

**Read and annotate the two articles about recent attempts to ban *To Kill a Mockingbird* from schools. Use these annotations to answer questions 5-7 on your Socratic Seminar sheet.**

### **Banning 'To Kill a Mockingbird' teaches students the wrong lesson - to fear mere words**

By [Steve Kurtz | Fox News](#) [EDUCATION](#) October 16th, 2018

A Mississippi school district in Biloxi has just pulled Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" from its middle school curriculum because "it makes people uncomfortable."

This is hardly the first case of increasing sensitivity at schools. For instance, last year a district in Virginia removed classroom copies of "Mockingbird" as well as Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" when a parent complained.

Indeed, both "Huck Finn" and "Mockingbird" are among the most frequently challenged books in school curricula over the last decade or so. This is largely because both books use racial slurs.

The argument of those in favor of banning such titles is that to allow them validates these ugly words. But that's both a misunderstanding of the books, and of how literature works.

Yes, both books do use hateful language, but in the service of a humane message. They have enough depth that their meaning can't be summed up in a pat sentence or two, but they certainly aren't racist works, and expose the hypocrisy behind bigotry.

They're also powerful works, and entertaining enough that they've encouraged a lifelong love of reading in countless students.

Literature, at its best, can take you outside yourself. It allows you to experience things through the eyes of a person of a different age, a different gender, a different culture.

The people who run our educational system regularly talk about the value of diversity. Well this is diversity in its purest form. Every book lets you enter into a different world, and learn to see things from a different angle.

True, encountering how other people think can be a shock to the system, but it's a helpful one. And if it may temporarily make some students feel uncomfortable, in the long term it empowers them. First, it gives them useful historical information—this is how people spoke and acted in the past. But it leads to more than that. It leads to questions about why things were that way, how they've changed, and if they might change again before too long.

Meanwhile, banning the books not only takes away some great literature from students, but teaches them the wrong lesson. To fear mere words. They'll be facing the real world soon enough. If they're armed with the knowledge they can deal with painful or offensive concepts, they'll be that much stronger.

By the way, the students don't even need to agree with the books they read. In essays, or classroom discussion, they can explain how Harper Lee or Mark Twain got it wrong, or missed something. Reading is not a passive activity—it's all part of a give-and-take the author, the reader and others engage in.

So books like "Mockingbird" and "Huck Finn," if taught with sensitivity, open up dialogue about topics that mean something to students. And will continue meaning something to them as adults. In addition, give the students a little credit, they're smart enough to understand tough words in the proper context, not to mention tough new ideas.

In any case, it certainly can't be worse than what they're already seeing every day in social media.

## **Banning 'To Kill a Mockingbird'? Virginia school pulls books after parent's complaint**

By MICHAEL SCHAUB

DEC 05, 2018 | 10:15 AM

A school district in Virginia has pulled copies of Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel "To Kill a Mockingbird" and Mark Twain's classic "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" after a parent's complaint. The Accomack County school district is considering banning the books from the county's schools outright, following a complaint from the mother of a biracial high school student over the use of the N-word in the novels. The mother, Marie Rothstein-Williams, said she believes the books are "great literature," but said at a school board meeting, "There is so much racial slurs in there and offensive wording that you can't get past that, and right now we are a nation divided as it is."

The racial slur in question appears more than 200 times in "Huckleberry Finn," Mark Twain's 1884 satire about racism in pre-Civil War America. The novel frequently appears on the American Library Assn.'s yearly lists of the country's most challenged or banned books.

The N-word is used almost 50 times in Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird," a 1960 novel about anti-black bigotry in the midcentury American South that has been a staple of school syllabi for 50 years. Lee's novel has also been subjected to challenges in schools many times since the book's publication.

Rothstein-Williams said the books' use in schools would teach children that using the racial slur was acceptable. "We're validating that these words are acceptable. They are not acceptable," she said. "We will lose our children if we continue to say that this is OK, that we validate these words when we should not." The suspension of the books didn't sit well with some residents of Accomack County, dozens of whom protested outside the county courthouse in the town of Accomac, reports Delmarva Now.

Charles Knitter, who helped organize the protest, read a chapter of "To Kill a Mockingbird" at the rally. "We're not going to be censored, because banning literature is, well, stupid — I don't have another way to say that," he said.

Sadye Saunders, a 16-year-old high school junior, agreed with Knitter, and noted that a petition she had started to have the books returned to schools was confiscated by her principal.

"This is important, because censorship blinds us," Sadye said. "These books are important, because they are not condoning this word, this racial slur ... They're showing the ignorance of using that word and having this bigotry."

"Huckleberry Finn" and "Mockingbird" aren't the only books to face challenges in schools recently. Some parents in the Chicago suburb of Lemont have criticized the local high school's use of Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" and Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," citing the books' sexual content, the Cook County Chronicle reports.

Lemont resident Rick Lighthart suggested that the school ban any books that contained "literal, metaphorical, figurative or allegorical words for male or female genitals."

"English classes should not be involved in sexuality in literature for our kids. It shouldn't be in any books. No books," he said. "We can't have 18-year-olds reading about masturbation or sexual issues, regardless of the literature. I don't care if it's from Dickens or who else."

Lemont High School has so far not chosen to ban Roy's and Angelou's books from its classrooms or library. The Accomack County school district will consider whether to ban "Huckleberry Finn" and "Mockingbird" after the novels are reviewed by a special committee.