Updating the ‘You Go Girl’ Book Collection; Children’s Books

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Body

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If you’re a parent of kids (who am I kidding: girls) and possess a passing interest in basic human rights and dignity, you most likely have been gifted some of the books I have come to call the You Go Girl Collection. Infant libraries once home mostly to overinvested bunny mothers and magic pasta pots are now studded with bobble-headed cartoon depictions of female pioneers from Ada Lovelace to Bessie Coleman, while older kids now read about women resisting, persisting and dissenting till they puke.

Some of the new wave of children’s progressive history is brilliant and transporting; Erica Armstrong Dunbar’s young readers’ edition of “Never Caught,” about George and Martha Washington’s runaway slave Ona Judge, and her Harriet Tubman biography, “She Came to Slay,” are gold standards, and I love David Roberts’s “Suffragette: The Battle for Equality,” Jonah Winter’s “Lillian’s Right to Vote: A Celebration of the Voting Rights Act of 1965” and so many others. But there’s plenty that will make you want to self-immolate (“Cleopatra was Queen of the Nile and said girls rule!”).

I try to remind myself that, despite their varied quality, the proliferation of these books means that kids are at least hearing about history I never knew existed. I gobbled the Landmark history books like candy, and by third grade could have told you in excruciating detail about John F. Kennedy’s PT-109, but wouldn’t have recognized Alice Paul or Mary Church Terrell if they’d shown up to picket my house.

Still, it was with trepidation that I tackled a new crop of children’s books published to mark the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment. When the story of the long fight for women’s enfranchisement has been told popularly, it has too often been presented as flat celebration — all the complexities and nastiness, the racism and classism, the defining incompleteness of the project pressed out to make a neat fist-in-the-air tale of victory. If it’s so hard to honestly address the ways in which injustices have been replicated within movements for justice, how can those contours be effectively communicated in children’s books? Especially children’s books that are designed to inspire?

Updating the ‘You Go Girl’ Book Collection; Children’s Books

Barb Rosenstock’s FIGHT OF THE CENTURY: Alice Paul Battles Woodrow Wilson for the Vote (Calkins Creek/Boyds Mills & Kane, 40 pp., $18.99; ages 7 to 10), with illustrations by Sarah Green, did not assuage my anxieties. Rosenstock perplexingly presents the protracted battle between suffragist Paul and then-President Woodrow Wilson over a suffrage amendment to the Constitution as a boxing match: “This fight determines whether the women of the United States can vote, folks. The winner changes the country forever.” This framing, aside from giving kids bonkers ideas about what constitutes real political challenge — “In this corner, standing five feet six inches, 100 pounds, wearing long skirts and a large-brimmed hat, women’s rights leader, Alice Paul!” — also undersells what was actually radical about her tactics. While Rosenstock writes that Paul’s pickets outside the White House were a first in American protest strategy, the impact of that point gets dulled somewhere around “DING! END OF ROUND THREE.”

Why Rosenstock believed that ringside vernacular would resonate more with kids than direct storytelling is mysterious, but so are the gaps in her history. Green’s illustrations of the 1913 suffrage parade Paul organized show cheerfully integrated crowds of white and Black women. There is no mention until the concluding author’s note that Paul herself signed off on the segregation of Black suffragists to the back of the march to appease white suffragists who did not want them included at all; even when she does offer up this information, Rosenstock notes that Paul’s “support of her organization’s discriminatory actions damaged her historical reputation as a fighter for equal rights,” as if the reputational damage sustained by Paul — and not the white supremacy of a movement that purported to be on the side of liberty and democracy — is the key takeaway.

What a pleasure, then, to dive into HOW WOMEN WON THE VOTE: Alice Paul, Lucy Burns, and Their Big Idea (Harper, 80 pp., $18.99; ages 8 to 12) by Susan Campbell Bartoletti, with illustrations by Ziyue Chen, which offers an engaging and nuanced view of the movement, without attempting to pretty it up. Bartoletti describes the process of force-feeding suffragists who protested their imprisonment with hunger strikes: “A prison doctor stuck a long rubber hose as thick as a finger up [Paul’s] nose. He snaked the tube down her throat and into her stomach. He fastened a funnel to the top of the hose. Into the funnel, the doctor poured milk and two raw eggs. This is called force-feeding. And it hurt.” Ziyue’s illustrations of protesters being clubbed by police are interspersed with photographs reminding young readers that these things happened to real people in real life.

While this book, like “Fight of the Century,” settles on Paul as a central character (and does not address the very different, inside approach her contemporary, the National American Woman Suffrage Association leader Carrie Chapman Catt, took to persuading Wilson to come around to the 19th Amendment), its view of the movement is broader and comes far closer to providing the multigenerational, multiracial and, very often, racist bigger picture. Bartoletti dedicates several pages to Black suffragists, including the anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells — who was instructed not to march with the white Illinois delegation in the 1913 parade but flouted orders by joining them partway through — as well as the N.A.A.C.P. co-founder Mary Church Terrell, Nellie May Quander, Nannie Helen Burroughs and Carrie Williams Clifford. But its conclusion is something of a letdown: a pat celebration of the 19th Amendment, with an afterword promisingly entitled “More Work to Be Done” that is mostly about Paul’s later work to pass the Equal Rights Amendment, and not about the long battle to overturn Jim Crow-era disenfranchisement of Black women and men, a fight that extended 45 years beyond the 19th Amendment and — especially in the wake of the Supreme Court’s 2013 gutting of the Voting Rights Act — continues today.

For a longer view, slightly older readers can turn to HISTORY SMASHERS: WOMEN’S RIGHT TO VOTE (Random House, 224 pp., $7.99; ages 8 to 12) by Kate Messner, illustrated by Dylan Meconis. This volume is the most conversational of the bunch, a mix of sidebars, graphic-novel-style storytelling and cartoons; the text is often disconcertingly colloquial. Of suffragist and abolitionist Ernestine Rose, who pushed for the Married Women’s Property Act that New York passed in 1848, Messner writes, “She thought that the state’s law about married women not being able to keep their own property was the dumbest thing ever.” Which, y’know, isn’t wrong.

The book’s format may be a good match for those with shorter attention spans, and permits it to be gratifyingly capacious in what it covers. Messner pays welcome attention to Harriot Stanton Blatch’s Equality League of Self-Supporting Women, as well as to the labor activists, including Rose Schneiderman, who understood suffrage as a key lever of influence for working-class women. She also covers the history of fighting voter suppression up through Stacey Abrams’s contested loss in the 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election and concludes with a photo and prompt

from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: “Just imagine what all those women who fought for their right to vote would think if they could see their country now.”

My favorite of the books is FINISH THE FIGHT! The Brave and Revolutionary Women Who Fought for the Right to Vote (Versify/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 144 pp., $18.99; ages 8 to 12), written by the staff of The New York Times, led by Veronica Chambers. “The way we frame suffrage needs attention. It is thought to be kind of dowdy and dour, whereas in fact it is exciting and radical,” the historian Kate Clarke Lemay is quoted as saying near the start. In addition to that “makeover,” the writers note, this history requires “a wider lens,” and so they highlight the activists who were not Paul, Susan B. Anthony or Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

They begin, as the suffrage movement is widely understood to have begun, in Seneca Falls, New York, but they do not linger on Stanton or her 1848 convention there. Instead the book describes the Haudenosaunee confederacy of Native American tribes, a society, built on matrilineal power lines, in which women were public speakers and leaders. Instead of considering the impact the Haudenosaunee had on white suffragists — an angle that keeps the focus on those white feminists — it recounts how the imposition of white political culture on the Haudenosaunee women contributed to their disempowerment, and left them to their own centuries-long battle to get back the authority they’d had long before suffragists came into view. “The Seneca Nation constitution wouldn’t be changed to allow women to vote in tribal elections until 1964,” we learn.

We also learn about the New Yorker Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, who in 1912 rode a white horse as she led members of her Chinese and Chinese-American community in one of the biggest suffrage parades in U.S. history. And there is an excellent section on the suffragist and writer Frances Ellen Watkins Harper — one of the first African-American women in the United States to publish short stories and novels — who said, “I do not believe that white women are dew-drops just exhaled from the skies. I think that like men they may be divided into three classes, the good, the bad and the indifferent. The good would vote according to their convictions and principles; the bad, as dictated by prejudice or malice; and the indifferent will vote on the strongest side of the question, with the winning party.” Could there be a more vivid description of the gendered, racial and political dynamics of our contemporary moment, a century after the 19th Amendment, and two and a half months before an election in which a Black woman is the vice presidential candidate on a major party’s ticket for the first time in this nation’s history?

Reading the lushly illustrated chapters about the Mexican suffragist Jovita Idár and the Dakota Sioux writer and activist Zitkála-Šá, as well as about Elizabeth Piper Ensley, who in the 1890s fought for racial integration within the suffrage movement in the Western states and wrote, “Women’s work in politics must be like that of the chambered nautilus, the spiral animal, which after completing one house or shell proceeds to make another and so is constantly advancing,” I felt myself wanting more. Not from this volume, which offers lots, but from others.

These books make me hungry for more like them, for children and adults. I want this history offered in as many forms and with as much energy and dedication as the history of this nation’s white men over the centuries.

The purely heroic, bang-pow version of affirmative women’s history is the stuff I fear younger readers will reflexively rear back from, reasonably question and ultimately reject. The complex, challenging texts that provoke curiosity and frustration seem more likely to drive kids of every gender, race and identity to want to read more, learn more, write more of their own history and, most crucially, jump into America’s ongoing, jumbled, urgent fight for full enfranchisement.

Also of Note: “Bold & Brave: Ten Heroes Who Won Women the Right to Vote,” by Kirsten Gillibrand and Maira Kalman (Random House, 40 pp., $7.99; ages 6 to 9) is now out in paperback, and “The Suffragist Playbook: Your Guide to Changing the World,” by Lucinda Robb and Rebecca Boggs Roberts (Candlewick, 160 pp., $15.99; ages 12 and up), by the daughters of Lynda Robb and Cokie Roberts, will be published October 27.

Rebecca Traister is a writer for New York magazine and author of “Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Anger.”

PHOTO: “I shall not march at all,” Ida B. Wells said, “unless I can march under the Illinois banner.” From left, Nellie May Quander, Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells, Alice Paul. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Ziyue Chen/"How Women Won the Vote" FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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