

This week's question to consider:

Someone has told me that I shouldn't teach using a particular book. I realize that this is probably coming from a good place, but I love this book! I've been teaching it for years, and I know it so well! I've got all the stuff for it, and the kids like it, and is there any way I can just keep teaching this book? It's so good. And wait, isn't this censorship? Which is... not equitable? What does this have to do with representation?

Pro tip: Look at the landscape of points of view your students are getting. It is your responsibility as their teacher to offer them representation. You are one of the most significant reinforcing voices that will echo throughout their lives. Representation of their lives matters, so much.

When I was a teenager growing up in the 90s (I am aging, it is glorious), my favourite movies were two very specific movies. The first was Disney's *Aladdin*, because I am Egyptian and that was the one representation that came close, and the second was a truly terrible movie, *True Lies*.

Why was *Aladdin* a problem? It's always a problem when there is no input from people whose culture is being depicted. You're inevitably going to miss context. Notably, in the opening song, the entire culture described as barbaric. (Note, the [original song lyric](#) was [updated](#) in the recent live-action remake, wherein there was a diverse cast.) Also, [why do only the bad guys have accents](#) in that movie?

How about *True Lies*? Why is it a truly terrible movie? Well, I can only tell you why I see it as a terrible movie (even though I loved it at the time, and still occasionally quote a few choice ridiculous lines to my sister to make her choke-laugh). Namely, I identified with the bad guys. The terrorists! The bad guys! The sweaty men with an established terrorist organization who wanted to blow up the world! I should say I identified with their *language*, rather, because nothing else in their characters held any measure of interest, nor merit. Their language was a language I recognized, and I delighted in understanding what they said, even though they were dimensionless, inarguably bad, bad guys.

There are other problems with this movie, the most egregious one being Arnie's character communicating "hey, look away from that nuclear bomb we have to let go off and I'll shield you with my hand, and you're fine, also let's make out", at the end there. I like to suspend disbelief as much as the next person but *come on*.

The point I want to highlight here is that not only were there only depictions of bad guys, but they were all men, and that is all I had in popular media to relate, even remotely, to my own culture back then. My white friends had countless examples.



[Yikes, right?](#)

When I say, “representation matters,” this is the kind of thing I am talking about. When people insist that representation matters, they are concerned with positive representation, negative representation, or an entire lack of representation.

When representation of your culture in a positive light does not exist in your world, you look for anything that approximates it, even if it is negative. You find yourself looking at and internalizing those negative narratives as you grow. Identity is powerful, so they do resonate, even if they are negative. You end up growing up with negative or absent representations, and no way to naturally internalize any association of good with your culture.

It becomes an internal fight against your own identity.

This extends to all media that school-aged people consume. It’s a little easier when you’re older (see? aging is amazing). We get to choose, we can seek subscriptions to streaming services that cater to our identity a bit better, we can source content from around the world, and we have agency to look for things that will speak to our experience. Or if we are creative, we begin to make them. Personally, I have found Arabic-French comedians particularly hilarious, and first-generation Canadian immigrants share similar experiences to mine, particularly if they grew up as a racialized minority in their towns.



too difficult to not get sucked in.)

Students’ access to media, however, tends to be filtered through the adults in their lives. Movies, shows, books, music, or other media, we, the adults in their lives, are the gatekeepers. Makes sense, of course. We can’t let students gad about on the Internet without any kind of direction! My goodness, but they could land themselves in all sorts of questionable corners of the internet! Spam! Viruses! TikTok addiction! Wait, that last one might just be me. (Do not worry, gentle reader, I’ve got it under control; I have a 30-minute daily timer on that app, it’s

All this to say, book selection in the classroom is important. It is important at every grade, at every age, in every classroom. It stays with us for years. Reading you have access to as a child and as you grow stays with you in a way no other reading in your life does. It’s an enormously important responsibility if you happen to be an English Language Arts teacher. *Especially* if you are selecting books to read to your students.

For this reason, it is crucial to keep up to date with the status of the books you are using to teach. My personal litmus test for a book that touches on race in any way: was it written by a white person? If so, no. Please don’t. Please do not teach using this book. Please. No. Beautiful people, we do not need additional white perspectives on racial issues. That is where you start. You start with books written by racialized people, since they will naturally bring their own perspectives, which have traditionally been omitted from curriculum, publishing, and media in general.

If you do not know whether or not your book is a good representation, or you are wondering how to proceed, here are some considerations:

1. You can check with the following website, which asks you to consider specific things before embarking on teaching a specific book, even though it does not ask you what book you will be teaching: [SHOULD I TEACH THIS BOOK](#).
2. How old is this book? It can be a classic, but remember that as time goes on, we learn more and more about racism and how this is woven everywhere into society. Odds are that an old book will have old points of view. Do a bookshelf check every year or two. If your classroom library is enormous, lucky! Ensure that you add diverse books, when you add to it.
3. Rather than evaluate an existing book, shake it up and find a new one! Here is a tool developed for you: [GUIDE FOR FINDING AN ANTI-BIASED BOOK](#)
4. Ask someone. You could ask me about a specific book (email me or put in a Request for Support and I will get back to you as soon as humanly possible). You could approach your department head or SPR or admin or principal. You could reach out to a literacy coach. You could bring it up in your PLC (Professional Learning Community). Ask around until you develop an internal method for evaluating a book with an antiracist lens.

I am asking you to consider offering different perspectives in context of your job as a teacher because **you have the most impact**, beautiful educators. The daily, front-line effort is crucial. The conversations you have with your students, the books you offer them... my goodness they matter. So very much. Offer representation. The power you have in affecting how students see themselves and see the potential they have to affect change in their world is indescribable. Wield it intentionally. You actively remove barriers to people's self-perception when you offer representative books.

Recommended Resources:

Should I Teach This Book Website (last updated 2021) | [Should I Teach This Book](#)
Teaching for Change Article by L. Derman-Sparks (2003) | [Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children's Books](#)
Teacher Bees.ca Article (2020) | [Repeating the Mistakes of Underground to Canada: Examining my own Biases](#)
Electric Literature Article by S. Schmuhl Long (2020) | [White People Need to Recon with Atticus Finch's Racism](#)
Teaching While White Podcast Episode 1 Transcript (2017) | [To Teach or To Kill a Mockingbird](#)
Guidelines for Text Selection (New Brunswick specific document)

Reading Forever,

Your friendly neighbourhood Anti-Racism & Equity Coach
Therese Trofimencoff (*she/her*)