

# Opinion: It's time to diversify and reconstruct our schools' reading lists

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Harper Lee's "Go Set a Watchman" book ready for its July 14, 2015, release and Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" at a Harper Lee celebration at Barnes & Noble in New York City on July 13, 2015. Photo: Laura Cavanaugh/Getty Images

A school district in Duluth, Minnesota, recently decided to drop Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" and Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" from its required reading list. The books were dropped because they include racial slurs. The books, however, will remain on a list that students have the option of reading.

While this is an important step in the right direction, it barely scratches the surface of a more deeply troubling issue. Many white-authored classics are racist and damaging to students of color. The racial slurs they contain are merely the tip of the iceberg for why these books should be left out of literature lessons.

## Behind The "White Savior" Plots

Both "Huck Finn" and "To Kill a Mockingbird" incorporate the common white savior and "magical negro or native" themes. This is where native, brown and black characters exist as mere devices to help white characters reach moral enlightenment.

Jim in "Huck Finn" and Tom Robinson in "To Kill a Mockingbird," like other native, black and brown characters in the mostly white-authored collection of literary classics, are flat and grossly stereotypical. They neither make decisions for themselves nor act fully human. They exist in deplorable conditions only to be pitied by more complete white characters. The non-white characters are victims whose victimhood is the core idea behind the white savior plot. The more helpless these characters are, the greater, more courageous, more impressive the white savior's rescue seems.

Some critics argue that the Duluth school district's decision was a mistake because "Huck Finn" and "To Kill a Mockingbird" teach students about racism. This is only the case, of course, if by "students" we mean white students. Native, brown and black students don't learn anything about racism written from the oppressor's point of view. The portrayal of such open and offensive racism hardly reflects the reality of what many Native Americans and students of color endure in their daily lives.

Instead, white savior books reinforce the extremely demeaning and derogatory notion that native, black and brown people exist only to serve the needs and goals of white people. Reading these works could increase students' stress levels. It could also negatively impact their self-esteem and limit their ability to see themselves as powerful people who can create change in the world.

## Is There A Literary Lesson?

Novels that incorporate the white savior theme also exemplify poor literary craft. Take "To Kill a Mockingbird." In the book, a white lawyer named Atticus Finch defends Tom Robinson, a black man. Robinson is falsely blamed for sexually assaulting a white woman, Mayella Ewell, in Maycomb, Alabama, in the 1930s. After his trial and conviction, Tom attempts to escape from prison and is shot and killed.

Tom, as a character, exists only to be saved by Atticus and to attempt to teach the white community of Maycomb about racism.

In a graduate school creative writing class, I asked students to give words that describe Atticus Finch. Their adjectives filled an entire dry-erase board. Generous. Intellectual. Forthright. Moral. When I asked them to do the same for Tom Robinson, they stumbled a bit before suggesting selfless and kind, for the occasional free labor he did for his accuser, Mayella Ewell.

Other than what Tom says on the stand during his trial, where he is playing the role of victim to serve this white savior plot, we learn little else about him. We know nothing about what kind of father he is, what interests he has. Harper Lee gives Tom little substance or dimension.

### **Other Books Can Teach Valuable Lessons**

For some people, "Huck Finn" and "To Kill a Mockingbird" are beloved classics. Holding onto the memory of reading these books in the past is not a good reason to keep them in literature lessons, though. What we teach students about people from marginalized communities should be authentic. To be authentic, it should come from marginalized authors and the richly drawn characters they create.

Native, black and brown characters should not simply serve as targets of white violence or lessons for white morality. They should play central roles in their own stories, with a full range of emotions and personalities. They should not be subjected to what Toni Morrison has called the "white gaze," the presumption that people of color's lives "have no meaning, no depth," beyond white people's imagination or understanding of them.

We don't need and have never needed texts that incorporate racist themes. Authors of many racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds have been writing about their own communities as far back in time as white authors. Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God" or Octavia Butler's "Kindred" could replace "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" or "To Kill a Mockingbird." If that happens, students, particularly white students, will not only be reading more challenging, realistic and layered books about the black community, they will understand prejudice at a deeper, systemic level.

We don't need nor have we ever needed to teach books written by white authors that capitalize on inaccurate stereotypes and show marginalized communities as vulgar and barbaric. What's more, we can also teach books about marginalized

communities that celebrate joy and love, health and success. Native, black and brown stories don't need to always be about suffering to teach valuable lessons about social and political issues.

### **As People Evolve, So Can The Classics**

The conversation about racism in school texts must go far above and beyond a conversation about racial slurs. Students of color deserve to have the same privilege in education that white students have always had. They must have the opportunity to examine and imagine the full extent of their humanity in literature.

If people can evolve to become more accepting of others, shouldn't the mostly white collection of literary classics evolve, too?

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