

All information reprinted from *Novelist Book Discussion Guides/EBSCO Publishing © 2001*

About the Author

Harper Lee is an elusive figure. Since the publication of her first and only (known) novel, she has carefully guarded her privacy and does not give interviews. She was born Nelle Harper Lee on April 28, 1926 in Monroeville, Alabama. Her parents were Amasa Coleman Lee and Frances Finch Lee, and she is the youngest of four children, including two sisters and a brother. She went to Huntingdon College and the University of Alabama, where she studied law. Though her father and older sister, Alice, were lawyers, Lee herself left law school before finishing her degree. In the 1950s she worked as an airline clerk in New York City, and in 1957 she submitted the manuscript of a novel to Lippincott. For the next several years she revised this manuscript, and in 1960 "To Kill a Mockingbird" was published. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1961 and was named by President Lyndon Johnson to the National Council of Arts in 1966.

In 1959, she went with her childhood friend Truman Capote (on whom the character Dill Harris is said to be based) to Kansas as a research assistant for the book that would become *In Cold Blood* (1966). Capote dedicated the book partially to her, and invited Lee to what has become one of the most famous parties of the twentieth century – his glamorous Black and White ball in honor of Katherine Graham.

In 1962, the movie "To Kill a Mockingbird" was released. The screenplay was written by Horton Foote, and Gregory Peck went on to win a Best Actor Oscar for his portrayal of Atticus Finch. In a rare interview with Roy Newquist (published in *Counterpoint*, Rand McNally, 1964), Lee said "I have nothing but gratitude for the people who made the film.... I'm no judge, and the only film I've ever seen made was "Mockingbird," but there seemed to be an aura of good feeling on the set." She said that at first, though she liked Gregory Peck when she met him, she was unsure that he was right for the part. However, when she saw him in costume, she said "I knew everything was going to be all right because he was Atticus."

Since it first appeared in 1960, "To Kill a Mockingbird" has never been out of print and is considered a classic all over the world. In recent years, Lee has split her time between New York and Monroeville, where she lives with her sister. Aside from her famous novel, Harper Lee has written only four essays for publication. Many speculate that she has written books under another name or that she has been working on her memoirs or other novels, but there is no confirmation of these rumors. However, it is hard to believe that Harper Lee has given up writing. In her interview with Newquist, she said "You know, many writers really don't like to write.... I like to write. Sometimes I'm afraid that I like it too much because when I get into work I don't want to leave it. As a result I'll go for days and days without leaving the house or wherever I happen to be. I'll go out long enough to get papers and pick up some food and that's it. It's strange, but instead of hating writing I love it too much."

There is more information on this Web site about Harper Lee.

<http://www.chebucto.ns.ca/Culture/HarperLee/bio.html>

Book Summary

Scout (Jean Louise) Finch and her older brother Jem Finch live in the town of Maycomb, Alabama during the 1930s. Their mother has died long before the story begins, and the children are being raised by their lawyer father, Atticus, with the help of Calpurnia, the African American cook who has worked for the Finches for a long time. Jem and Scout spend their summers playing with their friend Dill Harris, who comes to stay with his aunt, Miss Rachel Haverford, every summer. One summer Dill convinces the Finch children that they should try to get the town boogeyman, Arthur "Boo" Radley, to come out of his house. Nobody has seen him for twenty years or more, and all the children are petrified of him. Jem manages to run up to the Radley house and touch it, but their games don't get much farther than that. The following fall, Scout starts first grade and the children begin finding small objects in a knothole of a tree on the corner of the Radley property. They are curious about these things, and are disappointed one day when they find that Mr. Nathan Radley, Boo's brother, has filled the hole with cement.

Their interest in Boo Radley wanes somewhat as their relations with the other children in town begin to be strained by a court case their father is working on. Atticus is defending Tom Robinson, a black man accused of raping a white woman, Mayella Ewell. Scout gets into fights with other children, and Jem tears up the camellia bushes at the house of old Mrs. Dubose, who has insulted their father. Atticus makes him apologize, and Mrs. Dubose requests that Jem come to read to her every afternoon for a month.

The following summer Dill doesn't come to visit his aunt and Atticus has to go away to sit in the legislature. During this time, Calpurnia takes the Finch children to her church and they get a glimpse of Negro life. Soon after, their Aunt Alexandra comes to live with them and tries to make the children behave properly. Dill Harris shows up soon afterwards, having run away from home, and they are all happy that he is allowed to stay for the rest of the summer.

As the trial approaches, Atticus goes out one night. The children sneak out too, and see him sitting in front of the jailhouse reading a book. A band of white men arrive, drunk and asking Atticus to let them have Tom. The children approach and break up the tension between the men and Atticus, and the gang leaves. When the trial finally begins, the children go down to the courthouse even though Atticus has told them not to. The only available seats are in the colored balcony, and from there they watch the whole trial. Atticus makes a good defense, and it becomes obvious that Mayella Ewell forced her affections on Tom. She was seen kissing Tom by her violent father, Bob Ewell, who beat her and then encouraged her to accuse Tom of rape. Tom says that he had been around the Ewell house trying to help Mayella because he felt sorry for her, and because he has one crippled hand, it is obvious that he could not have caused the injuries that she suffered. The Ewells are furious that they have been made fools of and the jury sits out a long time, but in the end a guilty verdict is returned. Tom is sent away to a prison camp to await an appeal, and while there he tries to escape and is shot dead. The black community shows their appreciation to Atticus by leaving all sorts of food stuffs on his back porch. Bob Ewell spits in Atticus' face, harasses Tom Robinson's widow, and is suspected of having tried to break into the judge's house.

Book Summary *Continued*

Atticus dismisses Bob Ewell's actions, saying that he's too cowardly to do anything truly dangerous. But in the fall, Jem and Scout go to a Halloween pageant, and as they are walking home at night, they are attacked in the dark. There is a scuffle, and eventually they are carried home. Jem has been knocked out and has a broken arm; Scout is confused. The doctor examines Jem, and Scout notices a stranger in the room, a man she decides must have been a country person who came to see the pageant. Sheriff Heck Tate arrives a little later with the news that Bob Ewell is lying dead down the street, stabbed between the ribs. He was the person who attacked the children, and the stranger is the person who has saved them. Scout looks at the stranger again and utters her now famous line, "Hey, Boo." Sheriff Tate tells Atticus that Bob Ewell must have fallen on his knife and that is how he will report the case. Scout walks the pale and silent Boo Radley back home, and they never see him again.

Questions

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

Why is this book considered a classic children's or young adult book when it deals with such serious subjects?

Some adult readers might feel that "To Kill a Mockingbird" treats subjects that are much too serious for children or teenagers. Yet it is a story about children, and it is told from a child's point of view, though when the story opens, it's clear that Scout is telling it some time after all the events have occurred. She has the understanding and perspective of an adult, yet she narrates the story as it appeared to her at the time. The story is essentially a tale of the Finch children's loss of innocence, and Scout is careful to show us when she didn't understand things and when she did. For instance, it is not until after she tells Mr. Tate how she and Jem were attacked that she realizes that the stranger who saved them is Boo Radley, and she never says until the last chapter that it was he who left presents for them in the tree.

Though Scout and Jem are very smart children, there are many things that they don't understand about the world, and "To Kill a Mockingbird" is a chronicle of their coming of age. It is popular with older children and young adults because it shows that children know and understand much more than adults think children should know and understand. Atticus Finch is a father who explains things to his children; when they ask him a difficult question, he answers it in the most honest and factual way that he can. Though they may not be pleased with the answer, they know they have gotten the truth from him. As for Atticus, he realizes that though he can try to keep his children safe, he cannot protect them from slander, prejudice, and injustice, nor can he keep them ignorant of the violence that these things provoke. However, by being honest with them and displaying a steadfast integrity, he teaches them how to behave justly. The book itself does the same thing for us as readers (while also entertaining and engaging us), and that is why, even though the story deals with racism and violence, it appeals to children and adults alike.

What is the meaning and importance of the title?

When Jem and Scout receive air rifles for Christmas, they are anxious to try them out, but Atticus refuses to teach them to shoot. Their Uncle Jack teaches them, and when the children go out to practice Atticus reminds them that "it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." Scout asks Miss Maudie why it's a sin, and Miss Maudie explains: "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." In this

story, the mockingbird is a symbol of innocence, and although the religious and legal rules that define the world of Maycomb uphold that it is wrong to persecute the innocent, prejudice and fear cause even the most upright citizens to harm people who don't deserve to be harmed. Tom Robinson's unselfish desire to help poor Mayella Ewell ultimately leads to the great injustice of his arrest, prosecution, and subsequent death. Bob Ewell, in effect, killed him, as did the townspeople and the jury that could not return a verdict of not guilty without overturning the basic unjust tenet of their society – that a white man's word is always better than a black man's. It doesn't matter how sorry and wrong the white man is or how guiltless and kind-hearted the black man is.

What does Boo Radley represent?

Boo Radley can be considered to represent a number of things. He is locked away in the house for something he did long ago, and he has become a sort of ghost. Many people in the town fear him – he's said to walk about at night staring in people's windows. The children are afraid to walk by the Radley place, or even to go into the end of the schoolyard that shares a border with it. They also ascribe some outlandish traits to him:

“Jem gave a reasonable description of Boo: Boo was about six-and-a-half feet tall, judging from his tracks; he dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch, that's why his hands were blood-stained – if you ate an animal raw, you could never wash the blood off. There was a long jagged scar that ran across his face; what teeth he had were yellow and rotten; his eyes popped, and he drooled most of the time.”

In the eyes of the children, Boo is a boogeyman, an animalistic wild man. Although Boo's “crimes” were minor – some youthful indiscretions of drinking and disorderly conduct with “the wrong crowd” – his father locked him in the house. Children know that punishment is supposed to fit the crime, and Boo's punishment of a lifetime of incarceration within the house makes the children believe that he must be a crazed, uncontrollable person who has done truly horrible things. They've never seen him, so they invent wild tales about him and fear him. He represents for them everything that is unknown, everything that hides in the dark, everything they can't understand. The children's fear of him is not unlike the townspeople's fear of black people, who are tolerated as long as they stay in their place. And yet the better-off white citizens of Maycomb depend on the black people to take care of their children, cook their meals, clean their houses, and work their land. The people the whites fear are actually the ones who make their lives easier for them, and this turns out to be as true of Boo Radley as it is of the African American population of Maycomb.

At the end of the book, after Boo Radley saves the children from Bob Ewell and Sheriff Tate decides to say that Ewell fell on his knife, Atticus asks Scout if she understands why Tate has made this decision. She says, “Well, it'd be sort of like shootin' a mockingbird, wouldn't it.” Boo is a hermit and uncomfortable out in the world, and a long court case – even one in which he would be found innocent – would devastate him. Though Boo Radley has long been thought of as the bogeyman in the neighborhood, he hasn't done anything to his neighbors but watch out for the Finch children. Like Tom Robinson, he has tried to be helpful. Even though he has killed a man, Boo (unlike Tom Robinson, whose only “crime” has been to presume to feel sorry for a white woman) can return to the safety of his home because he is from a respectable white family.

What does the story of Mrs. Dubose have to do with the case of Tom Robinson?

The lesson that the children learn from having to spend time with Mrs. Dubose is another lesson in tolerance and understanding. Mrs. Dubose is unappealing to the children in every way; she is old, feeble, and crotchety. Worst of all, she insults Atticus within their hearing, which so infuriates Jem that he attacks her camellia bushes. As they endure the punishment of having to read to her, they are frightened by her strange “fits.” After she dies, they learn that she was a morphine addict, trying to kick her habit before she died. Atticus says to Jem: “I wanted you to see something about her – I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It’s when you know you’re licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do.”

This statement just as easily applies to Atticus’s controversial defense of Tom Robinson. He knows that many of the white citizens oppose his actions, but he also knows that Tom is innocent of the crime of which he has been accused. He is seasoned enough to know that it will be nearly impossible for him to win Tom’s case, but he must try because it’s the right thing to do. In the chapter just before the one concerning Mrs. Dubose, Atticus kills the rabid dog with one perfect shot, and Scout revises her idea that he is “feeble.” Yet Atticus does not consider that action brave, and he doesn’t want his children to think that having power over something weaker than themselves is courage.

Why does Aunt Alexandra come to stay with them?

Simply put, Aunt Alexandra is “respectable.” She behaves as a lady of her family background and upbringing is supposed to behave, and her opinions are mainstream. She belongs to the right clubs and societies, she knows all the gossip, and she has a moral or a piece of advice for every situation. She disapproves of her brother’s defending Tom Robinson, and she disapproves of Atticus’s unruly children, especially Scout with her tomboyish behavior and her scruffy overalls. Nevertheless, Aunt Alexandra comes to stay with the Finches. “We felt it was time you children needed – well, it’s like this, Scout,” Atticus said. “Your aunt’s doing me a favor as well as you all. I can’t stay here all day with you, and the summer’s going to be a hot one.”

Scout professes that she did not know what he meant. Atticus knows that with Tom Robinson’s court case coming up, tension in Maycomb will be running high and that his children will have a difficult time and possibly need protecting. He also realizes that Scout and Jem are getting to an age when they need to learn some of the conventions of their society, and Aunt Alexandra is an expert on conventions. Atticus is attempting to raise his children to hold to a higher standard of integrity than society requires, but he also knows that they need to be able to understand Maycomb society’s expectations. If they understand convention, they can both get along with other citizens and be able to judge when they must act against convention.

What is the importance of books and reading in the Finch household?

Books and reading are extremely important to the Finches. Scout often finds Atticus reading in the evenings when she wants to sit in his lap, and it is during these evening sittings that she herself has learned to read. She is distraught when she gets to the first grade and her teacher, Miss Caroline, tells her that Atticus has taught her to read the wrong way and that she must not read any more until Miss Caroline teaches her correctly. Scout is so angry that she begs not to be sent to school anymore, even though she was looking forward to it before her run-in with Miss Caroline. She is only mollified when Atticus promises that they can keep reading together.

Scout and Jem and Dill base many of their games on books they have read, and when Jem and Scout go to Mrs. Dubose's, they read to her. Literature provides them with a way to play, and it provides comfort, excitement, and a form of escape. When they go to church with Calpurnia, Scout is shocked to learn that there are no hymnals and prayer books, not only because there is little money for such things but because most of the congregation cannot read. During this exchange Jem says something to Calpurnia that points to the importance of reading to the Finch children:

“...Cal,” Jem protested, “you don’t look even near as old as Atticus.”

”Colored folks don’t show their ages so fast,” she said.

”Maybe because they can’t read. . . .”

Jem and Scout believe that reading is a way to attain useful information and ultimately to become wise, and Atticus is the admired practitioner of their belief. However, even at his young age, Jem realizes that knowledge and wisdom are a kind of burden that can age a person. His comment doesn’t allow for the sorts of burdensome knowledge and wisdom that come sheerly with living, but Jem does understand that reading can give a person the kind of knowledge that is not easy to bear. It is significant that at the very end of the book, as Scout is going to sleep, she begs Atticus to read from Jem’s book “The Gray Ghost.” It is a story about a boy on a ship who was thought to be causing all kinds of mischief:

“An’ they chased him ‘n’ never could catch him ‘cause they didn’t know what he looked like, an’ Atticus, when they finally saw him, why he hadn’t done any of those things . . . Atticus, he was real nice. . . .”

His hands were under my chin, pulling up the cover, tucking it around me.

”Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them.”

The lesson of “The Gray Ghost” is the same lesson the children have learned from the plights of Tom Robinson, Mrs. Dubose, and Boo Radley. Books both reflect and illuminate all the things that life has to teach them.

What does Miss Maudie mean when she says “His food doesn’t stick going down, does it?”

Miss Maudie says this at a meeting of the Missionary Society held by Aunt Alexandra at the Finch house. Some ladies have been discussing how sulky and dissatisfied “the help” has been since Tom Robinson’s trial. Mrs. Meriweather says “. . . I tell you there are some good but misguided people in this town. Good, but misguided. Folks in this town who think they’re doing the right, I mean. Now far be it from me to say who, but some of ‘em in this town thought they were doing the right thing a while back, but all they did was stir ‘em up. That’s all they did. . . .” She is referring of course to Atticus, and Miss Maudie angrily says “His food doesn’t stick going down, does it?” Mrs. Meriweather claims not to know what she means, but she blushes and looks away. Scout can see that Aunt Alexandra is giving Miss Maudie a look of gratitude but she doesn’t understand why. Miss Maudie is defending Atticus and accusing Mrs. Meriweather, and the other people who think the way she does, of hypocrisy. They are perfectly happy to come to Atticus’s house and eat the food his salary provides (the same salary he receives for defending, among others, Tom Robinson), and yet they feel free to insult him because his actions go against their way of life. Doubtless, many of them have called on Atticus for help and will again, and yet they feel so sure about their prejudiced opinions and their sense of right that they see no problem with chastising him, even in his own home.

The insult is especially ironic when Mrs. Meriweather goes on to say that people in the North are hypocrites: “. . . born hypocrites. At least we don’t have that sin on our shoulders down here. People up there set ‘em free, but you don’t see ‘em settin’ at the table with ‘em. At least we don’t have the deceit to say to ‘em yes you’re as good as we are but stay away from us. Down here we just say you live your way and we’ll live ours.” She accuses others of hypocrisy, but she does not recognize it in herself.

Does this book pertain to the world we live in today?

“To Kill a Mockingbird” takes place in the 1930s, and the book was published in 1960. Obviously much has changed in the world in forty years (and seventy years), and our laws are now meant to guarantee equal rights for all American citizens. Our country is more diverse than ever, and minorities and women are now able to enjoy hard-won freedoms that were unavailable to them for so long. Nevertheless, racism and prejudice still exist in many forms throughout the country and the world. “To Kill a Mockingbird” is a story about two children who learn to be more tolerant and empathetic. Through their relationships with Atticus, Calpurnia, Boo Radley, Dill Harris, Mrs. Dubose, Miss Maudie, Aunt Alexandra, the Cunninghams, and the many other citizens of Maycomb, they learn that all people should be treated with humanity and dignity no matter what color they are or what they believe in. In many ways the lesson seems both to uphold and to contradict their small-town way of life, which teaches them to be friendly with everybody (except, according to some, the wrong sort of people).

Although the story is set during the Great Depression, Harper Lee’s book does not seem dated or irrelevant because treating other people with honesty and fairness is a timeless concept. Her examination of the simultaneous importance and fallibility of the jury system is still of vital interest today. As our schools strive to encourage children to learn about other cultures and to

accept people of all heritages, “To Kill a Mockingbird” remains a beloved and valuable resource. Children and adults alike respond not only to the humanitarian lessons of the book, of course, but also to the unforgettable characters and the compelling story.

In 1995 Harper Collins published a special 35th anniversary edition of “To Kill a Mockingbird.” Harper Lee was asked to write a new introduction for it. In a letter to her agent, she explained why she would not:

“Please spare “Mockingbird” an Introduction. As a reader I loathe introductions. To novels, I associate Introductions with long-gone authors and works that are being brought back into print after decades of internment. Although “Mockingbird” will be 33 this year, it has never been out of print and I am still alive, although very quiet. Introductions inhibit pleasure, they kill the joy of anticipation, they frustrate curiosity. The only good thing about Introductions is that in some cases they delay the dose to come. “Mockingbird” still says what it has to say; it has managed to survive without preamble.” (Harper Lee, 12 February 1993, cited at <http://www.chebucto.ns.ca/Culture/HarperLee/intro.html>)

Further Reading

“I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” by Maya Angelou (1969)

The first volume of Angelou’s autobiography recalls the hardships of growing up in the South, as well as the strength of the African American community as it struggled to raise its children.

“Ellen Foster” by Kaye Gibbons (1987)

The title character of Gibbons’ first novel is an eleven-year-old orphan who tells the story of her troubled home and her friendship with Starletta, a black child down the road.

“The God of Small Things” by Arundhati Roy (1997)

Though narrated from a child’s point of view, this story of twins Rahel and Estha is a complex, lusciously told tale about caste, race, love, and murder in India.

“Wolf Whistle” by Lewis Nordan (1993)

This novel is based on the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black boy from Chicago who was killed in Money, Mississippi by two white men after he reportedly insulted a white woman by whistling at her.

“The Voice at the Back Door” by Elizabeth Spencer (1956)

Set around the time of the first Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, this remarkable novel chronicles race relations and a local election in a small Mississippi town. Spencer deftly transcribes what is said and not said, while vividly describing the land and the people.

This Book Discussion Guide was developed by Julia Ridley Smith, a writer and editor who holds a BA in English from UNC-Chapel Hill and an MFA in Creative Writing from Sarah Lawrence College. She lives in eastern North Carolina. November, 2001