

Colby Cedar Smith

By Lisa Wolff | Executive Director, FoHVOS | Photo by Benoit Cortet



For young students still seeking summer reading, *Call Me Athen: Girl from Detroit*, written by Hopewell poet Colby Cedar Smith was chosen as a Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection. Forbes magazine also listed the novel amongst its Young Adult Trends for

Summer. This critical acclaim is even more impressive considering her debut Young Adult novel, won't actually be released until August 17th.

While major online booksellers, as well as Simon & Schuster and Goodreads.com are already providing feature and pre-order pages. Customers that pre-order through The Bear and the Books in Hopewell or Labyrinth books in Princeton will receive signed copies.

Throughout May 2021, every Hopewell Elementary fourth grade student worked with Smith as part of a residency funded by the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and Young Audiences for Learning. In June, students shared their poetry in the Nature Harmony Project (NHP) outdoor culminating event.

The NHP is an outdoor learning area in the FoHVOS Community Conservation program. By providing ecological consulting and grant funding, FoHVOS seeks to not only promote native plants for building habitat, but also involve the community to make personal connections to the land.

Upon learning this, Colby emphasized that her personal connection to the land was directly responsible for her decision to become a poet. "I come from a hiking and outdoor family. My imagery is derived from the natural world. I find inspiration and heartfelt connections."

Growing up in the Midwest, Colby enjoyed her parents' lakeside cabin outside of St. Paul, Minnesota. She often went out alone and laid in her canoe to watch the herons. At eight years old, she snuck out in the middle of the night to take in the beauty of the night. Colby came back all muddy and wet and climbed into bed with her parents to announce, "I'm a poet!"

She didn't stray much from that path, always knew she wanted to write, and that connections to the land remained an inspiration. Colby attended Colorado College, as a creative writing major, surrounded by the majestic mountains of Pikes

Peak. When she could, she visited Garden of the Gods Nature Center to do homework amidst their red rocks.

After college, Colby moved to Boston while her husband was pursuing his Ph.D. at MIT. She organized author events as a community relations coordinator for a local bookstore. During her time at bookstores she realized that becoming more proficient at building community would help her become a better writer. So, she opted to attend the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Arts in Education program.

She later moved to Hopewell and served on the Hopewell Library board for almost 5 years. For the past 11 years she has taught creative writing for the Arts Council of Princeton. Colby believes everyone brings their "best self" to class and connects on both a literary and emotional plane. She tries to create a place in the world that is connected, emotional, and empathetic.

I had the pleasure of reading through an advance copy of her book that is a novel written in verse. Each poem is strong enough to stand alone. The writing is easy to read, yet the emotion easily shines through. I appreciate her accessible writing style.

Colby discussed her transition as a writer. "That accessibility you noticed is deliberate. I am a person of the heart, of deep emotions, of connectivity of the land. In my 20s and 30s, I was trying to craft imagistic, abstract intellectual poems. I was trying to write poems that didn't fit who I was."

Things suddenly changed when her daughter had an accident at four weeks old. Colby wrote every day for a year as she worried about whether the baby would recover. The resulting collection became her first book for adults. "I was using my own writing as a cathartic way to heal. And as soon as I gave myself permission to forget what poetry was supposed to be, and write through a nurturing, connected, mothering, healing place...Poetry became a totally different beast... After I had a lot of near successes with that book, a local writer, Abigail Rayner, asked if I ever considered writing a novel in verse."

She had not, but was intrigued by the idea. Previously published in the *MidAmerican* and a finalist for a James Wright award, her poem "Immortal Jellyfish" provided the basic plot for this novel. Colby wrote the first draft of her new book in six months and found that mixing the genre of poetry and prose was really enjoyable and she loved the learning process.

Perfecting her written voice was a long journey that began with an appreciation of the outdoors. Now with the Nature Harmony Project, Colby Cedar Smith shares her passion for nature as an expert guiding students to find their own voice.