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What defines you? Maybe it's the shade of your skin, the place you grew up, the accent in your words, the make up of your family, the gender you were born with, the intimate relationships you chose to have or your generation? As the American identity changes we will be there to report it. In America is a venue for creative and timely sharing of news that explores who we are.

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Ala. prison bars white inmate from reading 'Slavery by Another Name,' citing security risk

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(CNN) – The Pulitzer Prize-winning book "Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II," by Douglas Blackmon, tells the story of African Americans in the post-Reconstruction south who were imprisoned and forced into involuntary servitude after being convicted of trifling crimes. Now a modern-day prisoner in Alabama is suing for his right to read the book.

The lawsuit, filed in September, alleges that when officials at the Kilby Correctional Facility in Mt. Meigs, Ala. denied prisoner Mark Melvin access to the

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book, it was a violation of his rights to "freedom of speech, equal protection and due process." The case is currently in the discovery phase.

The Alabama Department of Corrections declined comment for this story, citing the pending litigation. In their answer to the lawsuit, they admitted that Melvin had been denied access to the book, but denied any violation of his rights.

The Department said the book was in violation of its rules about what kind of reading material can be sent to inmates – namely that "the book, its title, its contents and/or its pictures could be used (or misused) by the plaintiff or other inmates to incite violence or disobedience within the institution." They also noted that the book, which describes the forced labor of African Americans in detail, "could also be used (or misused) in a manner which is inconsistent with legitimate penological objectives, for instance the rehabilitation of inmates through prison work details and/or the inculcation of a work ethic."

Melvin, who is white, is serving a sentence of life without parole for a murder committed when he was 14. The book was one recommended to him by Bryan Stevenson, an attorney with the nonprofit [Equal Justice Initiative](#) who had represented him in an earlier case. Stevenson, in compliance with prison rules, arranged for the publishers of "Slavery by Another Name" and another book, "[Mountains Beyond Mountains](#)," by Tracy Kidder, to mail copies of the books directly to Melvin.

Stevenson said he often sends books to his current and former clients in the prison system, especially those who were convicted at a young age and have only limited educational opportunities in prison. Melvin had expressed an interest in history and biographies, so in September 2010, Stevenson sent him books about Irish, Native American, and U.S. history, including Blackmon's book.

"I think knowledge creates a better understanding, creates more introspection and introspection leads to rehabilitation," said Stevenson. "There's so many negative distractions that reading is a better escape than a lot of the other things you see people doing in jails and prisons."

According to the original lawsuit filing, when prison officials told Melvin he would not be allowed to have the book because it was allegedly "too provocative," Melvin appealed by filing a grievance. Prison officials denied that grievance on the basis that the content of the book was inappropriate. The lawsuit alleges that a second grievance filed by Melvin was denied without officials giving a reason.

Stevenson said he believes prison officials don't like the book's treatment of historical facts that highlight the [mistreatment and injustice](#) meted upon African Americans at certain points in the state's – and America's – history.

"All kinds of books with graphic violence and other destructive narratives come into the prison every day," said Stevenson. "Prisoners watch television with all kinds of worrisome messages. We've raised the question, 'Why this book?' To me it seems clear that it's because it's really a book about racial history. For many people, talking about our racial history is so complicated and provocative that they'd rather not do it."

Stevenson said that inmates told him that prison officials did not prevent them



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from watching a [PBS documentary](#) based on the book when it aired on Alabama Public Television earlier this month.

The book's author, Blackmon, called the Alabama officials' decision "outrageous." He said that soon after news of Melvin's lawsuit broke, the commissioner of Georgia's prison system contacted him to say that he had read "Slavery by Another Name." The commissioner went on to tell Blackmon that it had impressed him so much that he was making it required reading for participants in an upcoming staff retreat.

"Wiser, well-reasoned people who have actually read the book, who have taken time to be serious and consider the balance of history and who are not acting with a knee-jerk reaction, understand that this is the kind of history that helps us understand why things are the way they are today," said Blackmon. "And it could help inmates understand the world they live in, whether they're white or black."

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