

To Kill a Mockingbird

by Harper Lee

About the Book

One of the best-loved stories of all time, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been translated into more than forty languages, sold more than thirty million copies worldwide, served as the basis of an enormously popular motion picture, and was voted one of the best novels of the twentieth century by librarians across the country. A gripping, heart-wrenching, and wholly remarkable tale of coming-of-age in a South poisoned by virulent prejudice, it views a world of great beauty and savage inequities through the eyes of a young girl, as her father — a crusading local lawyer — risks everything to defend a black man unjustly accused of a terrible crime.

Praise for the Book

“That rare literary phenomenon, a Southern novel with no mildew on its magnolia leaves. Funny, happy and written with unspectacular precision, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is about conscience — how it is instilled in two children, Scout and Jem Finch; how it operates in their father, Atticus, a lawyer appointed to defend a Negro on a rape charge, and how conscience grows in their small Alabama town.”

— *Vogue*

“All of the tactile brilliance and none of the precocity generally supposed to be standard swamp-warfare issues for Southern writers. . . . Novelist Lee’s prose has an edge that cuts through cant, and she teaches the reader an astonishing number of use truths about little girls and about Southern life. . . . Scout Finch is fiction’s most pealing child since Carson McCullers’s Frankie got left behind at the wedding.”

— *Time*

“A first novel of such rare excellence that it will no doubt make a great many readers slow down to relish more fully its simple distinction. . . . A novel of strong contemporary national significance.”

— *Chicago Tribune*

Courtesy of Harper Perennial

About the Author

Harper Lee

American Novelist (1926–)

Also known as: Nelle Harper Lee, Harper Lee

Updated: 11/29/2007

Personal Information: Born April 28, 1926, in Monroeville, AL; daughter of Amasa Coleman (a lawyer) and Frances (Finch) Lee.

Education: Attended Huntington College, 1944–45, and University of Alabama, 1945–49; also attended Oxford University.

Politics: Republican.

Religion: Methodist.

Avocational Interests: Golf, music.

Addresses: Home: Monroeville, AL. Office: c/o J. B. Lippincott Company, East Washington Square, Philadelphia, PA 19105. Agent: McIntosh & Otis, 353 Lexington Ave. 15th Fl., New York, NY 10016.

Career: Writer. Airline reservation clerk with Eastern Air Lines and British Overseas Airways, New York, NY, c. 1950s. Member, National Council on the Arts, 1966–72.

Awards: Pulitzer Prize, Alabama Library Association award, and Brotherhood Award of National Conference of Christians and Jews, all 1961, *Best Sellers' Paperback of the Year Award*, 1962, and Alabama Humanities Award, 2002, all for *To Kill a Mockingbird*; Quill Award for Audio, 2007, for audio version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*; Presidential Medal of Freedom, President George W. Bush, 2007.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR

- *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lippincott (Philadelphia, PA), 1960.

Contributor to *Vogue* and *McCall's*.

To Kill a Mockingbird has been translated into ten languages.

The audio version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, read by Sissy Spacek, has been published by Caedmon Audio.

Media Adaptations: *To Kill a Mockingbird* was filmed by Universal in 1962 and adapted as a London stage play by Christopher Sergel in 1987.

Sidelights

With the enormous popular and critical success of her novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee established herself as a leading figure in American literature. Although she has not published any new fiction in the past four decades, Lee's reputation is secure. According to Dorothy Jewell Altman in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, "a regional novel with a universal message, combines popular appeal with literary excellence, assuring Harper Lee's place in American letters."

To Kill a Mockingbird is narrated by six-year-old Jean Finch, nicknamed "Scout," who, along with her older brother Jem, watch as their father, an attorney in Maycomb, Alabama, defends Tom Robinson, a black man accused of raping a white woman, Mayella Ewell, daughter of Bob Ewell. During the three years of the trial, the two children come to an understanding of prejudice as their father stands his ground in defending a man he believes to be innocent. Scout and Jem are taunted by classmates and neighbors who object to the idea of a white man defending a black man, and the situation intensifies until Robinson is threatened with lynching; he is only saved by Jem and Scout's innocent intervention. At the trial, the jury finds Robinson guilty, even though Atticus proves he cannot possibly have committed the crime. Despite this truth and all his hard work, Atticus can't break through Maycomb's deeply entrenched racial prejudice that "*all* Negroes lie, that *all* Negroes are basically immoral beings, that *all* Negro men are not to be trusted around . . . [white] women." Told with "a rare blend of wit and compassion," according to a *Booklist* critic, the novel moves "unconcernedly and irresistibly back and forth between being sentimental, tough, melodramatic, acute, and funny," wrote a *New Yorker* reviewer.

One of the novel's subplots revolves around attempts by the two siblings and their friend Dill Harris to draw out Arthur "Boo" Radley, a local recluse who has remained hidden in the Radley home since his teenage years, when he was arrested for a prank and then released into his father's stern custody. Locked in the house, a victim of his father's religious notions and misplaced family pride, Radley eventually becomes a victim of the town's prejudice, and is feared by both adults and children. The children's wild ideas about the unseen Boo — that he eats raw squirrels and wanders the town by night — reflect the town's misconceptions about race. Dill, who is fascinated with Boo, convinces Jem and Scout that they should try and entice Boo to come out of his house so they can see him. Boo responds to this attention, secretly leaving gifts for the children in a hollow tree, mending Jem's pants when he tears them while climbing over the Radleys' fence to spy, and covering Scout with a blanket when she stands out in the cold watching a neighbor's house burn in a fire. In the end, Boo saves Scout from being killed when Bob Ewell, drunk and murderous, tries to kill her in order to exact vengeance on her father.

When Boo is revealed as a benefactor to the children, they must reconsider their preconceptions about him. "One of the most interesting features of *Mockingbird*," writes William T. Going in his collection *Essays on Alabama Literature*, "is the skill with which Miss Lee weaves these two struggles about childhood and the law together into one thematic idea." "The achievement of Harper Lee," Edgar H. Schuster argued in the *English Journal*, "is not that she has written another novel about race prejudice, but rather that she has placed race prejudice in a perspective

which allows us to see it as an aspect of a larger thing; as something that arises from phantom contacts, from fear and lack of knowledge; and finally as something that disappears with the kind of knowledge or 'education' that one gains through learning what people are really like when you 'finally see them.'"

Although the storyline of the novel appears to be simple, the book presents several opposing pairs of themes: ignorance versus knowledge, cowardice versus heroism, guilt versus innocence, and prejudice versus tolerance. The town's entrenched ignorance is contrasted with the education the children gain by following their innate instinct for truth and justice, and their accurate observations of the adults around them, particularly Atticus, who always tells them the truth. Atticus's clarity and courage is sharply contrasted with Bob Ewell's cowardice and bullying. Atticus tells Scout what true courage is, using the example of a neighbor who defeated her addiction to morphine: rather than being "a man with a gun in his hand," courage is "when you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what." Atticus embodies this definition of courage when he defends Tom Robinson, a case he knows he will probably lose. Innocence and guilt are sharply contrasted when the most innocent characters in the book — Tom Robinson and Boo Radley — are judged guilty by society.

Throughout the book, Lee draws on the symbol of the mockingbird, which she associates with Boo Radley and Tom Robinson. This bird, which sings almost continuously, represents innocence and joy; the children's neighbor, Miss Maudie, tells them that it's a sin to kill one. Another symbolic moment occurs when an unusual snowstorm blankets Maycomb in white, and Jem builds a snowman over a base layer of mud. When the snowman melts, the mud is revealed. In one day, the snowman has gone from the black color of the underlying mud to white, and back to black, revealing how superficial skin color really is.

Lee drew upon her own childhood experiences as the daughter of a lawyer in Alabama to create the fictional events in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Together with her brother and their childhood friend Truman Capote, Lee enjoyed many of the small-town adventures depicted in the novel; Capote would later base a character in his first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, on Lee. Scout's troubles in school — she is so far advanced in reading that she finds her school work boring — reflects Lee's own childhood boredom with grade school. Lee's older sister, Sook, a recluse who rarely left the family house, shares many of the qualities exhibited by the character Boo. Lee's father, Amasa Coleman, served in the Alabama State Legislature from 1927 to 1939, and was the model for Atticus Finch. "Although Lee stressed that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not autobiographical," explained Altman, "she commented that a writer 'should write about what he [sic] knows and write truthfully.' The time period and setting of the novel obviously originated in the author's experience."

Lee began her writing career after leaving college in 1950 just before completing her law studies. While supporting herself in New York City as an airline reservation clerk, she sought the advice of a literary agent about her work. The agent advised her to expand one of the short stories she had written into the novel which became *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The process of writing the novel took several years. During this time Lee quit working, lived in a cold-water flat and was supported by friends who believed in her work. In 1957 she approached the publishing firm of

Lippincott with the manuscript. Although editors criticized the novel's structure, which they felt read like a series of short stories strung together, they saw promise in the book and encouraged Lee to rewrite it. By 1960, with the help of Lippincott editor Tay Hohoff, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was finished.

The book was an immediate popular success, being selected by two major book clubs, the Literary Guild and the Book-of-the-Month Club, and condensed in the *Reader's Digest*. In addition, the book won the Pulitzer Prize and several other awards. However, critical response to the novel was initially mixed. It was only with the success of the film adaptation in 1962 — a winner of two Academy Awards and starring Gregory Peck and Mary Badham — that many critics took a second look at *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Initial reviews had sometimes highlighted the novel's melodramatic qualities or the unlikely nature of the story being narrated by a child of six. Phoebe Adams in *Atlantic*, for example, found the story “frankly and completely impossible, being told in the first person by a six-year-old girl with the prose style of a well-educated adult.” Granville Hicks wrote in the *Saturday Review* that “Lee's problem has been to tell the story she wants to tell and yet to stay within the consciousness of a child, and she hasn't consistently solved it.” Later critics were more generous with the novel, citing Lee's storytelling abilities and creation of a believable small-town setting. As R. A. Dave wrote in *Indian Studies in American Fiction*, Lee “is a remarkable storyteller. The reader just glides through the novel abounding in humour and pathos, hopes and fears, love and hatred, humanity and brutality. . . . We hardly feel any tension between the novelist's creativity and social criticism [while] the tale of heroic struggle lingers in our memory as an unforgettable experience.” He also wrote that Lee created “an epic canvas against which is enacted a movingly human drama of the jostling worlds — of children and adults, of innocence and experience, of kindness and cruelty, of love and hatred, of humor and pathos, and above all of appearance and reality — all taking the reader to the root of human behavior.”

Despite these later critics' comments and the book's popular success, no book-length study of the work was published until Claudia Durst Johnson's *To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries* appeared in 1994. Johnson wrote, “Some of the most interesting criticism of the novel, and certainly the largest volume of commentary on the novel, has been done by legal rather than literary scholars.” Teresa Goodwin Phelps wrote in the *Alabama Law Review* that “While the novel depicts change in one facet of law and society, it reinforces the status quo in other troubling aspects.” These aspects include its casual attitude toward the sexual abuse of Mayella Ewell by her father, as well as its condescending view of poor whites.

Since its initial appearance in 1960, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been a continuing favorite with high school and college students. But, aside from a few short articles for magazines, Lee has published no new work in over thirty-five years. The reason for this extended silence remains a matter of speculation. Lee has avoided making public comments about her life or her work, although reports at the time *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published described her as a slow, methodical writer who rewrote constantly. When pressed for personal information, Lee has used humor to protect her privacy, describing her political affiliation as “Whig,” and saying that she believes “in Catholic emancipation and the repeal of the Corn Laws” and commenting that her favorite fan letter was one that accused her of not taking the rape of white women seriously:

“Why is it that you young Jewish authors seek to whitewash the situation?” She responded with a clever letter, signing it “Harper Levy.”

Lee has counted among her favorite authors Charles Lamb, Robert Louis Stevenson, Jane Austen, and Thomas Love Peacock, as well as various religious writers of the nineteenth century. As Lee once commented: “Writing is the hardest thing in the world. . . . but writing is the only thing that has made me completely happy.”

Despite her love of writing, continuing to work after publishing *To Kill a Mockingbird* proved to be somewhat intimidating for Lee. She began a second novel in 1961, writing from noon until early evening, and revising so extensively that she produced only one or two pages per day, but never presented this work for publication. In the early 1960s she penned several short essays and an article titled “Love — In Other Words” for popular magazines. However, Lee retired from literary activity by mid-decade. Despite the fact that its author’s renown rests on a single book, *To Kill a Mockingbird* retains its place in the American literary canon. In more recent years Lee has divided her time between New York City and her hometown of Monroeville, Alabama, where her sister, Alice Lee, practices as an attorney.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Detroit: Gale, 2007.

Source Database: Literature Resource Center

Discussion Questions

1. How do Scout, Jem, and Dill characterize Boo Radley at the beginning of the book? In what way did Boo's past history of violence foreshadow his method of protecting Jem and Scout from Bob Ewell? Does this repetition of aggression make him more or less of a sympathetic character?
2. In Scout's account of her childhood, her father Atticus reigns supreme. How would you characterize his abilities as a single parent? How would you describe his treatment of Calpurnia and Tom Robinson vis a vis his treatment of his white neighbors and colleagues? How would you typify his views on race and class in the larger context of his community and his peers?
3. The title of Lee's book is alluded to when Atticus gives his children air rifles and tells them that they can shoot all the bluejays they want, but "it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." At the end of the novel, Scout likens the "sin" of naming Boo as Bob Ewell's killer to "shootin' a mockingbird." Do you think that Boo is the only innocent, or mockingbird, in this novel?
4. Scout ages two years—from six to eight—over the course of Lee's novel, which is narrated from her perspective as an adult. Did you find the account her narrator provides believable? Were there incidents or observations in the book that seemed unusually "knowing" for such a young child? What event or episode in Scout's story do you feel truly captures her personality?
5. *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been challenged repeatedly by the political left and right, who have sought to remove it from libraries for its portrayal of conflict between children and adults; ungrammatical speech; references to sex, the supernatural, and witchcraft; and unfavorable presentation of blacks. Which elements of the book—if any—do you think touch on controversial issues in our contemporary culture? Did you find any of those elements especially troubling, persuasive, or insightful?
6. Jem describes to Scout the four "folks" or classes of people in Maycomb County: "...our kind of folks don't like the Cunninghams, the Cunninghams don't like the Ewells, and the Ewells hate and despise the colored folks." What do you think of the ways in which Lee explores race and class in 1930s Alabama? What significance, if any, do you think these characterizations have for people living in other parts of the world?
7. One of the chief criticisms of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is that the two central storylines — Scout, Jem, and Dill's fascination with Boo Radley and the trial between Mayella Ewell and Tom Robinson — are not sufficiently connected in the novel. Do you think that Lee is successful in incorporating these different stories? Were you surprised at the way in which these story lines were resolved? Why or why not?

8. By the end of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the book's first sentence: "When he was thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow," has been explained and resolved. What did you think of the events that followed the Halloween pageant? Did you think that Bob Ewell was capable of injuring Scout or Jem? How did you feel about Boo Radley's last-minute intervention?
9. What elements of this book did you find especially memorable, humorous, or inspiring? Are there individual characters whose beliefs, acts, or motives especially impressed or surprised you? Did any events in this book cause you to reconsider your childhood memories or experiences in a new light?

Courtesy of Harper Perennial