

# HARPER LEE

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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Nelle Harper Lee was born on April 28, 1926, in Monroeville, Alabama. Her father, Amasa Coleman Lee, was a lawyer, newspaper editor, and state senator during her formative years. Harper Lee's childhood in a small Southern town decades before the triumph of the Civil Rights Movement provided all the material she needed for her celebrated, and only, novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Though narrated by a child, *Mockingbird* was not a story Lee could have written without experience in the larger adult world. She studied at Huntingdon College, the University of Alabama (where she never finished a law degree), and at Oxford University in England. In 1950, she moved to New York City, where she worked as an airline reservation clerk. Convinced she had a story to tell about her own magical childhood, she moved to a cold-water apartment and, in earnest, took up the life of a struggling writer.

In 1957, her attempt to publish the novel failed. On the advice of an editor, she decided to turn what was a manuscript of short stories into a longer, more coherent narrative about the Depression-era South. She gained valuable inspiration when, in 1959, she traveled to Kansas with childhood friend Truman Capote (the inspiration for Dill in *Mockingbird*). There she helped Capote research *In Cold Blood*, a work of creative non-fiction published to wide acclaim in 1966.

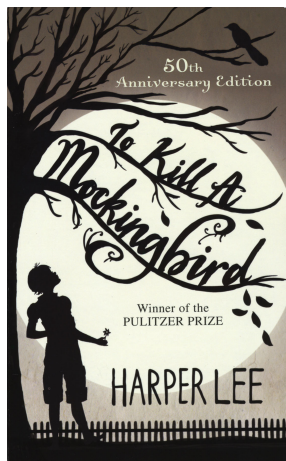
*To Kill a Mockingbird*, finally published in 1960, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1961. The following year the book was adapted as a movie with an Academy Award-winning screenplay by Horton Foote. Virtually overnight Lee became a literary sensation. A resolution was passed in her honor by the Alabama Legislature in 1961, and in 1966 she was named to the National Council of the Arts by President Lyndon Johnson.

In the last forty years, Lee has received numerous honors, including several honorary university degrees. Most recently she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in November 2007.

Expectations notwithstanding, Lee has never published another book. Her entire published oeuvre consists of a brilliant novel and miscellaneous articles, mostly from the 1960s.



## TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD READER'S GUIDE - INTRODUCTION



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.



## **TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD READER'S GUIDE - HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

### **HARPER LEE AND CIVIL RIGHTS**

**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," 1932. The Scottsboro Boys trials last from 1931 to 1937. Nelle Harper Lee is four 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, 1955. Lee accompanies Truman Capote to Kansas as "researchist" for his book *In Cold Blood*.

**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., delivers I Have a Dream speech on August 28, 1963. King wins the Nobel Prize in 1964.

**The mid-1960s** Congress passes the Civil Rights Act of 1964, enforcing the constitutional right to vote. Malcolm X is assassinated, 1965.

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



### **SOCIO-POLITICAL 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 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 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.

*"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*