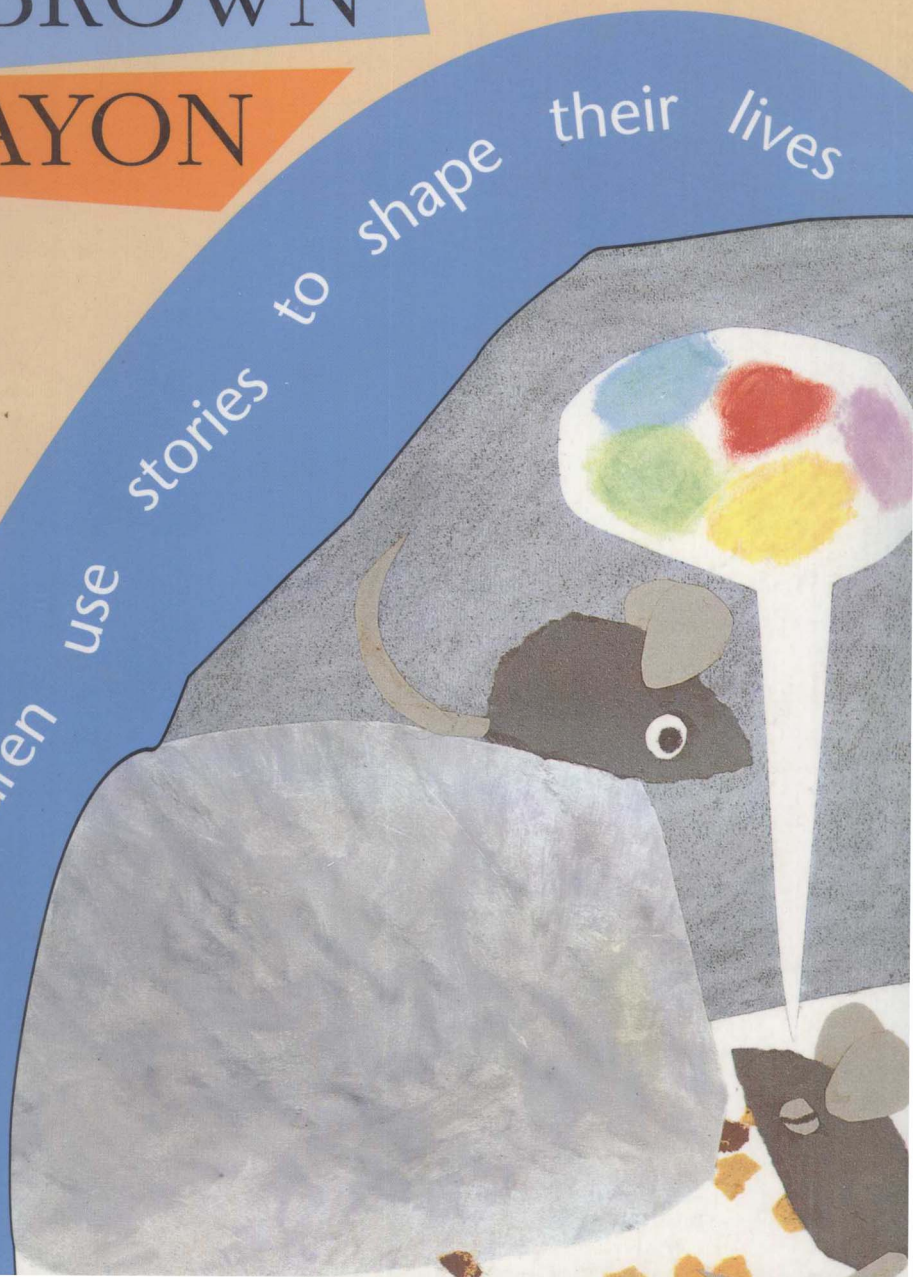


VIVIAN GUSSIN PALEY

The **GIRL** with the **BROWN** **CRAYON**

How children use stories to shape their lives



Vivian Gussin Paley

The Girl
with the
Brown Crayon

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The Girl with the Brown Crayon

This book has been awarded Harvard University Press's annual prize for an outstanding publication about education and society, established in 1995 by the Virginia and Warren Stone Fund.

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Kwanzaa and Me

To Irving

Preface

The events recorded here are true, though they seem, in retrospect, something I may have dreamed. Yet how could the children and I, even with our combined dreams, have imagined Reeny's song? "Once upon a time, uh-huh uh-huh, they was a mouse name Frederick, uh-huh uh-huh!" Swish, swish, hands on hips. "Uh-huh uh-huh, I told you so, uh-huh uh-huh, Frederico!"

Reeny is a five-year-old black girl who falls in love with a mouse called Frederick and then makes us think about him and his creator as if everything that happens in school depends on our deliberations. "Guess what, guess what!" she declares. "This is Leo Lionni we doing!"

"Who is Leo Lionni?" visitors ask, looking at the children's giant-sized paintings, each bearing the author's name in uneven print. "Our storyteller," we reply, smiling our secret smiles, knowing that something remarkable is taking place.

And none too soon. Incredible as it seems to me, after more than three decades my final year in the classroom has come. I shall need a miracle to sustain me for the days when my feet no longer carry me to Room 284.

This is my last chance to follow the children into unexplored territory, and never has there been a child so willing to lead as Reeny. How does she know that the whole point of school is to find a common core of references without blurring our own special profiles? Or, to put it into her words, “How come every the whole time I be with one person for a long time they ’mind me of a Leo Lionni somebody?”

“Do I remind you of a Leo Lionni somebody?” I ask, for I have wondered somewhat anxiously over the years about my identification with one of his characters, a bird named Tico.

Reeny studies my face. “He might be not thinking about old people,” she says, though the issues in his animal fables she has begun to memorize are ones I have struggled with all my life. Perhaps this will be the year I discover which Leo Lionni somebody I am. At the very least we will have invented a classroom no one has ever seen before, and this has always been miracle enough for me.

In the telling of this literary tale, it may seem that other significant details of school life are obscured by the single-minded dedication of one little girl and her teacher to the words and pictures of a man named Leo Lionni. Stories do proceed as if nothing else is going on, and it is Reeny’s story that is told in these pages.

As she herself remarks, “ ’Member when I didn’t even know Leo Lionni and I didn’t even know everyone in this class? That other time got . . . uh, seems like it went . . . uh, somewhere else. And now we got another time to talk about.”

“We could talk about that other time too, you know.”

“Yeah, but let’s us just keep talking about this time.”

The Girl with the Brown Crayon

Reeny

The room appears to be filling up with black girls though in fact only Reeny fits the description. “This brown girl that’s dancing is me,” she says, taping another crayoned figure to the wall. I try to imagine myself telling my kindergarten teacher, “This little Jewish girl dancing is me.” The impossibility of my having said such a thing makes me smile.

Reeny’s brown girls have begun to encircle the kindergarten. She achieves what is for her the right shade of brown by barely pressing down the first time she colors in the outline, then gradually darkening the tones until she is satisfied.

“Why do you always need a crayon for that?” asks Cory, who prefers markers.

“Because see? It’s the same color like me.” Reeny lays her hand on the paper. “A marker’s too dark.”

“Too dark for me too,” agrees the very blond Cory, covering Reeny’s hand with her own. They became best friends within the first hour of school and begin every day together drawing pictures of girls with enormous amounts of hair. Sometimes

Reeny uses markers for the dress, the hair, or even to outline the body, but the face, arms, hands, and legs are carefully colored in with a brown crayon, which she removes from the box as soon as she sits down. There it stays on the paper, ready to certify: This girl is brown like me.

The two other African-American children in the class are Kevin and Bruce. Today they bring paper and markers and settle across the table from Reeny and Cory. "Gotcha red, gotcha blue," Bruce begins to chant, shaping his big hulking monsters in two colors: red is the good guy, blue the enemy. "Gotcha!" Dash-dash-dash. "Gotcha!" Dash-dash-dash.

The tempo quickens around the table, feet tapping, shoulders swaying. "Gotcha blue, gotcha red, gotcha bad guy in the head. Gotcha this, gotcha that, can't go nowhere 'cause you're flat." Swoosh, descends the purple marker, snuffing out another bad guy.

Reeny moves her head to the beat, but the harmony is not to last. Before long she is at my side. "Excuse me," she says. "I got to tell you something important. Bruce called me a little short-haired black girl."

"And you're—"

"He sayin', 'You a little short-haired black girl.' He can't say *you* something." She turns to Bruce, who has followed her to my table. "Daddy says if someone botherin' you don't waste time on them, tell the teacher, so I did."

"Sorry," Bruce mumbles, but he is not discouraged. At lunch he calls out, "Hi, baby!" when Reeny passes on her way to get milk. Again she is quick to object, though this time her goal is purely instructional.

“See, I think you saying, ‘Hi, baby,’ like you saying, ‘Hi, girlfriend,’ like that? And I’m not your girlfriend.”

“Maybe you are,” Bruce responds, teasing, but Reeny is persistent. “Uh-uh, see, you can’t be. Girlfriend is for very older people. That’s for when you grown up. Daddy says ‘Hi baby’ to my mommy ’cause they already married.”

Reeny is not intimidated, as I had been. When I was in the first grade there was an Edward who hissed “Kinky-stinky” at me for my unruly hair, and my face burned with shame. I was too embarrassed to tell the teacher or report the indignity to my parents. Reeny’s protests are speedy and decisive.

She is more subtle when I interject a point of grammar during storytelling. “Once there was a little princess,” she dictates after lunch. “And a mother and father. They was the king and queen.”

“Do you want to say ‘They *were* the king and queen?’”

“They *is* the king and queen.” She hurries on lest I interrupt again. “And the princess was walking in the forest deeply and she got lost.”

“*In the forest deeply* is nice,” I offer, to which Reeny says, “Thank you.” She knows the difference between literary commentary and personal criticism. “Then the princess sees the opening and there is a prince.”

“And he says, ‘Hi baby?’” Bruce snickers.

“Uh-uh,” Reeny replies with great dignity, “’cause, see, a prince don’t talk that way. He say, ‘Good morning, madam. How is Your Highness today?’”

She knows what a prince says and what boys and girls should say—and sometimes even what a teacher might refrain

from saying. When she talks about herself the message is clear: This is who I am and, so far, this is what I know to be true. How easily she manages her talent for self-identity, something I yearned after but which eluded me most of my life. Not until my forties did I begin to color in the outline, surprising myself by deciding I was a schoolteacher who writes books.

I still cannot take my measure without a classroom of children to give me clues. This year I use Reeny's brown crayon as metaphor, but her role will not be so limited. She is a natural-born innovator and is about to discover an idiosyncratic little mouse named Frederick who will push her into new frontiers.

Where Reeny goes we shall follow. Kindergartners are passionate seekers of hidden identities and quickly respond to those who keep unraveling the endless possibilities. Reeny would be surprised to know that, although grownups are allowed to say 'Hi baby,' they seldom respond as warmly as children do to colleagues whose passions take them to unknown places.

Fortunately, my co-teacher, Nisha Ruparel-Sen, is well versed in the mythology and folklore of her native India and expects the ordinary to open up and reveal mysterious connections. Furthermore, like the children, she is always prepared to enjoy someone else's spectacle even as she creates her own.

Frederick

When Reeny first comes upon Frederick she is wide-eyed with wonder. “That brown mouse seem to be just like me!” she announces, staring at the cover of *Frederick*, a Leo Lionni book Nisha has just read to the class. “Because I’m always usually thinking ’bout colors and words the same like him.”

To me, Reeny does not much resemble Frederick. He is a field mouse who stubbornly refuses to help his friends gather food for the winter, spending his time instead composing poems and stories. This shall be his contribution to the welfare of the other mice, with or without their consent. Reeny, on the other hand, is as curious about her friends as she is about herself. Frederick concentrates on his own ideas to the apparent exclusion of all else, reminding me more of myself than of Reeny.

I do not mean to be critical of Frederick, artist and poet, but I do wonder about the lack of guilt he feels toward his friends. He is certain they will remain loyal to him even when he turns away to think his private thoughts. In adult life such loyalty is

more problematic. Of course, Reeny is used to the ways of young children, who generally are rather glad to have nonconformists in their midst.

Having identified with Frederick, Reeny is compelled to investigate further. She takes the book to a table and turns the pages, slowly tracing the mice with her finger. "They so . . .," she sighs, unable to complete the sentence. But she knows she must learn to draw these mice, to put her brown crayon to the task.

The first picture Reeny copies is of Frederick sitting with his eyes closed under a warm yellow sun, while the other mice struggle to carry ears of corn to their hideout in the stones. ("Frederick, why don't you work?" they asked. 'I *do* work,' said Frederick. 'I gather sun rays for the cold dark winter days.'")

"He so quiet." In his stillness, Reeny finds her word.

"Frederick's not as nice as them," Cory argues, puzzled at her friend's new interest. "He's being mean."

Reeny touches Cory's arm. "That's not the same as mean. He's thinking. Anyway, those others *is* nicer but I still like Frederick. Look how his tail is, Cory. Don't you love his tail the way it goes?"

"Can you do the eyes for me?" Cory asks, pushing her paper in front of Reeny. I look up to see five children drawing mice; by some unspoken agreement they are following a new curriculum.

"I'm not hardly doing eyes yet," Reeny replies. "They the hardest to do. But I'll do it for you but it might not be good. These kind of eyes is the hardest to do."

The eyes they want to reproduce are little dark circles inside larger white ones, simple yet uncommonly tender and kind.

Though Frederick's behavior seems odd to his friends they continue to watch over him with a warmth that creeps into the reader's soul. I wished I could have been regarded this way by the other teachers when my preoccupation with writing books made me seem distant and distracted.

"They do act nice to Frederick," Reeny explains, "'cause they know thinking's not being mean. You hasta be quiet for thinking."

Jonathan calls out from the sand table. "You could anyway think if you're helping!" But Jenny disagrees. "'Member when I had a story in my mind and Mrs. Paley said no because it's cleanup and then I forgetted my story?" Frowning, she waits for my response.

"I'm sorry, Jenny. Frederick's friends would have let him tell his story while they cleaned up."

"You mean *think* his story," Reeny says. "Oh, look here the way he closes his eyes that way." She squeezes her own eyes shut, continuing to draw, but gives up after a moment or two and hands me the book. "Can you read me it again?"

While I read she rubs the textured colors, trying to feel their depth. Frederick sits gazing at the meadow, his back to the others. ("And now, Frederick?" 'I gather colors,' answered Frederick simply. 'For winter is gray.'")

There are fragments of other colors to copy, a bit of green moss, a reddish acorn, and an orange flower, before Reeny picks up the brown crayon again. Frederick's eyes are lidded, a half-circle of tan across the top. ("Are you dreaming, Frederick?" they asked reproachfully. But Frederick said, 'Oh, no, I am gathering words.'")

"My crayon is dreaming," Reeny says, marveling at the

lighter-than-ever shade of brown she creates for the eyelids. “Look, Cory! Blankies! You want me to make these blankies for your eyes?” She laughs at her own joke, then holds up the book for everyone to see. “Guess what, guess what!” she declares. “This is Leo Lionni we doing!”

Who is Reeny if not Frederick? Her imagery lifts our spirits in the way Frederick’s poetry cheers his friends when the food supply is gone. (“‘Now I send you the rays of the sun. Do you feel how their golden glow . . . ’ And as Frederick spoke of the sun the four little mice began to feel warmer.”)

“Uh-huh uh-huh, they Leo Lionni mice.” Reeny’s song circles the other artists at the table and they respond, humming and da-dumming variations on the original melody. Their smiles flicker like the sunbeams through our gray Chicago windows.

In the course of a morning, the children have taken up such matters as the artist’s role in society, the conditions necessary for thinking, and the influence of music and art on the emotions. From Reeny’s simple assertion “That brown mouse seem to be just like me” has come a preview of the introspective life.

And I, thought by some to be *too* introspective, though never by Nisha or the children, have met a little girl with a brown crayon and an author with a magic paintbrush who will outshine me in their search for the mirror of self-revelation.

“Who is Mr. Lionni?” a visitor asks.

“Leo Lionni,” Reeny corrects him. “That’s Frederick’s . . . um . . . he’s Frederick’s . . . uh, friend.”