

# Judge Sentences Teens to Read Books to Pay for Crimes

Many Americans today are troubled by the anger, disrespect, and ignorant attitudes they see in the younger generations. Unfortunately, these attitudes often spill over in violent protests and other inappropriate actions.

Such was the case last fall in Loudon County, Virginia when a group of five teenagers defaced the historic, one-room “Ashburn Colored School” with anti-Semitic, racist, and other indecent comments. The perpetrators were caught, charged, and sentenced... but the latter step is taking an unprecedented – and potentially wise – turn.

According to [\*The New York Times\*](#), the judge sentenced the teens to reading and reporting on one book a month for the next year. Many of the books, some of which are listed below, explore historical time periods and deal with the same problems with which the teens were charged:

1. *Night*, Elie Wiesel
2. *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller
3. *The Chosen*, Chaim Potok
4. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee
5. *The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead
6. *The Help*, Kathryn Stockett
7. *The Banality of Evil*, Hannah Arendt
8. *The Sun Also Rises*, Ernest Hemingway
9. *The Rape of Nanking*, Iris Chang
10. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou

As Alejandra Rueda, the prosecuting attorney who came up with the idea, explains, such a sentence goes beyond a slap on the wrist and actually allows the delinquents to ponder and re-evaluate their reasoning in these areas:

*“‘It occurred to me that the way these kids are going to learn about this stuff is if they read about it, more than anything,’ Ms. Rueda said. ‘Yes, they could walk into court and plead guilty and get put on probation and do some community service, but it wasn’t really going to bring the message home.’”*

*‘I just thought maybe if they read these books, it will make an impression on them, and they will stand up for people who are being oppressed,’ she added.”*

In today’s culture, Ms. Rueda’s idea is a refreshing approach. All too often, perpetrators of crimes – or even individuals who make rather stupid statements on social media – are publicly excoriated and figuratively tarred and feathered by an emotionally-charged society. In doing so, we often forget that those who make these statements may be making them because they simply have not been presented with the opposing viewpoints, nor have they been given the opportunity to weigh and consider those viewpoints in a rational, thoughtful manner.

But then, should we really be surprised given the state of today’s education system? Consider, for a moment, that nearly [90 percent](#) of high school students are not proficient in history. Many college students are also completely ignorant when it comes to [questions about the Holocaust](#). And while students do read in school, that fare is often [less rigorous and not as broad](#) as it was in schools of yore. Furthermore, many schools no longer seem to teach students how to debate and [make an argument](#) from a variety of viewpoints.

Until we teach our students about the past, encourage them to read the great ideas of Western Civilization, and teach them how to logically debate and argue, then we can only expect acts of anger, violence, and disrespect to escalate.