

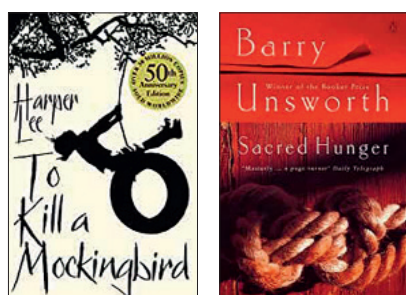
Life & Times Books

To Kill A Mockingbird Harper Lee

Arrow Books Ltd, 50th Anniversary Edition, 2010, PB, 320pp, £8.99, 978-0099549482

Sacred Hunger Barry Unsworth

Penguin Books, 1993, PB, 640pp, £8.99, 978-0140119930



A SHORT COURSE IN RACISM

I grew up in the 1960s in a small country town imbued with a pervasive suspicion that the death of Queen Victoria may have been greatly exaggerated. Mind you, we experienced diversity in my school — there was a French boy called André. White, obviously. As children we sang unapologetically racist songs about the Italians and the Germans. Well, our fathers had won the war.

So my adult life, like many white Brits of my age, has been a gradual journey towards a better understanding of human identity. Tolerance. Diversity. Celebration of difference within our common humanity. But perhaps it came as something of a shock that 'Black Lives Matter' was still a necessary mantra as we head towards the third decade of the 21st century.

As a middle-class white liberal it has sometimes been hard for me to understand white privilege. My parents came from a working-class background, and as a grammar school boy I felt I worked for everything I got. But I have learned from

talking to some of my friends. A younger friend, a church pastor, who has been repeatedly stopped by the police with no reason apparent but his skin colour. A high-flying manager responsible for the running of a large chunk of Transport for London who, at a TFL social gathering, was assumed without enquiry to be a train guard or a porter.

There is an inequity of esteem somewhere deep within the Western psyche. I don't like it and I don't really understand why we still have it. And if we will not address it in ourselves we could easily find ourselves kneeling on someone else's neck — and we know that's not always metaphorical. So I would like to tell you about my own recent refresher course in racism via two classic prize-winning novels.

I recently read a student's work that referred to Harper Lee's 1961 Pulitzer-winning novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I thought it was about time I actually read it. It is a staggeringly good novel. It defuses our instinctive reaction of disgust at overt and murderous racial inequality by telling the story through the eyes of a child, Scout, Atticus Finch's precocious but perceptive daughter. Distancing us by one step from the events themselves releases the author from telling us what to think. We ourselves are enabled to work out the lives of the black population of Alabama in the 1930s. They were still seen as morally and intellectually inferior, still desperately poor, and still had little control over their lives. How much difference had the abolition of slavery actually made? And how much progress has been made since, for the present peoples of Birmingham, Alabama, or Birmingham, UK? Some certainly, but why only some? And why might things even be drifting backwards from the heady days of the 1960s?

SACRED HUNGER

As a follow up I re-read Barry Unsworth's

1992 Booker Prize-winning *Sacred Hunger*. Again, a staggeringly good novel. This time about the slave trade in the middle of the 18th century. The cruelty that is possible between humans once we identify another as other is shocking and deeply depressing. But we see it ever in the human condition. The 7th century BCE defensive walls at Choïrokotia, the Carthaginians' treatment of the Romans, the Romans' treatment of, well, pretty much everyone. Fill in the blanks yourself up to Stalin, Hitler, the Nanjing Massacre, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, extraordinary rendition, the Rwandan genocide, the Bosnian genocide, Guantanamo Bay, ISIS, and drone attacks on other people's citizens. And what of ourselves? How careful are we about who sews our clothes or grows our mangetout?

Before we shrug off responsibility for the past pseudo-science of white superiority and enjoy the warm glow of Shaftesbury's achievements in 1807 when the slave trade was abolished, we should remember that the gangrene of racist supremacy is still with us, as is the simple fact that, to steal a phrase, wealth cascades down the generations. Even after a couple of centuries.

These two books have helped me to understand just a little bit more of why 'Black Lives Matter' matters. And it has not escaped my attention that I, a prosperous white middle-class liberal, have learned a little bit more not from George Floyd himself, who can no longer teach me, but from the perspectives of white protagonists, told by two white middle-class liberals, Lee and Unsworth. Who both won prizes. With no one kneeling on their necks.

Are we really all in this together? It's going to be a long road still. But read (or re-read) these two novels. We have to want to get better. It starts in our heads.

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