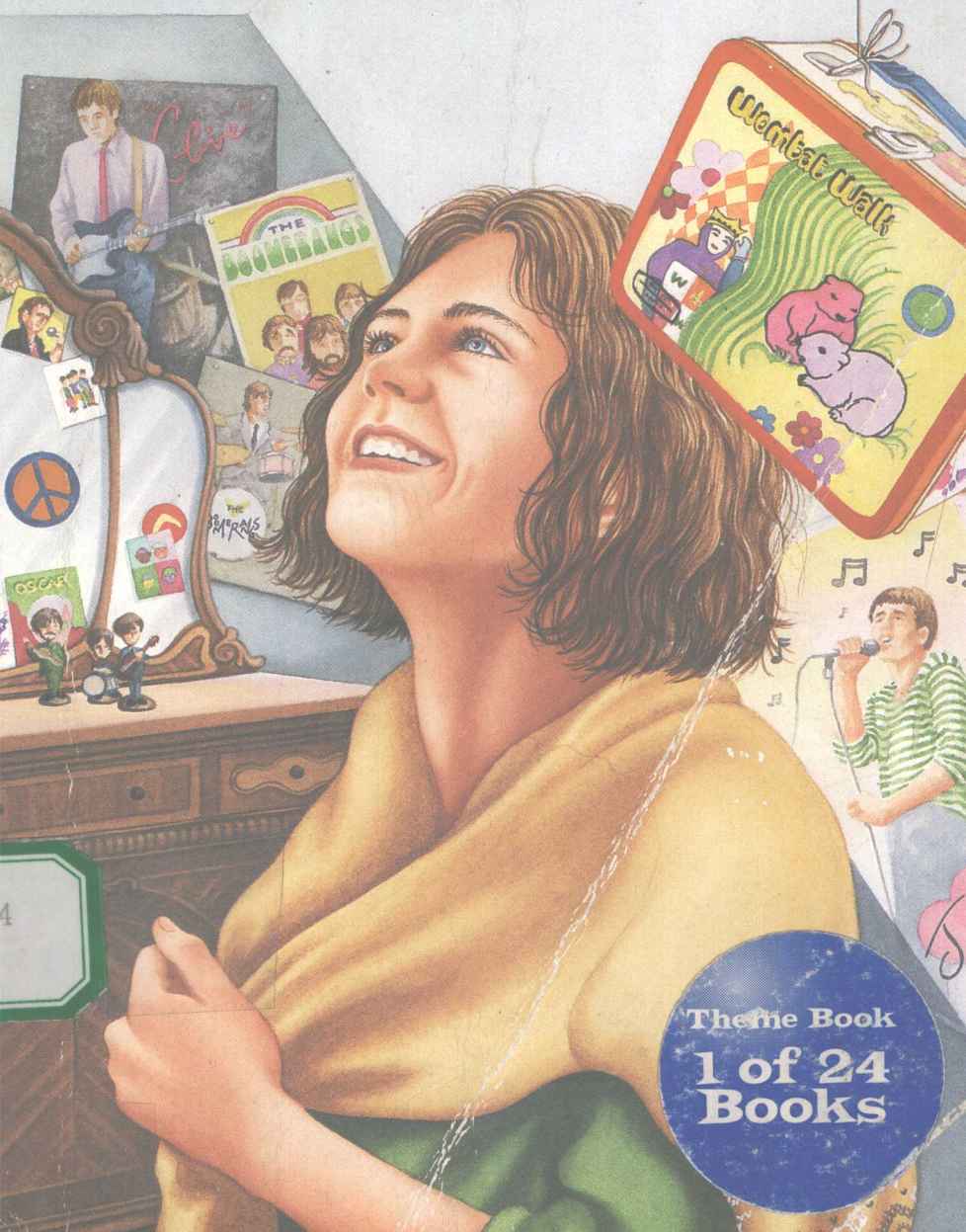


Sydney, Herself

Colby Rodowsky



Theme Book
1 of 24
Books

Colby Rodowsky

Sydney, Herself



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BOOKS BY COLBY RODOWSKY

What About Me?

Evy-Ivy-Over

P.S. Write Soon

A Summer's Worth of Shame

The Gathering Room

H, My Name Is Henley

Keeping Time

Julie's Daughter

Fitchett's Folly

To my sons-in-law,
TIL AND JAY

Sydney, Herself

September

It's hard to know just where to begin: with Birdy-Morrison talking about self-awareness, with Sam Klemkoski in the English classroom where he shouldn't have been, or with me and my Boomerang blood.

"Begin at the beginning," my mother always said when I was little and would come running in, telling tales back to front about who did what and to whom.

"Just get it down on paper. We'll mess with it later," said Sam Klemkoski, looking us over that first day of school in September.

Given what I knew about the two of them—that Sam Klemkoski didn't belong there, and that my mother, as

mothers go, was generally right—maybe I'd better stick with "Begin at the beginning."

But, first, a warning. This is a school project. Not one of the boring kind, like an outline or a vocabulary drill, but a school project nevertheless. And, of course, to get to the beginning, I had to go back, once I knew it *was* a project, and fill in what already happened.

It was warm for September when my friends Cissy and Mary Jo and I started up the drive to Hawthorne Hills, and the sun, beating down, seemed to make little wavy patches in the air. I felt a trickle of sweat between my shoulder blades, followed by another, and another—a whole river of sweat—and I began to think I should've worn cutoffs and a T-shirt.

"Listen, you guys," I said, urging the other two on, "we didn't spend all summer perfecting our Carol Weatherby look to give up on it now."

"You're right," said Cissy, grinning so that all her teeth, (which would have looked big on anybody else but didn't on her,) showed.

"I guess," said Mary Jo. Mary Jo's never as sure of things as she ought to be.

We stood staring at one another, and it was as if we were a string of look-alike paper dolls: our hair all permed and cobwebby; our clothes in layers—skirts and shirts and dark-colored stockings, scarves and jackets that reached almost to our knees. ("The three witches from *Macbeth*,"

my mother called us.) We had a carefully cultivated pallor to our faces, with smudges of eye shadow under our eyes. ("The gray look," my mother called it.) And we walked with our hands sort of out in front as if we were carrying invisible trays. ("As though you're feeling for a doorknob in a dark room," said my mother.)

Carol Weatherby was this really terrific English teacher who taught sophomore creative writing, and all last year and throughout the summer we couldn't wait to be in her class. She's the kind of person who looks misty and tragic, so that you *know* things have happened to her—which definitely haven't to any of us. She told us once last year that she had done her best writing when she was in her early teens and that we, at H.H., were just *ripe* for it. (When I told that to my mother she said, "Sounds like a peach," and went back to her knitting.)

Anyway, there we were, halfway up the school driveway, looking as misty and tragic as we could manage, with everybody around us yelling about summer vacation and how it was good to be back and what kind of kick was Birdy-Morrison going to be on *this* year.

Birdy-Morrison in any other school would've been called the principal (except that any other school probably wouldn't've *hired* her), but at Hawthorne Hills she was "The Head," just as her father, William William Morrison, had been "The Head" (and also founder) before her. And the thing about her was that every summer, when most people were going to the beach or the moun-

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tain, she went off to some seminar someplace and came back with a bunch of ideas she tried out on us. And I knew, as we went into the school, that it wouldn't be long before we got this year's offering.

Hawthorne Hills is an alternative and somewhat progressive school where everybody's encouraged to be terrific in at least one thing, which then makes it okay for the same kids to be duds in something else. The main building used to be a private home, but by now it's been added on to so many times and in so many directions that it looks lumpy and slightly run-down. In the middle of the first floor is the Big Hall, which is where we have meetings, plays, concerts, parties, and what pass for assemblies. And which is where we all crowded on that first morning in September to get our "Welcome Back, Girls" talk.

"Welcome back, girls," said Birdy-Morrison when everybody had settled on the floor, the stairs, and into nooks and corners. "Welcome back to Hawthorne Hills." She stood in the center of the room, leaning on the bust of an Indian girl named Mignon and wearing the same dress she'd worn last June when she said "Goodbye, girls." (What I really think is that Birdy-Morrison has six or seven dresses just alike—morning-glory blue with the top permanently sagged out where she sags out—and I imagine her washing them and hanging them on the line the same as I imagine Little Orphan Annie hanging out her row of identical dresses.)

suppose 假设 猜想
交流 聊天

September † 7

"I know you all had a wonderful summer—and I know you're all glad to be back," chirped Birdy-Morrison. And then there was this rumbly kind of a groan that spread throughout the room—the kind you know you're supposed to make when a teacher cracks a joke.

"And that now you're *all* ready to get down to work," she said.

Another groan.

"But first let me share my summer with you, because this year, girls, I found myself."

"I didn't know she was lost," whispered Cissy, poking me in the ribs. 肋骨

"I spent part of my vacation at an awareness seminar and I learned to know the inner me," Birdy-Morrison went on. "And that is what I want for you: to know yourselves. Consequently, girls, this year at Hawthorne Hills will be"—significant pause—"the Year of the Self."

By then the heat in the room was beginning to get to me. I tugged at my layers of clothes and wondered if looking like Carol Weatherby was worth it and twisted around to see where she was and if she appreciated my suffering. When I didn't see her, I turned back to Birdy-Morrison, who was going strong.

"Not in a selfish way, girls," she said. "What I want is for you to see yourselves as part of the broad scheme of things. To understand yourselves in light of your relationships, your abilities, the world around you."

"Yuck," said Cissy.

"Maybe next year she'll go to the Grand Canyon," whispered Mary Jo. "Then all we'll have to do is look at slides."

"This year we will have a project," said Birdy-Morrison, her voice quivering. "A yearlong project. And for each of you it will be something different. Those of you who can will express yourselves in the written word . . ." (Here Cissy and Mary Jo and I tilted our chins slightly and tried to look ethereal.)

"Those of you who can draw, who are musical, or gifted in photography will work in those areas . . ."

"There will be murals and scrapbooks, plays and oral histories. And so," said Birdy-Morrison, throwing her arms out and setting her bosoms bouncing, "if you can write, write. If you can draw, draw. Whatever your talents, girls, find yourselves."

For a while after that, nobody moved. It reminded me of the time, years ago, when I went to a birthday party at Nancy Parks's and there was a treasure hunt, and after her father gave the instructions, we all waited, the way we were now, until he finally said, "On your mark, get set, go." I halfway expected Birdy-Morrison to say "On your mark, get set, go."

Instead, she said, "There are a few changes you should know about, girls. The parking lot by the back door is for faculty only. There will be a salad bar on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays in the dining room. And Carol Weatherby, who taught creative writing, will not be with

us this year. Her place will be taken by Sam Klemkoski." And here Birdy-Morrison pointed to a man who was leaning against the back wall, sort of dozing.

"It's not *fair*," said Cissy as we headed out of the Big Hall.

"And she didn't even mention it until after the parking lot and the salad bar on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays," said Mary Jo.

"And my own mother *knew* it," I said. "She *had* to know it, the way she was over here all last week for faculty meetings and stuff."

"Honestly, Sydney," said Cissy. "The only thing that'd be halfway decent about going to the school where your mother teaches would be having her *tell* you things. And yours doesn't."

"Don't remind me," I said. And right away I knew how really upset Cissy was. Otherwise, she'd never have mentioned it.

"Carol Weatherby, where are you?" said Mary Jo.

"When we need you most," said Cissy and I together.

But even as we said this, we found ourselves heading upstairs, through the twisty second-floor hall, to Carol Weatherby's classroom.

Except that Sam Klemkoski was in it now.

He was not only in it, he was taking up most of it. At least that's the way it seemed as Cissy and Mary Jo and

I grabbed three desks and shoved them as far over in the corner as we could. But it was hard to get away from Sam Klemkoski. I mean he was so *there*. And right away I knew that, as much as I wanted to look the other way (out of loyalty to Carol), I couldn't take my eyes off him.

Not that he was handsome, or young either. He had this face that looked like it should've had a beard, but didn't; ^{from} tufts of hair growing out of his ears; a big nose; and a bald spot at the back of his head. His hands were square and sort of beat-up-looking and his clothes were rumpled, the way mine get when I forget and leave them in the dryer for days. And he wore sandals, ^{便鞋} so his toes showed when he twitched them, which he did every time he said something he thought was important. Or when he was nervous. The way some people do with their eyebrows.

"My name is Sam Klemkoski," he said in a voice that rattled the windowpanes. Twitch-twitch went the toes.

"I'm a wood sculptor ^{雕刻家} (twitch-twitch) "turned English teacher," he said. "And the reason for the change is that, as an artist, I was afraid I was becoming too isolated, that I was spending too much time staring at my belly button. And I wondered if I could still communicate in words as well as wood. In short, I decided to rejoin the world."

"That means that, whatever happened to Carol, *he* was the only teacher they could get at the last minute," whispered Cissy.

"And I have to confess," Sam Klemkoski went on, "that

the thought of a regular income, no matter how meager, is not entirely unwelcome." (Twitch, twitch, twitch.)

The whole time he was saying this he was balancing a stack of green loose-leaf binders with E.T. on the covers (E.T. in high school?), trying to keep them from slipping and sliding before he handed them out. "Now you all heard Miss Morrison . . ."

"Birdy-Morrison," said Janet Preller from the front of the room.

"Yes," he said. "You heard Miss Morrison tell . . ."

"Birdy-Morrison," said Winkle Shultz from the corner under the hanging spider plant.

"Yes," said Sam, who all of a sudden looked as if he had hold of a greased pig that was just on the point of getting away.

"Hy-phen-ated," said Janet. "Or at least it sounds that way."

"Birdy-Morrison," said Winkle, running the words together. "She goes by her *whole* name, but the teachers just use their first, you know."

Obviously, Sam didn't know, and if he didn't know *that*, then he didn't know much about Hawthorne Hills, which probably made it true what Cissy said about their getting him at the last minute. Like maybe yesterday.

"Well," he said, "that makes me Sam, then. And I'm sure I'll know all your names in the fullness of time."

I watched him handing out those stupid green binders and thought how, since he didn't know anything about

Hawthorne Hills, maybe it was up to the creative-writing class to teach him. Then I yawned and slumped down in my chair, because, with Carol gone, I felt sad and sort of blah and not up to teacher baiting (which takes more energy than one might imagine).

“Now,” said Sam, wiping his hands down the sides of his pants, “you all heard Miss . . . you all heard Birdy-Morrison talking about self-awareness. You have all been given these notebooks, and I want you to cleave unto them; to make them your own, your boon companions.”

Cleave? Boon companions? Fullness of time? I wrote on the first page of my notebook and shoved it over for Cissy to see.

“Good,” said Sam Klemkoski, bringing his hand down flat on the top of a bookcase so that dust puffed out from the shelves. “I’m glad to see that some of you are already taking notes, because that’s what this year will be all about. A series of notes. One long observation that will be made up of stories and character sketches, essays and scraps of dialogue. This year will be a little bit of everything: a hodgepodge, a gallimaufry. You will find your own voice. But, always, in what context?”

“Self-awareness,” said Winkle Schultz, but her voice said, “This is only the first day of school and I’m already bored.”

“Yes, self-awareness,” said Sam. And then after a humongous pause, when you could almost see him figuring out in his mind that class wasn’t over yet and he’d better