually write, I can refer back to the detailed proposal. But I really prefer to write about and be informed by people I can actually talk to. In writing *We Were There, Too!*, I used a lot of primary and secondary sources, but it was very liberating when I reached the time period, around the Great Depression, when I could actually speak to people who could tell me their own stories.

So much is about perseverance. Claudette Colvin was concerned that if a book about her story were to be widely read, she might lose her job. She said through an intermediary that she wouldn't consider working with me until after she retired. It took me awhile to realize that she was serious—not just dismissing me—and that I would have to be patient to get the chance to talk with her. I was working on other projects while I waited for her. And she came through when the time was right for her.

BKL: *You interviewed the young people profiled in It's Our World, Too! while they were in their teens. How did you locate them? Have you kept up with them? Are they still activists and leaders today?*

HOOSE: I found them through old-fashioned literature searches and networking. Back in the early 1990s, you couldn't just Google your characters. I was fortunate to have a network

of friends who are activists and knew about my project. They suggested young people for me to interview, but I also searched card catalogs and indexes.

SADLY, I have lost track of most of the young people I profiled, but some are still active in their causes or are making a difference in some way. I'm still in touch with Joel Rubin, who is a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, and I recently received an e-mail from Dwaina Brooks, who is now a teacher in Texas.

BKL: *Two of your books are about birds. I've met a surprising number of young birders in the last couple of years. How and when did you get involved in birding? How do adults help kids become interested in birding? Do you have a favorite bird?*

HOOSE: I went to the Yale School of Forestry and took an ornithology class. My classmates were passionate about birding and got me interested. The hook was set in the mid-1970s. Parents and educators can help by getting kids involved in birding by having them draw birds. I have found that many avid birders were encouraged by their elders to draw. Thousands of young people, mostly fourth- and fifth-graders, were in Junior Audubon Clubs in the early years of the twentieth century. They paid a dime to get a kit that included outlines of common birds for them to color in. Then they had to draw the birds from memory. That got the kids interested in field details. Then the kids would go outside and observe and draw birds from memory. This worked for more than 100,000 schoolchildren in the clubs, and it continues to work for young bird enthusiasts I know today. My favorite bird is the chat. It's a big old Buick of a warbler that lets out a stream of thuggish sounds that are hilarious. I don't get to see them often anymore unless I head south in the spring to find them.

BKL: *How do young readers respond to your stories?*

HOOSE: Readers responded in two different ways to *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird*. Before the announcement that the ivory-billed woodpecker had been rediscovered in the swamps along Arkansas' Lower Cache River, my presentations would conclude with discussions about the meaning of extinction or about the people involved in trying to save the species. After the announcement, in the middle of a nationwide book tour, there was more emotion in the discussions. The bird represented hope. Then, when prominent scientists challenged the claim, my audiences wanted reassurance. Attendees just wanted to know if there was still basis for hope. With *Moonbird*, there is more basis for hope, and the response is usually more about getting to work to save this species.

BKL: *Is extinction part of natural selection, or can we truly save a species? Given how hard it is to identify specific species of birds, how do we know if they've been saved from extinction?*

HOOSE: Humankind has sped up the process a lot, but we can reverse the process and save declining species. A lot depends on when you start. The efforts came too late for the ivory-bill

woodpecker but not for the rufa red knots. We've had three consecutive good seasons at Delaware Bay, counting more than 26,000 birds in a single day this year. That has to be a response to the conservation efforts being made. Harvesting of horseshoe crabs is prohibited on the Jersey side of Delaware Bay, and people are honoring the moratoriums against walking on certain beaches during the migration, and this helps the birds. There are good examples of conservation in South America to maintain coastal areas and protect the wintering grounds. I have high hopes for the red knot. Back in the early 1990s, when B95, the bionic-seeming subject of *Moonbird*, was born, there were an estimated 150,000 red knots; now there are only 35,000 to 40,000. The species had more margin for error in the larger group. With so few left, everything has to go just right, stopover site after stopover site. Timing has to be precise, and the food has to be there waiting for them every time. That's why it's so amazing that B95 has lived more than 20 years. Most knots live only a fraction as long.

BKL: You have said that caring is at the core of it all. Can we really teach children empathy and compassion through books?
HOOSE: I sure hope so. One point in writing these books is to help readers develop compassion and empathy. I receive a lot of correspondence from young people who have been moved by the books. Claudette Colvin's story has had a tremendous response from young readers who want to reach out to her. I believe that books can make a huge difference. My favorite book is *The Story of Ferdinand*, by Munro Leaf. If that book could work to make a difference in me, my books can work for others.

Sampling Hoose

Claudette Colvin: *Twice toward Justice*. 2009. 133p. illus. Farrar, \$19.95 (9780374313227); Squarefish, paper, \$9.99 (9780312661052). 323.092. Gr. 6–12.

Hey, Little Ant. By Phillip Hoose and Hannah Hoose. Illus. by Debbie Tilley. 1998. 32p. Tricycle, \$15.99 (9781883672546). PreS–Gr. 3.

It's Our World, Too! *Stories of Young People Who Are Making a Difference*. 1993. 166p. illus. Macmillan, paper, \$15.99 (9780374336226). 302.14. Gr. 5–10.

Moonbird: *A Year on the Wind with the Great Survivor B95*. 2012. 148p. illus. Farrar, \$21.99 (9780374304683). 598.072. Gr. 6–12.

The Race to Save the Lord God Bird. 2004. 208p. illus. Farrar, \$22.99 (9780374361730). 598.7. Gr. 7–12.

We Were There, Too! *Young People in U.S. History*. 2001. 264p. illus. Farrar, \$32.99 (9780374382520). 973. Gr. 5–8.

Jeanette Larson is a library and literature consultant and an author. Her latest title is *Hummingbirds: Facts and Folklore from the Americas* (2011).

Common Core Connections

Below are suggestions for implementing the Common Core State Standards with titles by Phillip Hoose. You can find more information about the standards at www.corestandards.org.

In the Classroom: After reading Hoose's *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird* or *Moonbird*, students can look at other books about birds that have lived long lives, such as Darcy Pattison and Kitty Harvill's *Wisdom, the Midway Albatross*, or that are endangered, such as Sy Montgomery's *Kakapo Rescue: Saving the World's Strangest Parrot*. Ask students to refer to specific passages in the texts as they compare and contrast the factors and traits that might account for the birds' ability to survive. Discuss how the actions of human beings have helped and hindered the well-being of these animals.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.7.3.** Analyze the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text (e.g., how ideas influence individuals or events, or how individuals influence ideas or events).
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.7.9.** Analyze how two or more authors writing about the same topic shape their presentations of key information by emphasizing different evidence or advancing different interpretations of facts.

In the Classroom: Direct students to follow their reading of *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird* with research about the ivory-billed woodpecker. Sites such as the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, www.birds.cornell.edu/ivory, and the Nature Conservancy, www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/arkansas/ivorybill/index.htm, have reports about claims of sightings since 2004. After students have considered some of the evidence, discuss whether it is likely that the ivory-billed woodpecker has escaped extinction and whether there is hope that its population could increase again.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.8.** Trace and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RST.9-10.1.** Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of science and technical texts, attending to the precise details of explanations or descriptions.

In the Classroom: One of the core values in *Hey, Little Ant* is respect for all living things. Although the story does not answer the question about whether to squash the ant, begin a class discussion about other animals and whether it is ever alright to kill them. Does the answer change if the animal is considered cute or is bigger and more powerful than we are? Does our motivation make a difference (anger, fear, hunger, etc.)? Pair up students and assign each a creature (bee, shark, cockroach, snake, etc.).

Have one student role-play the creature making the case for being left alone, including pointing out the things it has in common with humans, while the other student presents arguments for slapping, squashing, or trapping the animal. Have the student pairs present each case while the rest of the class serves as the jury.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.K.9.** With prompting and support, identify basic similarities in and differences between two texts on the same topic (e.g., in illustrations, descriptions, or procedures).
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.1.9.** Identify basic similarities in and differences between two texts on the same topic (e.g., in illustrations, descriptions, or procedures).
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.6.** Distinguish their own point of view from that of the author of a text.

In the Classroom: Draw the shape of a bus on a large piece of paper that can be attached to a wall. Ask students to work individually or in small groups to create scenes from Claudette Colvin's story. Select a quote from the book to be the inspiration, and after creating the art, add those words to the illustration. Use paint, mixed media, collage, photographs, crayons, or any other desired medium. Exhibit the pictures around the school. The Understanding Courage Project, www.understandingcourage.blogspot.com, has photographs from projects around the country and additional art-project resources.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5.1.** Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.7.** Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.8.7.** Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using different mediums (e.g., print or digital text, video, multimedia) to present a particular topic or idea.

In the Classroom: Read several of the stories in *It's Our World, Too! Next*, have students select a local young person who is doing service or activist work and interview that person about his or her activities to support the community.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.3.** Analyze in detail how a key individual, event, or idea is introduced, illustrated, and elaborated in a text (e.g., through examples or anecdotes).
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.3d.** Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to capture the action and convey experiences and events.