

Harper Lee

1926-

Also known as: Harper Lee, Nelle Harper Lee, Harper Nell Lee, Nell Harper Lee

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Nationality: American

Birth Place: Monroeville, Alabama

Genre(s): Social novels

Awards

Career

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Source Citation

Writings by the Author

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:

* *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, Thomson Gale, 2007.

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