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I Don't Control a Lot of Things- but I Can Control What I Read

By Yolanda Hood

UCF Forum columnist

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I found myself facing some epic declarations and accusations recently:

“How do you even have the job that you have?”

“And you have a Ph.D. in English! How? How did that happen?”

“Should you even be a librarian?”

I laughed in the face of everyone's reactions to my seeming disgrace. I like to laugh.

I had confessed to multiple friends and colleagues that I had never read Harper Lee's

“To Kill a Mockingbird” and likely would never read it. I also acknowledged that the chances of my reading “Go Set a Watchman,” touted as the recently released sequel, are slim to none as well. So, now you see what all the commotion was about.

Why should I read it? I actually live it.

I've been told that “To Kill a Mockingbird” is a moving portrayal of racism, social injustice, and the fight to overcome them. Well, I live those experiences every day. And, I am reminded of it every day in one way or another.

There was the time this summer when my 13-year-old daughter asked me questions that I didn't know how to answer: “Will the police help me if I need help? Will they kill me, mom? Will they kill you?” I didn't want to answer her because the truth of the matter is that I could have answered each of those questions with, “It's possible.”

As if that's not enough, there was the time I was the only African-American at a meeting in which everyone voiced their opinions and participated in the brainstorming session with helpful feedback, but when my turn came and I began to share, I was immediately dismissed with a raised voice, a hand slammed against the table, a face turned red. Even though I pushed through and completed my thoughts, I was reminded by this micro-

aggression that my ideas were not wanted. I barely spoke a word at the next meeting. But, isn't that part of what a racist system does? It bends the back and snatches the voice, attempting to siphon away your humanity.

The prolific and very wise author Toni Morrison once stated, "The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing."

What can "To Kill a Mockingbird" teach me that I don't already know?

One colleague suggested that "To Kill a Mockingbird" is a book that white people embrace because it helps them to understand racism better while still providing hope for humanity. Perhaps. I don't deny that it is a voice, a perspective on the precarious intersections of black and white lives. I believe that anyone who wants to read it should. I don't have a lot of control over the things that happen in this world. In some cases, I may not even have control over what happens to me. But I do have control over what I read.

Reading is my joy. I should be able to read what I want and how I want, if not always when I want (I have a huge stack of books next to my bed waiting to be read). I'm almost finished with Bi Feiyu's "The Moon Opera." After that, I'm going to crack open Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Americanah" and John Lewis' graphic novel, "March: Book One."

I respect the idea that "To Kill a Mockingbird" is considered great American literature. And, I'm OK with those who have the opinion that I should have read it. But I don't want to read it.

I'm not going to be distracted by that because as Toni Morrison suggests, I have work to do.

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