

*Written by Sungjoo Yoon*

If you had told me in seventh grade, as my class read Mildred Taylor's Newbury-awarded *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*; that the book, an anachronistic exposition of our country's failures and systems of oppression against people of color, would one day be banned from our classrooms for being 'racist', I would have seriously questioned your sanity. But 2020, right?

The abnormal is the new normal, and with that, apparently, is the consideration of anti-racist, eye-opening titles like *Roll of Thunder*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and others to be inherently discriminatory and censored from schools.

That is the position that the Burbank Unified School District has taken. From breaking their own statutes and banning these books from teaching lists, to the Superintendent outspokenly criticizing the educational value of books that have won Pulitzer Prizes, Newbury Awards, and been labelled by the Library of Congress to be "books that shaped America", the District bureaucrats have championed an unreasonable narrative that contends any book dealing with critical race theory is, somehow, racist.

Not only is this deeply flawed and misguided, it's also dangerous. It's dangerous because it sets a precedent of shying away from difficult but necessary conversations.

The District is not incorrect in responding to the valid concerns of the four parents who brought them forward. As [the Los Angeles Times reported on November 12th](#), this call for a ban grew from one student's painful personal experience at a Burbank school. The *Times* explains that while the student was at David Starr Jordan Middle School, another student stated "My family used to own your family and now I want a dollar from each of you for the week".

There is no denying that their experience is horrific. It must be addressed and is an important part of discussions in a District long-riddled with racial cliques, biases, and discrimination.

But this is exactly why these books need to stay.

Common sense tells us that the offending student didn't say that because these historical classics are themselves racist. The student in question did not act hatefully because they read a book. The issue is much deeper than that.

These books are not turning students into bigots. These books are written quite literally to educate students on the fundamentals of the discriminatory stain in American history, and how this history plays into systemic racism today.

Any and all scenarios in which students used harmful epithets should be taken as just that: A mean-spirited bully insulted someone, with or without realizing the true ramifications of their words. When a student uses these books as a scapegoat to minimize punishment, we need to

understand that these books are not what really caused their actions. This is a case of a student trying to avoid being held accountable. Like teenagers do.

But it seems the District has failed to realize this. Yes, the District should respond to racism, but not in the way they are doing so now. Rather than analyzing the situation, they've chosen to hide behind the narrative that these books perpetuate racism, cause harm, and are not educational with very little substantiation to back it up.

My personal experience, and this is an experience that I have had the pleasure of sharing with my classes through my decade-long tenure as a student in Burbank schools, is that these books have been met with an overwhelmingly positive and beneficial response by eager-to-learn students who had been blind to our nation's history of oppression.

Take the example of my seventh grade class, in which we read *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. The visceral, yet realistic, story of Cassie Logan's struggle against systematic oppression, while her parents weigh their desire to do the right thing against their family's survival shocked most of my class.

At a time when we cared about little more than Xbox and what was for lunch, hearing this story of unimaginable pain changed us. I personally went home that day and didn't dive into a video game, but rather read more about the history of race in America. I know that the rest of my class did as well, because we came back the next day wanting to discuss, wanting to learn, wanting to know more. It was the single most engaged classroom discussion I had ever participated in, opening our eyes to the reality that America, in all her beauty, is far from perfect.

Many of the students from that classroom now advocate for Black Lives Matter and continue to proactively seek anti-racism. I know the teaching of these books played an integral role in introducing us to critical race theory. When students learn about such watershed issues, our primal intellectual curiosity is triggered. By censoring these books, the District is suppressing that curiosity.

For every one incident of a student being immature or cruel, there is a classroom full of students learning and understanding a necessary history and having hard-hitting discussions of why we, as the future of our country, need to actively play a part in mitigating racial inequity.

But those racist incidents do need to be addressed, so let's be solution-based. We need to understand that, although the affected students' experiences are valid and traumatic, the books did not cause them. These books are not themselves perpetuating bigotry, and in fact, confront it. The bigots are, simply put, bigots. Every single year, thousands of students within the District gain imperative insight into anti-racism and critical race theory through this literature. At the same time, students have been targeted because of their race.

So let's all join together in effectively combating these incidents through stricter guidelines,

positive narratives of people of color, and stronger enforcements instead of banning books and hoping racism disappears (which it won't).

The District and the supporters of this censorship have also stated that these books would be replaced by more diverse books authored by people of color to broaden the narratives presented to students. Well, I contend that you don't do that by getting rid of the work of Mildred Taylor, arguably the most influential Black young adult author in modern history. But let's assume that they're talking about some of the other titles affected by this censorship.

As someone who consumes a substantial amount of literature by Black authors, from James Baldwin to Toni Morrison, I think those books are 100% worthy, educational, and long overdue insofar as the curriculum goes. As a student who's attended the District's elementary, middle, and high schools, I know better than any bureaucrat that we certainly have enough time to add these great titles to the curriculum without removing the aforementioned classics, given all the downtime within our classrooms.

The District is claiming that diversifying the curriculum will mitigate the racist incidents experienced by students. But the incidents reported recently include use of the N-word and references to Black students being descended from enslaved people. Much literature by authors of color uses the N-word and discusses the impact of slavery as much as the existing curriculum. All of these books will also require thoughtful teaching, just as the books on the current list do.

It seems that the District is failing us on two fronts: First, by getting rid of anti-racist literature, and second, by not actually achieving any tangible outcome and instead hiding behind "slactivism."

But what's new? When teachers in this District asked for more racial/subconscious bias training, the District rejected their request. When students at Burbank High tried to continue the Black Student Union last year, they were offered absolutely no assistance until the program died out from a lack of support. When students stepped up against this censorship and 2,600 members of the community stepped up and signed our petition, we were told our petition would not receive consideration. And now, in a predominantly immigrant District, students, especially those with little knowledge of the historical realities of our nation, are being failed by the District and stripped of opportunities to learn from monumental literature that would give them the tools to dismantle their unknown biases.

It is very difficult to confront an issue as emotionally-charged as racism at school. But for a better, more equitable future, we need to be able to have difficult conversations without getting overwhelmed by fear and uncertainty. I pray that the District doesn't fail us this time around and stops their censorship of anti-racist American classics.