
to their maids. Hilly Holbrook would have been one of countless white citizens who enforced a racist caste system, decades in the making, that crushed resistance through reprisal and violence. Brave individuals risked everything to fight this brutal repression, and their struggle demands an accurate historical telling. These gains were not achieved though sympathetic white girls and poop pies.

There are so many excellent books that use the power of narrative to bolster historical understanding—books that are richer, deeper, and just so much *better* than *The Help*. Those seeking fiction that focuses on Jim Crow and racial injustice can read *Invisible Man*, *The Street*, *Passing*, or the more recent *Bombingham*. For riveting, narrative nonfiction about the forces and shifts that shaped race in this century, *Sons of Mississippi* and *The Warmth of Other Suns* are essential. Anne Moody's memoir *Coming of Age in Mississippi* is a vivid, historically detailed look at black life in rural Mississippi, written by a woman whose involvement in the civil rights movement is made all the more remarkable because of the often terrifying historical context she provides.* *She Would Not Be Moved* sheds fresh light on Rosa Parks and dissects the sexism and racism that transformed a dedicated activist into a tired old lady in the public eye. James Baldwin's writing remains clear, compelling, and moving, and *The Fire Next Time* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain* are classics. *12 Million Black Voices* presents lives of black people—in both the rural South and urban North—in the 1930s, with prose by Richard Wright accompanying powerful photographs by Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, among others. Of course, there are even more unsettling stories, like *Your Blues Aren't Like Mine* and the lyrical *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, but because they seek to capture the actual brutality and ugliness of Jim Crow, they're often deemed too disturbing for students—which should be the point but is often the problem.

Because if you're really teaching students how to think about history, the content *must* be deeply upsetting at times. A serious study of history requires a confrontation with the failures of courage and conscience that have often marked our times. Acknowledging this history doesn't diminish the gains our society has made; it makes them all the more extraordinary. Glossing over actual history for a historical, largely blameless fictions like *The Help* doesn't give young people nearly enough credit. Some educators assign these books under the misguided assumption that white kids will relate to a book about the struggle for equality only if it features a white protagonist and a "happy" resolution. But in my experience, teenagers are far more fluid in their conception of identity than older people and far more cognizant of unhappy endings and ambiguities than infantilizing adults think they are. As long as there's a point of connection—and injustice is one to which all teenagers relate—students devour stories of people different from themselves.

To my mind, if you're going to assign *The Help* to teach about civil rights, you might as well assign *Life Is Beautiful* to teach about the Holocaust. Both rely on a simplification that makes a hard subject seem palatable and resolved, while giving viewers that lovely self-righteous feeling that keeps us from recognizing the discrimination around us now. People didn't make concentration camps happy places through clowning, and the legalized system of oppression that ruled the South for more than 100 years was not undone by white girls and their mummies.

Of course, we teach the Holocaust with Anne Frank's diary or Elie Wiesel's *Night*, books that don't shield young readers from the realities of history nor from the way history echoes into the present. Racism is not a problem that Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks and Skeeter fixed, as demonstrated by the gutting of the Voting Rights Act, the murder of Trayvon Martin, and the everyday lives of high schoolers of color. But that's the kind of stagnant historical understanding I see in students who only read neat narratives of struggle and redemption. I've heard dozens of white students talk about how "crazy" things were before the civil rights movement changed everything, with no sense of present connection ("Now we