

Canceling *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a step too far

If they can come for Lee, they can come for anybody

July 7, 2021



Harper Lee (Getty)

It often feels like we're living through the revenge of the talentless. Cancel culture is essentially a war of no-marks against high achievers. Think of all those faceless furious people on Twitter who want the Harry Potter books thrown in the dumpster of history just because J.K. Rowling thinks biological sex is real. These people can barely string a tweet together, never mind write eight books that enthrall millions. Or think of the armies of literalist bores who demand the scalp of some comic who once made an iffy joke. I bet those people have never made anyone laugh. At least not intentionally.

And now we learn that a schoolteacher in Scotland has decided he wants to stop teaching [*To Kill A Mockingbird*](#) and *Of Mice and Men* because apparently they are outdated and offensive. Allan Crosbie, head of English at James Gillespie's High School in Edinburgh, may be a perfectly good teacher. But, I'm sorry, just think of the industrial levels of arrogance it must require for a teacher to decree that two of the most important American novels of the 20th century are no

longer appropriate and should be erased from the curriculum. What's the opposite of impostor syndrome? Whatever it is, I bet Mr Crosbie has it.

Mr Crosbie says Harper Lee's and John Steinbeck's classic novels are 'problematic'. Isn't everything these days? Their use of the N-word and their promotion of a 'white savior' narrative make them 'dated and problematical', he told the EIS teaching union's annual gathering last month. He continued: 'Their lead characters are not people of color. The representation of people of color is dated. And the use of the N-word and the use of the white savior motif in [Mockingbird](#) — these have led us as a department to decide that these really are not texts we want to be teaching third year anymore.'

And just like that, children at a school in Scotland could be deprived of the joy of reading two great novels. Two novels that form the moral backbone of modern America. Lee's story of a child's view of racism and justice in Depression-era America and Steinbeck's tale of the special bond between two migrant ranch workers, also set in the Great Depression, have thrilled and moved millions. I read both at school and, yes, we were startled by the N-word. But we understood that its use in [To Kill A Mockingbird](#) was intended to illustrate the dehumanizing consequences of racism. The hero of the story — lawyer Atticus Finch — actually chastises his daughter for saying it. 'Do you defend niggers?', she asks him. 'Of course I do. Don't say nigger, Scout', he replies.

This is the thing about the censorious, humorless cancel-culture frenzy — it rips everything out of context. So [To Kill A Mockingbird](#) can be branded racist, or at least 'problematical', despite being the most famous anti-racist novel ever written. Lee's crime in the eyes of the 21st-century speech police is that she too faithfully depicted the American South of the 1930s, where the N-word would have been used widely and frequently. They essentially wish she had written a less honest novel, one where the gruff racists making false accusations of rape against a young black man said 'African American' rather than 'nigger'. Yes, that would have been realistic.

The idea that these novels might inject 'problematical' ideas into the minds of impressionable children is ludicrous. These are self-consciously moral stories, in which the wickedness of the world is confronted by characters with a strong sense of justice. But even if they weren't, so what? Much of literature is bracing and confronting. Should school kids be protected from Shakespeare plays that feature insults and violence? Or Dickens novels that have a tendency to caricature the poor? This Year Zero mentality that rages against old culture and art for failing to conform to contemporary correct-think on race, sex and class is ludicrous. Very little from the past would survive if it had to pass a woke test. Guess what? People thought and spoke differently back then.

The moralistic chastisement of art and literature for failing to communicate the 'right' message or to use the 'right' language is not new, of course. Indeed, [Of Mice and Men](#) is on the American Library Association's list of 'The Most Challenged Books of the 21st Century', such is the frequency of the assaults on it for its vulgar themes and racial language. Back in 1979, Ray Bradbury, in a coda to a new edition of his most famous work, [Fahrenheit 451](#), wrote about the

growing trend for special-interest groups to chastise writers for failing to depict certain communities in a positive manner. He said these people seem to want ‘dreary blancmange plain porridge unleavened literature’. ‘There is more than one way to burn a book. And the world is full of people running about with lit matches’, he said of those who whip up storms of anger against ‘difficult’ writers.

There are even more people running about with lit matches today. Those who say cancel culture isn’t real, that it’s a figment of right-wingers’ imaginations, need to explain how we can have a situation where two novels that have been taught to kids for generations can be casually discarded by an English department on the basis that they are ‘problematic’. This is the world we live in now — one where even Harper Lee, for heaven’s sake, can be written off as a promoter of dodgy ideas. Listen, if they can come for Lee, they can come for anybody.

This article was originally published on [The Spectator](#)’s UK website,

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