

# Mississippi school district removes *To Kill a Mockingbird* from curriculum

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Earlier this month, the Biloxi, Mississippi public school district removed Harper Lee's renowned novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), from the eighth-grade English lesson plan nine weeks into the semester. The action was taken because of complaints from parents about racist terms in the book, used for entirely legitimate and artistically valid purposes. The vice president of the Biloxi School Board, Kenny Holloway, told the media, "There is some language in the book that makes people uncomfortable, and we can teach the same lesson with other books."

Students were told to stop reading the book and have begun reading a replacement. Lee's novel remains in the school library and students can read it and be graded on it if they choose, but only at their own request and with the agreement of a teacher. Otherwise, students will not be exposed to *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the classroom.

Biloxi is a city of about 45,000 people, 91 miles (146 km) east of New Orleans along the Gulf Coast. It was severely affected by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The book has been a standard in US middle-school and high-school education for years, and has been read by tens of millions of Americans. It is a part of Mississippi's Core Curriculum for English Language Arts.

Despite this, it has been removed from libraries and school curricula several times since the 1970s almost always because of its frank use of racist epithets by some of its characters. Mark Twain's classic *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), a profoundly anti-slavery and anti-racist work, has been banned numerous times on the same grounds. It does not help anyone to give in to this sort of "benevolent," identity-politics censorship.

The book, Harper Lee's only novel until an earlier

version, *Go Set a Watchman*, was published in 2015 to some controversy, tells the story, set in the 1930s, of lawyer Atticus Finch and his daughter Scout. They oppose the legal frame-up in a small Alabama town of an African-American who has been falsely accused of raping a white woman during the period of Jim Crow racial segregation, as well as the racist prejudices of white townsfolk and the judicial system. The novel sympathizes with the outcast and downtrodden generally. It won the Pulitzer Prize in 1962 and was made into an Oscar-winning film that year by director Robert Mulligan, featuring Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch.

Lee's book was one of the significant artistic achievements of the Cold War period, and addresses not only racism but also, more obliquely, the anticommunist McCarthyite witch-hunting of the previous decade. It continues to have an impact by depicting portraying honest, humane and principled behavior to readers, especially young readers. Indeed, the teaching module that it is used for in Common Core Curriculum is called, "Taking a Stand."

The most significant and troubling aspect of the Biloxi, censorship is the unwillingness, and perhaps the inability, of school officials to openly discuss the reason for their decision. There has been no public debate about the school district's actions.

The censorship of any work of art takes on a retrograde and sinister aspect today, but is particularly dangerous at a time when major media corporations such as Google and Facebook are deciding what material readers may and may not find and read.



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