

**“The one thing
that doesn’t abide
by majority rule
is a person’s
conscience.”**

—ATTICUS FINCH
in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

READER'S GUIDE

**BIG
READ**



HARPER LEE'S

**To Kill a
Mockingbird**

**NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS**



The Big Read is an initiative designed to revitalize the role of literature in American society. Created by the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and Arts Midwest, this program aims to bring the transformative power of reading into the lives of Americans. The Big Read will work with multiple partners across the country to encourage citizens to read for pleasure and enlightenment.

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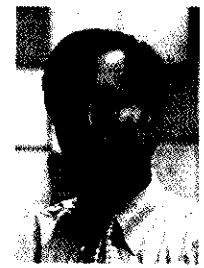
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**“There’s no substitute
for the love of language,
for the beauty of an
English sentence.
There’s no substitute
for struggling, if a
struggle is needed,
to make an English
sentence as beautiful
as it should be.”**

HARPER LEE

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.

Lee tells two deftly paired stories set in a small Southern town: one focused on lawyer Atticus Finch’s defense of an unjustly accused man, the other on his bright, bratty daughter’s gradual discovery of her own goodness. For many young people this novel becomes their first big read, the grown-up story that all later books will be measured against.

The Big Read is a new initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts designed to revitalize the role of literary reading in American popular culture. *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*, a 2004 NEA report, identified a critical decline in reading for pleasure among American adults. The Big Read aims to address this issue directly by providing citizens with the opportunity to read and discuss a single book within their communities.

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

Dana Gioia

Dana Gioia
Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts

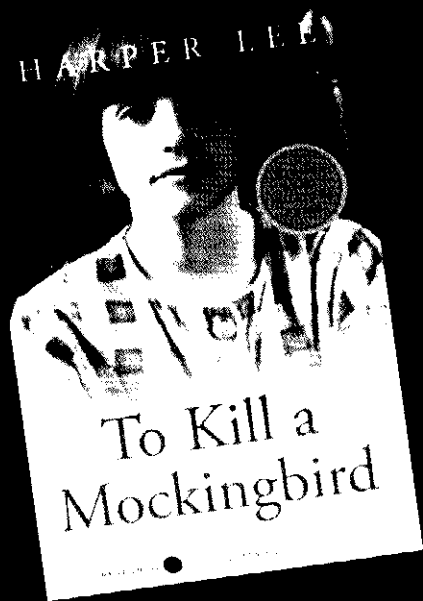
“Atticus said to Jem one day, ‘I’d rather you shot at tin cans in the back yard, but I know you’ll go after birds. Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit ‘em, but remember it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.’

That was the only time I ever heard Atticus say it was a sin to do something, and I asked Miss Maudie about it.

‘Your father’s right,’ she said. ‘Mockingbirds don’t do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don’t eat up people’s gardens, don’t nest in corncribs, they don’t do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That’s why it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.’”

—HARPER LEE

To Kill a Mockingbird



Introduction to the Novel

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 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’ 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 black skin, but also under the fishbelly pallor of her neighbor.

Harper Lee (b. 1926)

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.

Nelle—her first name is 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 Cole 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 19th-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, 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.”



Harper Lee, while visiting Monroeville, Alabama, 1961

To Kill a Mockingbird was published in 1960 to highly favorable reviews and quickly climbed the bestseller lists, where it remained for 88 weeks. In 1961, the novel won the Pulitzer Prize.

HARPER LEE AND

The 1930s

Over 25% of labor force unemployed during worst years of the Great Depression.

Franklin D. Roosevelt wins presidency with promise of his “New Deal” in 1932.

The Scottsboro Boys' trials last from 1931–1937. Nelle Harper Lee is 6 years old when they begin.

The 1940s

Jackie Robinson signs baseball contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers, 1947.

President Truman ends segregation in the military and discrimination in federal hiring.

Harper Lee moves to New York City to become a writer.

The 1950s

Brown vs. Board of Education rules school segregation unconstitutional.

Rosa Parks refuses to surrender her bus seat to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama.

Lee accompanies Truman Capote to Kansas as “researchist” for his book *In Cold Blood*.



African American citizens in the rear of the bus in compliance with South Carolina segregation law

The early 1960s

To Kill a Mockingbird published on July 11, 1960.

The film follows in 1962 and wins Oscars for best actor, screenwriter, and set design.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s “I Have a Dream” speech delivered, 1963. He wins the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

The mid-1960s

Congress passes the Civil Rights Act of 1964, enforcing the constitutional right to vote.

Malcolm X is assassinated in 1965.

Despite rumors of a second Southern novel, Lee never finishes another book.

Though fans of the book waited for a second novel, it never came. Lee later researched a book, similar to Capote's *In Cold Blood*, 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. She dropped the project in the 1990s.

In the meantime, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has sold more than 30 million copies in 18 languages. 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.



Harper Lee attends a Los Angeles Public Library Awards Dinner in her honor, 2005

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. Lee, 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, and 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 had not heard from him in years.

Historical Context: 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 then-innocuous terms as black, colored, or Negro, but it later became attached to this specific arsenal of repressive laws.

During the Jim Crow era, 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 not only void but illegal. Almost as bad as the injustice of Jim Crow was the inconsistency with which local law enforcement applied it. Backtalk would rate a laugh in one town, 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 Ku 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



Sheet music cover illustration with caricatures of ragged African American musicians and dancers, c. 1847



Top, passengers lined up in front of segregated buses at a Louisville, Tennessee, bus station, 1943; Above, a segregated drinking fountain.

“Why reasonable people go stark raving mad when anything involving a Negro comes up, is something I don’t pretend to understand.”

—ATTICUS FINCH
in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

nine young African American men accused of raping two white women on a train from Tennessee to Alabama. The primary testimony came from the older woman, a prostitute trying to avoid prosecution herself.

Juries composed exclusively of white men ignored clear evidence that the women had suffered no injury. 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.

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 farfetched one winter night in 1958, as Nelle Harper Lee huddled in her outer-borough New York City 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. Lippincott's formidable 'lay Hohoff promptly sent her outside to gather all the pages back—thus rescuing *To Kill a Mockingbird* from yet another slush pile.

The novel had its origins in Lee's hometown of Monroeville, Alabama—the small, Southern town that the fictional Maycomb is based. 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



Harper Lee in the Monroeville, Alabama courthouse, 1961

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*. This arguably marked an

improvement over her first title, *Go Set a Watchman*, but once she fastened on *To Kill a Mockingbird* she did not look back.

Lippincott finally published the book on July 11, 1960, by which time an unprecedented four national mail-order book clubs had already selected the novel for its 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-eight 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.

"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."

—HARPER LEE
in a 1964 interview

Lee with her father, 1961



To Adapt a Mockingbird



Mary Badham and Gregory Peck review the script on the set of the film *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1962



Gregory Peck and Harper Lee on the set, 1962

In 1962, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was adapted for the screen. It is considered one of the truest literary adaptations in film history.

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 it, 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 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

"To Kill a Mockingbird is about bigotry...For me the most beautiful scene is the moment when the Judge drops by to ask Atticus to take the case in defense of Tom Robinson. Casually put and casually answered, the question needed no answer. The judge knew it would not be possible for Atticus to say no. As for Jem and Scout, they learn a sense of honor from Atticus."

—GREGORY PECK

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*.

Additional Resources

Other works by Harper Lee

In the 1960s, Lee published three essays in American magazines, which can be read at Jane Kansas' Web site: www.mockingbird.chebucto.org/otherwork.html. 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 (15 April 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.



Mary Badham and Gregory Peck

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. Both can be found at www.mockingbird.chebucto.org/interviews.html.

Books about Harper Lee and *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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Arts Midwest connects people throughout the Midwest and the world to meaningful arts opportunities, sharing creativity, knowledge, and understanding across boundaries. 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 25 years.

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Acknowledgments

Cover portrait: John Sherffius
Writers: Charles J. Shields, author of *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee*; David Kipen and Erika Koss for the National Endowment for the Arts, with preface by Dana Gioia.
Special thanks to Susannah Bielak, Susan Chandler, Maryrose Flanigan, Liz Edgar Hernandez, and Jon Peede.
Graphic Design: Fletcher Design/Washington, DC.

Image Credits

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This publication is published by:
National Endowment for the Arts • 1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W. • Washington, D.C. 20506-0001
(202) 682-5400 • www.nea.gov