



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

To Kill a Mockingbird

by Harper Lee



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“Writing is a process of self-discipline you must learn before you can call yourself a writer. There are people who write, but I think they’re quite different from people who must write.”

Preface

Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the rare American novel that can be discovered with excitement in adolescence and reread into adulthood without fear of disappointment. Few novels so appealingly evoke the daily world of childhood in a way that seems convincing whether you are sixteen or sixty-six.



What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you’re a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to the Book

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* begins at the end. The novel opens with the adult Jean Louise "Scout" Finch writing, "When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow." By the time Jem finally gets around to breaking his arm more than 250 pages later most readers will have forgotten they were ever warned. This echoes the way the whole book unfolds—in no special hurry, with lifelike indirection. Nothing happens all by itself. The book's two plots inch forward along parallel tracks, only converging near the end.

The first plot revolves around Arthur "Boo" Radley, who lives in a shuttered house down the street from the Finches and is rumored to be some kind of monster. Scout, Jem, and their next-door neighbor Dill engage in pranks, trying to make Boo show himself. Unexpectedly, Boo reciprocates their interest with a series of small gifts, until he ultimately steps off his porch and into their lives when they need him most.

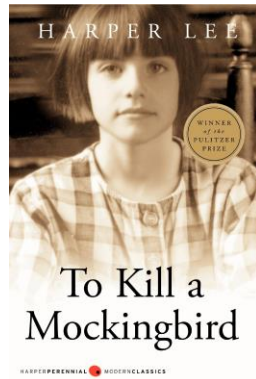
The second story concerns Scout and Jem's father, the attorney Atticus Finch. The local judge appoints him to defend a black man, Tom Robinson, who is falsely accused of raping a white woman. Atticus suspects he will lose the case, but he faces up to the challenge just the same, at one point heroically stepping between his client and a lynch mob.

Along with its twin plot lines, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has two broad themes: tolerance and justice. Lee treats the first through the children's fear of their mysterious neighbor. She illustrates the second with Atticus's courage in defending Robinson to the best of his ability, despite the racial prejudices of their small Southern town.

Tying the stories together is a simple but profound piece of advice Atticus gives Scout: "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view.... Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it." By the end of the novel, Scout has done exactly that—guessed at the pain not only beneath Tom Robinson's skin, but also under that of her neighbor.

How the Novel Came to Be Written

Any claims for *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a book that changed history could not have seemed more far-fetched one winter night in 1958, as Nelle Harper Lee huddled in her outer-



borough New York apartment trying to finesse her unruly, episodic manuscript into some semblance of a cohesive novel. All but drowning in multiple drafts of the same material, Lee suddenly threw open a window and scattered five years of work onto the dirty snow below.

Did Lee really intend to destroy *To Kill a Mockingbird*? We'll never know. Fortunately, in the next moment, she called her editor. J.B. Lippincott's formidable Tay Hohoff promptly sent her outside to gather all the pages back—thus rescuing *To Kill a Mockingbird* from the slush.

The novel had its origins in Lee's hometown of Monroeville, Alabama—the small, Southern town that the fictional Maycomb is based upon. Her father's unsuccessful defense of a black man and his son accused of murder, in addition to the Scottsboro Boys trials and another notorious interracial rape case, helped to shape Lee's budding social conscience and sense of a dramatic story.

Along with his legal practice, Lee's father published and edited the town newspaper. His regard for the written word impacted Lee's sensibility as surely as his respect for the law. Lee would name her idealized vision of her father after Titus Pomponius Atticus, a friend of the Roman orator Cicero renowned as, according to Lee, "a wise, learned and humane man." For a long time, Lee called her work in progress *Atticus*. Once she fastened on *To Kill a Mockingbird* she did not look back.

An early version of the novel, titled *Go Set a Watchman*, featured Scout as an adult returning to Maycomb. Lee's editor, Tay Hohoff, asked her to rewrite the story from a child's perspective, which she did. Until recently, the manuscript for *Go Set a Watchman* was believed lost. It was discovered decades later and published by HarperCollins in July 2015.

Lippincott finally published the book on July 11, 1960, by which time an unprecedented four national mail-order book clubs had already selected it for their readers. The first line of the *Washington Post's* review echoed many similar notices that praised the novel for its moral impact: "A hundred pounds of sermons on tolerance, or an equal measure of invective deploring the lack of it, will weigh far less in the scale of enlightenment than a mere 18 ounces of new fiction bearing the title *To Kill a Mockingbird*."

Eighty weeks later, the novel still perched on the hardcover bestseller list. During that time, it had won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the hearts of American readers. One can't help wondering how literary history might have been different had Harper Lee thrown her manuscript out the window on a slightly windier night.

About the Author

Harper Lee (1926-2016)

If Nelle Harper Lee ever wanted proof that fame has its drawbacks, she didn't have to look farther than her childhood neighbor, Truman Capote. After her enormously successful first novel, she has lived a life as private as Capote's was public.



Harper Lee
(Bettmann/Corbis)

Nelle—her first name was her grandmother's spelled backward—was born on April 28, 1926, in Monroeville, Alabama. Her mother, Frances Cunningham Finch Lee, was a homemaker. Her father, Amasa Coleman Lee, practiced law. Before A.C. Lee became a title lawyer, he once defended two black men accused of murdering a white storekeeper. Both clients, a father and son, were hanged.

As a child, Harper Lee was an unruly tomboy. She fought on the playground. She talked back to teachers. She was bored with school and resisted any sort of conformity. The character of Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird* would have liked her. In high school Lee was fortunate to have a gifted English teacher, Gladys Watson Burkett, who introduced her to challenging literature and the rigors of writing well. Lee loved nineteenth-century British authors best, and once said that her ambition was to become "the Jane Austen of south Alabama."

Unable to fit in with the sorority she joined at the University of Alabama, she found a second home on the campus newspaper. Eventually she became editor-in-chief of the *Rammer Jammer*, a quarterly humor magazine on campus. She entered the law school, but she "loathed" it. Despite her father's hopes that she would become a local attorney like her sister Alice, Lee went to New York to pursue her writing.

She spent eight years working odd jobs before she finally showed a manuscript to Tay Hohoff, an editor at J.B. Lippincott. At this point, it still resembled a string of stories more than the novel that Lee had intended. Under Hohoff's guidance, the perspective was changed to Scout as a child, and two and a half years of rewriting followed. When the novel was finally ready for publication, the author opted for the name "Harper Lee" on the cover, because she didn't want to be misidentified as "Nellie."

To Kill a Mockingbird was published in 1960 to highly favorable reviews and quickly climbed the bestseller lists, where it remained for eighty-eight weeks. In 1961, the novel won the Pulitzer Prize.

Lee later researched a book, similar to Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), about a part-time minister in Alexander City, Alabama, accused of killing five people for their insurance money and later himself murdered by a victim's relative. However, she dropped the project in the 1990s. It wasn't until February of 2015 that news of a second novel surfaced, when Lee's publisher announced a newly discovered manuscript for *Go Set a Watchman*, the novel Lee wrote before *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

In the meantime, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has sold more than thirty million copies in forty languages. In 2011, President Obama awarded her the National Medal of Arts. According to biographer Charles J. Shields, Lee was unprepared for the amount of personal attention associated with writing a bestseller. Ever since, she has led a quiet and guardedly private life. As Sheriff Tate says of Boo Radley, "draggin' him with his shy ways into the limelight—to me, that's a sin." So it would be with Harper Lee. From her, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is gift enough.

The Friendship of Harper Lee and Truman Capote

Nelle Harper Lee and Truman Capote became friends in the early 1930s as kindergarteners in Monroeville, Alabama. They lived next door to each other: Capote with aunts and uncles, Lee with her parents and three siblings. From the start they loved reading and recognized in each other "an apartness," as Capote later expressed it. When Lee's father gave them an old Underwood typewriter, they began writing original stories. Although Capote moved to New York City in the third grade to join his mother and stepfather, he returned to Monroeville most summers, eventually providing the inspiration for Dill in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

In 1948 Capote published his first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Around that time, Lee quit law school and joined Capote in New York to work at becoming a writer, too. Years of menial jobs followed until *To Kill a Mockingbird* was ready for publication. Capote read the manuscript and made editorial suggestions. She, in her turn, accompanied him to Kansas to help research *In Cold Blood*.

After *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published, Capote resented Lee's success. He could have tried harder to dispel baseless rumors that the novel was as much his work as hers. Their friendship continued during the 1960s and '70s, but Capote's drug and alcohol abuse strained the relationship. Later he would stop publishing and sink into self-parody, sponging off high society and making endless rounds of the talk-show circuit. When Capote died in 1984, Lee confided to friends that she hadn't heard from him in years.

Historical and Literary Context

Harper Lee and Civil Rights

1930s

- Over 25% of labor force unemployed during worst years of the Great Depression.
- 1932: Franklin D. Roosevelt wins presidency with promise of his "New Deal."
- The Scottsboro Boys trials last from 1931 to 1937. Nelle Harper Lee is four years old when they begin.

1940s

- 1947: Jackie Robinson signs baseball contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers.
- 1948: President Truman ends segregation in the military and discrimination in federal hiring.
- Harper Lee moves to New York City to become a writer.

1950s

- 1954: *Brown v. Board of Education* rules school segregation unconstitutional.
- 1955: Rosa Parks refuses to surrender her bus seat to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama, 1955.
- Lee accompanies Truman Capote to Kansas as "researchist" for his book *In Cold Blood*.

Early 1960s

- 1960: *To Kill a Mockingbird* published on July 11.
- 1962: The film follows and wins Oscars for best actor, screenwriter, and set design.
- Martin Luther King, Jr., delivers I Have a Dream speech on August 28, 1963. King wins the Nobel Prize in 1964.

Mid-1960s

- 1964: Congress passes the Civil Rights Act of 1964, enforcing the constitutional right to vote.
- 1965: Malcolm X is assassinated.
- Despite rumors of a second Southern novel, Lee never finishes another book.

2010s

- 2015: The manuscript for Lee's first novel, *Go Set a Watchman*, is discovered and published.
- 2016: Harper Lee dies in Monroeville on February 19 at age 89.

The Jim Crow South

Former slaves and their children had little assurance that their post-Civil War freedoms would stick. By the 1890s, a system of laws and regulations commonly referred to as *Jim Crow* had emerged; by 1910, every state of the former Confederacy had upheld this legalized segregation and disenfranchisement. Most scholars believe the term originated around 1830, when a white minstrel performer blackened his face, danced a jig, and sang the lyrics to the song "Jump Jim Crow." At first the word was synonymous with such terms as black, colored, or Negro, but it later became attached to this specific arsenal of repressive laws.

During the Jim Crow era, state and local officials instituted curfews for blacks and posted "Whites Only" and "Colored" signs on parks, schools, hotels, water fountains, restrooms, and all modes of transportation. Laws against miscegenation or "race-mixing" deemed all marriages between white and black people not only void but illegal. Almost as bad as the injustice of Jim Crow was the inconsistency with which law enforcement applied it. Backtalk would rate a laugh in one town, and a lynching just over the county line.

Though violence used to subjugate blacks was nothing new, its character changed under Jim Crow. Southern white supremacist groups like the Klu Klux Klan reached a membership of six million. Mob violence was encouraged. Torture became a public spectacle. White families brought their children as witnesses to lynchings, and vendors hawked the body parts of victims as souvenirs. Between 1889 and 1930, over 3,700 men and women were reported lynched in the United States, many for challenging Jim Crow.

All this anger and fear led to the notorious trials of the "Scottsboro Boys," an ordeal of sensational convictions, reversals, and retrials for nine young African American men unjustly accused of raping two white women on a train from Tennessee to Alabama.

Juries composed exclusively of white men ignored clear evidence that the men had not touched the women. As in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a black man charged with raping a white woman was not accorded the usual presumption of innocence. In January of 1932, the Alabama Supreme Court affirmed seven out of eight death sentences against the adult defendants. A central figure in the case was an Atticus-like judge, James E. Horton, a member of the Alabama Bar who eventually defied public sentiment to overturn a guilty verdict.

Despite these and many more injustices, black Americans found ingenious ways to endure and resist. Education, religion, and music became their solace and salvation until, in the organized political action of the Civil Rights Movement, Jim Crow's harsh music finally began to fade.

Other Works/Adaptations

To Adapt a *Mockingbird*

The story of bringing *To Kill a Mockingbird* to the screen is—as with any great film adaptation—the story of an awful movie trying unsuccessfully to be made.

After Universal Studios bought the rights to Lee’s novel, they first offered Rock Hudson the role of Atticus Finch. But producer Alan Pakula didn’t want Hudson for the part; he wanted Gregory Peck. When Pakula sent a copy of the novel to Peck, the tall, dignified Californian read it in one night and accepted, and the studio agreed to finance the film.

With Peck on board, the next piece of business was turning the novel into a screenplay. Pakula offered Harper Lee the chance to write the screenplay, but she wasn’t interested. She pleaded responsibility to her second novel and, with characteristic humility, said she would welcome an experienced screenwriter’s trimming.

When playwright Horton Foote landed the screenplay assignment instead, all worked out for the best. Foote’s upbringing in a small Texas town and knack for scenes of quiet dramatic intensity were ideal for the project. At Pakula’s urging, Foote compressed the novel’s three years into one in order to give the film a sense of unity. As Foote has said, “That decision was very freeing to me. It gave me a chance to explore the architecture that she had created for the novel and not feel that I was ruining anything or tampering with anything essential.” He also heightened the intensity of the novel’s social criticism, reflecting the growing momentum of the Civil Rights Movement.

In spite of these and other significant changes, Lee later praised Foote’s screenplay: “If the integrity of a film adaptation is measured by the degree to which the novelist’s intent is preserved, Mr. Foote’s screenplay should be studied as a classic.”

Next, the producers had to find the perfect set for Maycomb, Alabama. They wanted to film in Lee’s native Monroeville, which between the book’s setting in 1935 and the shoot in 1961 had lost much of its architectural charm. Wisely, the design team instead transplanted a street of shotgun shacks to the studio back lot, and recreated Maycomb in Southern California.

The set designers would win Academy Awards for their work, as would Peck and Foote. Nominations went to actress Mary Badham, cinematographer Russell Harlan, and composer Elmer Bernstein. The picture itself lost only to *Lawrence of Arabia*.

Other works by Harper Lee

In the 1960s, Lee published three essays in American magazines. Lee published her fourth essay in 1985, originally presented as a paper at the 1983 Alabama History and Heritage Festival.

- "Christmas to Me." *McCalls* 89 (December 1961): 63.
- "Love-In Other Words." *Vogue* 137 (April 15, 1961): 64-5.
- "When Children Discover America." *McCalls* 92 (August 1965): 76-9.
- "Romance and High Adventure." *Clearings in the Thicket: An Alabama Humanities Reader*. Ed. Jerry Elijah Brown. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985. 13-20.
- *Go Set a Watchman*, 2015

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Harper Lee chose as her novel's epigraph this quote from Charles Lamb: "Lawyers, I suppose, were children once"?
2. Why does the adult Scout begin her narrative with Jem's broken arm and a brief family history?
3. How does Boo Radley 's past history of violence foreshadow his method of protecting Jem and Scout? Does this aggression make him more, or less, of a sympathetic character?
4. How does the town of Maycomb function as a character with its own personality, rather than merely as a backdrop for the novel's events?
5. Atticus teaches Scout that compromise is not bending the law, but "an agreement reached by mutual consent." Does Scout apply or reject this definition of compromise? What are examples of her obedience to and defiance of this principle?
6. The novel takes place during the Great Depression. How do class divisions and family quarrels highlight racial tensions in Maycomb?
7. Atticus believes that to understand life from someone else's perspective, we must "walk in his or her shoes." From what other perspectives does Scout see her fellow townspeople?
8. How does Atticus quietly protest Jim Crow laws even before Tom Robinson's trial?
9. What does Jem learn when Atticus forces him to read to Mrs. Dubose as a punishment? Why does the lawyer regard this woman as the "bravest person" he ever knew?
10. Since their mother is dead, several women—Calpurnia, Miss Maudie, and Aunt Alexandra—function as mother figures to Scout and Jem. Discuss the ways these three women influence Scout's growing understanding of what it means to be a Southern "lady."
11. Why does Atticus Finch risk his reputation, his friendships, and his career to take Tom Robinson's case? Do you think he risks too much by putting his children in harm's way?
12. What elements of this novel did you find funny, memorable, or inspiring? Are there any characters whose beliefs or actions impressed or surprised you? Did any events lead you to revisit childhood memories or see them in a new light?
13. Adult readers may focus so much on the novel's politics that they may neglect the coming-of-age story. What does Scout learn, and how does she change in the course of her narrative?

Additional Resources

Interviews with Harper Lee

In the early 1960s, Lee gave many interviews before she chose to step out of the public eye. One of them was first published in Roy Newquist's book, *Counterpoint*, another in *Rogue* magazine.

Works about Harper Lee and *To Kill a Mockingbird*

- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird."* New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1996.
- Johnson, Claudia Durst. *"To Kill a Mockingbird": Threatening Boundaries.* New York: Twayne, 1994.
- Shields, Charles J. *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee.* New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2006.
- Murphy, Mary McDonagh. *Scout, Atticus and Boo: A Celebration of Fifty Years of To Kill a Mockingbird.* New York: Harper Perennial, 2010.
- Murphy, Mary McDonagh, dir. *Harper Lee: Hey, Boo.* PBS American Masters, 2012.

If you'd like to read other coming-of-age novels, you might enjoy:

- Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, 1868
- John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*, 1959

If you'd like to read works by authors admired by Harper Lee, you might enjoy:

- Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, 1814
- Truman Capote's *The Grass Harp*, 1951
- Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1885

If you'd like to read other books set in the South, you might enjoy:

- Olive Ann Burns's *Cold Sassy Tree*, 1984
- Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937
- Carson McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, 1940

Credits

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Foote, Horton. Interview with Dan Stone for The Big Read. Fall 2005.

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York: HarperCollins, 2002.

Spencer, Elizabeth. Interview with Dan Stone for The Big Read. Fall 2005.

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Arts Midwest promotes creativity, nurtures cultural leadership, and engages people in meaningful arts experiences, bringing vitality to Midwest communities and enriching people's lives. Based in Minneapolis, Arts Midwest connects the arts to audiences throughout the nine-state region of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. One of six non-profit regional arts organizations in the United States, Arts Midwest's history spans more than 30 years.



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