

Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2016
Massachusetts Center for the Book
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Level III Honors Award

Dear Harper Lee,

"A black male was shot." "ISIS beheaded another man"

Growing up as a Black Muslim male in America, you'd be surprised how often you hear one of these statements. You don't only hear them and move on with your life, you hear them and fear more for your life. As I was growing up, I personally thought that racism was a problem I was never going to have to face. Months and years passed, and time proved me wrong on several occasions. As I'm sure you know, it's a disturbing time in the world right now for both black people, racially, and Muslims, religiously. Being both, I am currently witnessing one of the most racial discrimination eras in the U.S. after slavery. People are becoming more and more educated, but the racism just keeps getting worse. Blacks and Muslims have been going through the pain of dealing with a problem that many thought was expelled from society. *To Kill a Mockingbird* talks about racism in Maycomb, Alabama in 1962, and you'd think 50 years later it wouldn't be a problem, but I stand to be corrected, and only time will prove it.

Last summer I was given the opportunity to take part in a teen summer program, where I was employed to take care of adolescents. Every two weeks my supervisor would call all teen workers into a room so they could sign their timesheets, in order to receive their paychecks. On Thursday afternoon, my supervisor called all the workers into the room to sign their timesheets, and I expected it to be the same as the previous weeks; sign your sheets, and get back to work. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case this time. As all the workers lined up, the Athan (call to prayer) app went off on my phone, but as soon as I heard it, I turned it off. I thought that no one heard it and everything would continue to go as is, but I was wrong (I'm wrong a lot of the time). About five seconds later, my supervisor said, "Oh, that's how you roll". At first I didn't take it seriously, but after a room of about twenty people started to shake with laughter; it was hard to not be offended. But in every racist society, there's an Atticus Finch, a person who goes against the belief of the majority, in order to follow what's morally correct. I like to think that a boy named Welinski was my Atticus. Instead of following the rest of the crowd, Welinski spoke up against everyone's actions. He reminded everyone that they were laughing at something sacred, religion. He stressed the fact that what everyone was doing was xenophobic. Despite being serious, there was a group of kids that continued to laugh. When the kids asked why he was defending me, he replied "He's different, I'm different, but my love and respect is for everyone".

Writing a letter to you isn't an easy task, I wanted to make it personal but related. When Welinski stood up for me, it reminded me of when Atticus said "*I do my best to love everybody... I'm hard put, sometimes – baby, it's never an insult to be called what somebody thinks is a bad name. It just shows you how poor that person is, it doesn't hurt you*". You taught me that in every setting there is an Atticus, and if there isn't an Atticus, then I must take the initiative to be him.

We're living in a world today where it's normal to be racist, and in fact it's encouraged. In the current Presidential race in the year 2015, Islam is becoming an increasingly significant topic. Candidates on the other hand are undiplomatically showing clear signs of Islamophobia and generalization on the entire Muslim population. It even reached the extent of forcing Muslims to have special ID's to identify them. The opinion of hundreds of people doesn't matter much when the population is around three hundred million, but the fact that people are supporting and encouraging what they are doing is disgusting and disrespectful to the religion of Islam.

America is built on the principle of freedom; freedom of speech and freedom of religion (unless, of course, you're Muslim). In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus took it upon himself to defend a Black man, even though it was unheard of for a white man to do such a thing. Atticus was a normal man but he broke racial barriers because he believed in what's right. I want to be Atticus. I want to show the world that I'm not just a regular teenage Black Muslim. I want to live my life without the fear that I will be the next victim of racism. I want people to understand that my beliefs and traditions don't give people the right to decide my worth. I lived in this country for fourteen years; I am as American as anyone else is and my religion doesn't change that.

So thank you, Harper Lee. Thank you for helping me realize that being different isn't a bad thing and now all that's left is to convince the rest of the world.

Sincerely,

Hassan

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