Educators Take a Hard Look at *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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**Race: Long a classroom starting point for lessons about intolerance, the Harper Lee classic is being reexamined by some who find its perspective limited.**

In the 40 years since Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* was first published, it has evolved into a key classroom tool for teachers trying to engage students in such issues as racism, intolerance and the personal cost of taking a moral stand.

Yet some educators have been taking a more critical view of the novel, which explores attempts by fictional white lawyer Atticus Finch to defend a black man wrongly accused of rape and of the lessons it contains for the classroom.

These critics say the novel represents a white view of racism that marginalizes both the lives and the pains of the very people it seeks to humanize—African Americans living in the Deep South during the Great Depression

And, they say, white students see one set of lessons in the story, while black students often see another.

Carol Ricker-Wilson, a secondary language arts consultant for the Toronto school district and a former English teacher, used the novel several year’s ago in a multiethnic 11th-grade classroom and was surprised to find that white students connected with the novel while many black students rejected it as demoralizing.

That experience led her to conclude that *Mockingbird* exemplifies what Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison described as a national body of work written under the tacit assumptions that the reading audience is white and that whiteness doesn’t exist as a race, but as an unquestioned and unexplored point of departure for engaging the world.

“We make whiteness invisible—‘We’re not a race; black people are,’” said Ricker-Wilson, a white Philadelphia and native who wrote about her experience in the academic *English Journal*, published by the National Council of Teachers of English.

Rather than drop *Mockingbird* though, she recommends twinning it with books on similar topics by black authors. Among those: Mildred D. Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, about a black girl coming of age in the South in the ’30s; Ouida Sebestyen’s *Words by Heart*, narrated by a young black girl living in a small Southwestern town; and Walter Dean Myer’s *The Glory Field*, tracing five generations of a family from Africa through American slavery.

Still, many teachers say *Mockingbird* remains relevant because of the timelessness of its underlying issues.

“The message is very important and still very applicable today—not necessarily from the racial standpoint, but the whole idea of not judging a person until you put yourself in their position,” said Jennifer Nocera, a teacher who directed a stage version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* at Victor Valley High School in Victorville last winter. “I think it’s an important message for high schoolers or any person.”

Loosely based on the infamous Scottsboro Boys trials in Alabama in the 1930s, *To Kill a Mockingbird* explores the ramifications of a judge’s decision to appoint a local lawyer, Finch, to defend Tom Robinson, a black man accused of raping Mayella Ewell, a young white woman whose father spotted her kissing Robinson.

Justice Is Not Always Blind

The novel is told through the eyes of nine-year-old Scout, Finch’s tomboy daughter, as she, her brother Jem and Dill, a neighbor boy (based on the author Truman Capote, Lee’s real-life childhood friend), learn that their idyllic small town is not all it seems. And that justice is not always blind.

“It is from the white perspective, from a racist kind of view,” said Tiana Dudley, 16, of Victorville, who portrayed Flinch’s housekeeper Calpurnia in the Victor Valley production. “You don’t see much about the African American characters; you don’t get to know them on a personal level. . . . But it definitely has a [universal] message behind it. I know it’s basically about racism but that’s not all that you can get out of it.”

Dudley, who is African American, prefers to view the play as a coming-of-age story. In her reading, the story rests on the actions of individuals when confronted with their moral beliefs rather than on the interplay between racists and the oppressed.

“It just makes people think,” she said.

But think about what?

In the novel, black characters exist as tools to help white characters successfully test their ethics, said Richard Yarborough, associate professor of English and a faculty research associate at UCLA’s Center for African American Studies.

“The black character is the victim and he or she becomes the test upon which any struggle for moral satisfaction on the part of white savior is waged,” said Yarborough, who is African American.

He finds similarities to the 1966 movie *A Time to Kill*, based on the John Grisham novel in which a white lawyer defends a black Mississippi man accused of killing two white men who raped his 10 year-old daughter. In both fictional situations, the black man is portrayed as defenseless until the white man intervenes, Yarborough said. In both stories, the black character dies.

“The fact that we have traveled so short a distance from *To Kill a Mockingbird* to *A Time to Kill* is remarkable,” he said. “These texts tend to sentimentalize the black character tremendously and objectify these characters in a very simplistic way. They don’t have much personal life and rarely is the black community embodied.”

One result is that only white characters have entered the American psyche. Young female readers of *To Kill a Mockingbird* identity with Scout, and young lawyers find a role model in Finch. Conversely, when Tom Robinson and Calpurnia are recalled, it is usually by the role—the black defendant and the black housekeeper.

Nancy Louise Rutherford, a former English teacher at Los Angeles’ Belmont High School who runs a Web site annotating dialect and cultural references in *Mockingbird* also thinks students need to understand how race affects perspective.

“If we’re going to take the view that it’s a book written by a white woman for a white audience about racism, that’s a view, too, and you need to understand that world view,” said Rutherford, who runs a language arts lab at the school. “Just like when you read *Huckleberry* *Finn*, you have to set it in context.

“Sometimes I think we get really focused on these little details and we forget in the grand scheme that this is a very well-written book that has a lot of things to teach—not just about tolerance, but about growing up and how to get along.”