

Rethinking Innocence with Robert Coles and Ruby Bridges

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The story of how six-year-old Ruby Bridges participated in the fight to integrate the American public school system is powerful affecting. Building on Victoria Ford Smith's observation that child activists are often portrayed either as invincible agents or vulnerable victims, I note that Robert Coles's *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (1995) portrays Ruby as an astonishingly competent and courageous moral agent. Four years later, adult Ruby pushed back against that narrative in *Through My Eyes* (1999) by characterizing her child self as a naïve victim of forces beyond her control. In so doing, she deploys the ideology of childhood innocence to seize control over her own story, much as Jennifer Colletta sees youth slam poets doing.

Yet if we circle back to more contemporaneous accounts of this terribly stressful year by these same two people, we find them co-articulating a more nuanced narrative, one that can help scholars to re-theorize the concept of innocence (rather than condemn it as harmful to minors or uncritically re-embrace it). Coles—a child psychologist—met regularly with six-year-old Ruby and documented her reactions to the integration struggle, recording her words and inviting her to draw pictures depicting herself and her daily life. Putting those words and artwork into the mix when we think about how to tell Ruby's story, I argue, can help critics to distinguish between more and less damaging conceptions of childhood innocence, moving away from accounts that stress the deficiency or alterity of children in favor of ones that emphasizes how akin they are to adults, since all of us are vulnerable to outside forces to one degree or another.