

(Nelle) Harper Lee

St. James Guide to Young Adult Writers, 1999

Born: April 28, 1926 in Monroeville, Alabama, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Novelist

Publications

- *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Philadelphia, Lippincott, 1960 ; London, Heinemann, 1960 .

Nationality: American. **Born:** Monroeville, Alabama, 28 April 1926. **Education:** Huntington College, Indiana, 1944-45; University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, 1945-49; Oxford University, Wellington Square. **Career:** Airline reservation clerk with Eastern Air Lines and British Overseas Airways, New York, during the 1950s; left to devote full time to writing. Member, National Council on Arts, 1966-72. **Awards:** Pulitzer Prize, 1961, Alabama Library Association award, 1961, Brotherhood award of National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1961, *Bestsellers'* paperback of the year award, 1962, all for *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Harper Lee's only novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, won the 1961 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and established her place in young adult literature. Universal themes of justice, compassion, racism, and family love enrich this drama set in Maycomb, Alabama (inspired by Lee's Monroeville, Alabama, home) in the 1930s. Transcending place and time, this modern American classic celebrates the courage of people who face adversity with dignity.

Narrator Jean Louise (Scout) Finch recalls three years of events leading to her brother Jem's accident: one arm was broken so badly that it healed shorter than the other. Scout obviously has emotional scars from this event twenty-five years ago. She begins the story when she was six, the summer their friend Dill encouraged them to make the reclusive Boo Radley emerge from his house. Neighborhood legend said this six-foot-six-inch terror dined on raw squirrels and stray cats, had rotten teeth, and drooled most of the time. After the novel's climactic scene on a frightening Halloween night, the children know more about the mysterious Boo who does indeed come out, yet their questions about the greater mystery of racism remain unanswered. The events following that summer of innocent play initiate the children into the darker experiences of social prejudice, cruelty, and fears. Scout and Jem witness the tragic consequences of persecuting people who are different, for Boo was very nice once they met him.

Not only are recluses such as Boo unfortunately branded as menacing threats to society, but blacks also suffer from social injustice. Some of the novel's most dramatic scenes occur in the courtroom as their father, Atticus Finch, a highly respected lawyer and citizen, defies townspeople's prejudice and heroically defends a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman. Before the trial, Atticus explains to Scout and Jem his belief in personal integrity: how people conduct themselves in trying times shows their true character. Atticus defends his unpopular decision to defend a black man accused of a heinous crime by telling his daughter that the only thing that does not abide by majority rule is a person's conscience.

In a Southern town dominated by whites, the ultimate crime is said to have been committed when Tom Robinson, a poor black laborer, is accused of raping Mayella Ewell, a poor white woman. Atticus proves that Tom is clearly innocent, and Bob Ewell, Mayella's father, is obviously guilty of beating her for making sexual advances toward Tom. However, as Atticus states, social injustice will prevail in a system ruled by white men convinced from childhood that "all Negroes lie, that all Negroes are basically immoral beings, that all Negro men

are not to be trusted around our women...." His impassioned plea to let the court treat all races equally falls on the all-male, all-white jury's unsympathetic ears. Because "a court is only as sound as its jury, and a jury is only as sound as the men who make it up," Tom is murdered--the scapegoat of society's prejudice and violence.

By the same token, racism also destroys the lives of whites. Mayella, victimized by her father, helps crucify an innocent man to save herself. Although Bob Ewell may be a victim of the poverty, ignorance, and bigotry that create racism, he proves to be a truly malevolent character who warrants no sympathy for his fate. In addition to the destructive impact on the Ewells, Scout and Jem also suffer from Maycomb's racism by enduring the insults of both children and adults. After Jem confesses to vandalizing Mrs. Dubose's camellias (retaliating for her saying that Atticus was "no better than the niggers and trash he works for!"), Atticus explains that the sick old woman should not be held responsible for what she says; she is one more pitiable victim of society's bigotry. Jem is punished by having to read aloud two hours to the woman everyday after school and on Saturdays for a month; as a result, he gains greater insight into the woman he once despised. The lessons learned undoubtedly will strengthen his character as an adult.

All these experiences over the three-year period validate the truth of Atticus's remark that "it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." The analogy between the senseless slaughter of innocent songbirds and Tom's tragic death becomes clear to Scout. She suddenly understands that not protecting Boo Radley from being implicated in Bob Ewell's death would "be sort of like shootin' a mockingbird." Although Atticus fails to save Tom, he teaches his children about racial justice and human dignity. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* has remained popular with young adults because it dramatizes so well the best and worst in human nature.

Further Readings

Media Adaptations

- *To Kill a Mockingbird* (movie), Horton Foote, 1962. The book was adapted into a play by Christopher Sergel and produced in England in 1987.

Biography

- Entry in *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 6: American Novelists since World War II, Second Series*, Detroit, Gale, 1980 .

Critical Studies

- Entry in *Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume 12*, Detroit, Gale, 1980 .

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