**Article #2 (For Banning the Book)**

**Why Are We Still Teaching 'To Kill a Mockingbird' in Schools?**

**We need to ask what lessons we are conveying with Harper Lee's classic, and how useful they are to 21st century students.**

by Alice Randall / Oct.19.2017 / 3:01 PM ET

A [Mississippi School Board](http://indy.st/2yl50pQ) sparked outrage this month when it voted to cut "To Kill a Mockingbird" from eighth-grade reading lists in Biloxi. The issue? Some people complained that the book’s language made them uncomfortable.

While the backlash was swift, those who blindly defend "Mockingbird" are missing an important point. If the criteria for inclusion on a middle school syllabus was simply whether the novel provokes tough discussions, Harper Lee’s opus belongs in as many classrooms as possible. But that is not the only question.

Let’s be clear: "To Kill a Mockingbird" is not a children’s book. It is an adult fairy tale, that is often read by children in wildly different — and sometimes profoundly damaging — ways.

 Harper Lee's "To Kill A Mockingbird" Laura Cavanaugh / Getty Images file

Some of that damage is obvious: the black child who has been verbally abused by being called a “nigger” in the schoolyard could be more hurt hearing that word taught in the classroom, for instance. Another kind of damage less often discussed is how the text encourages boys and girls to believe women lie about being raped.

These damages can be mitigated or evaded by an excellent teacher.

Students are strong enough for tough discussions; they easily can untangle the use and misuse of the word “nigger” in "Mockingbird." But Mayella Ewell’s lies, which are the crux of the false charges brought against Tom Robinson, are far more complicated — too complicated for the eighth grade, perhaps even with an excellent teacher.

And the book cannot continue to be taught as if every person in the classroom is white, upper middle class and needs to be prodded into being Scout. It should be taught by asking questions about why there are no black characters with agency in the novel, by [wrapping it in with the history](https://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_scotts.html) of [the Scottsboro boys](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/22/us/with-last-3-pardons-alabama-hopes-to-put-infamous-scottsboro-boys-case-to-rest.html) — a group of black teenagers falsely accused of raping two white women — and through raising questions about how "Mockingbird" (and American history) complicates the modern “believe victims” movement.

 "To Kill a Mockingbird" author Harper Lee. Chip Somodevilla / Getty Images file

We need to be asking what we are teaching when we teach "To Kill a Mockingbird," and how useful those lessons are to 21st century students. We should be asking whether then novel, written by a privileged daughter of the Old South should still take up space in curriculum that could be well used to expose students to literary voices on race and injustice that have emerged in the past 50 years — voices who wouldn’t have been published at the time that Harper Lee was first published.

Take, for instance, "Monster," a 1999 novel by award-winning African-American novelist Walter Dean Myers that also takes place in a courtroom. Here, however, the focus is on the young black defendant and narrator, Steve Harmon; the white lawyer, on the other hand, plays a lesser, but still complex, part. Monster is a complex and powerful modern classic that does much of the same work — providing a portrait of a young artist budding ethical integrity while confronting racism — as "Mockingbird" but does it with arguably more complexity.

We are often in practice censoring books like "Monster" from the curriculum to maintain a space for "Mockingbird." Often, we maintain that the book's inclusion is in fact necessary to prevent censorship. But what if keeping it in the curriculum maintains the status quo of the past as much as it illuminates it? Many who defend "Mockingbird" as a choice for curriculum are imagining students emboldened by Atticus to “fight for right” or inspired by Scout to be better than the society into which she is born.

But imagine instead that you are an African-American eighth-grade boy in Mississippi today, and are asked to read "Mockingbird." Perhaps it reinforces your growing suspicion that you are unlikely to get a fair trial should you stand accused of something like Tom Robinson.

Or imagine instead that you are an impoverished, white eighth-grade girl in New York today, asked read "Mockingbird." Perhaps it fuels your growing suspicion that people don’t believe girls who say they have been raped — and that, should you be raped and try to tell people about it, people will have reason to doubt you like the book says everyone should have doubted Mayella Ewell.

Or think of Calpurnia, the older black maid who cooks and serves without seeing much: she isn’t developed as a character as much as written as a set piece, suggesting the worst to young readers about the role of black women and black female intelligence.

And then, of course, there is Tom Robinson, falsely accused and “crippled,” in the parlance of the book, meant to indicate that he would have been physically incapable of sexual assault. Asking a child reader to decode that artistic choice of Lee’s is to ask them to think about whether black men are not desirable, impotent or marred — or that rape is a crime that can only be committed by an able-bodied person.

Every student who reads Lee’s book does not identify with Atticus or with Scout, and teaching it as though they do, or they must, may reinforce the very stereotypes about black men and impoverished women that teaching the book is supposed to combat. Some identify with Tom Robinson, or with Calpurnia, or with Mayella Ewell and, for these students, "To Kill a Mockingbird" is a far more complex text which, in the hands of a less-than-effective teacher, can be damaging.

So let’s move beyond a debate about censorship, about banning of books in classrooms, about the word “nigger.” All of that has been hashed over more or less effectively. Characters in novels think and act differently, and often in opposition to, the ways in which their authors think and act. It may be a sign that you are not a racist if you shine light on racists by creating one in fiction. Or it might not.

Let’s instead think about how, why and when we invite books into our classrooms, about the needs of an increasingly diverse student body and about how we can use difficult books to both illuminate our shameful past and better shape the young minds of our future. Though it holds sentimental pride of place for so many as the first book they read about race and injustice, "To Kill a Mockingbird" is more than a book about race and injustice, and it is not the only book about race and injustice. In the 21st century, it may not be the best book to illuminate those themes, especially when it reinforces so many stereotypes and misconceptions many eighth graders are hardly equipped to consider.