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What I’m Reading: Harper Lee’s 2 Novels

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Last fall, shortly after it was published, I read Harper Lee’s Go Set a Watchman, and this summer I reread her classic To Kill a Mockingbird. The controversy around Watchman intrigued me. I saw the differences in the books mainly as the change between the perspectives of the young Scout and the adult Scout (aka Jean Louise). Unlike some, I saw the Watchman as an honest book reflecting the complicated reality of white America in the Jim Crow era. I am using these books to frame discussions about divisiveness in America with a reading group of our top scholarship students. I am talking with them about how we are regrettably still far from a postracial society. One of the causes of division in the earlier days, as is shown in both books, was society-endorsed segregation. Today the causes are less clear.

What is needed on campuses are discussions about respect. We need to endorse choosing compassion over violence, and kindness over rancor. Discussing Watchman is a good vehicle to examine race in the current day. My message to my students is that what is needed is love, just as Martin Luther King Jr. said: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: Only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: Only love can do that."

Jerome A. Gilbert is president of Marshall University, in West Virginia.

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