



# To Kill a Mockingbird

By Harper Lee

First published in 1960

## Genre and Subject

*Coming of Age*

*Race relations*

*Racism*

## Synopsis

'Shoot all the Bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a Mockingbird.' A lawyer's advice to his children as he defends the real mockingbird of Harper Lee's classic novel - a black man charged with the rape of a white girl. Through the young eyes of Scout and Jem Finch, Harper Lee explores with exuberant humour the irrationality of adult attitudes to race and class in the Deep South of the thirties. The conscience of a town steeped in prejudice, violence and hypocrisy is pricked by the stamina of one man's struggle for justice. But the weight of history will only tolerate so much.

## Author Biography

"Nelle" Harper Lee was born on April 28, 1926, the youngest of four children of Amasa Coleman Lee and Frances Cunningham Finch Lee. She grew up in Monroeville, a small town in southwest Alabama. Her father was a lawyer who also served in the state legislature from 1926–1938. As a child, Lee was a tomboy and a precocious reader. After she attended public school in Monroeville she attended Huntingdon College, a private school for women in Montgomery for a year and then transferred to the University of Alabama. After graduation, Lee studied at Oxford University. She returned to the University of Alabama to study law but withdrew six months before graduation.

She moved to New York in 1949 and worked as a reservations clerk for Eastern Air Lines and British Overseas Airways. While in New York, she wrote several essays and short stories, but none were published. Her agent encouraged her to develop one short story into a novel. In order to complete it, Lee quit working and was supported by friends who believed in her work. In 1957, she submitted the manuscript to J. B. Lippincott Company. Although editors found the work too episodic, they saw promise in the book and encouraged Lee to rewrite it. In 1960, with the help of Lippincott editor Tay Hohoff, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* was honored with many awards including the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1961 and was made into a film in 1962 starring Gregory Peck. The film was nominated for eight Academy Awards, including Best Picture.

## Discussion Starters

- How do Jem and Scout's views of Boo Radley change during the book? Why does Jem cry when the hole in the tree is filled with cement?
- Atticus tells the children several times that they must walk in someone else's shoes before judging that person. Describe times when Atticus, Scout or Jem walked in someone else's shoes. Does this change how they viewed the situations? What role does this advice play in sympathy and compassion?
- Do you think the missionary society was walking in the Mrunas' shoes? What do these ladies show you about life in the town? Can you walk in their shoes and understand where they are coming from?
- What do you think of Aunt Alexandra? Did your opinion of her change during the book? Can you understand why she was concerned with Atticus' parenting?
- How do you think Atticus managed his role as a single parent?
- Discuss race issues in this book. Why does Calpurnia speak differently around other black people? Why does Mr. Raymond pretend he is drunk to help people cope with his mixed marriage?
- How do the trial and everything surrounding it change the town? How did it change Jem and Scout? Did it change you?
- At one point, Jem describes four kinds of "folks" in Maycomb County: "Our kind of folks don't like the Cunninghams, the Cunninghams don't like the Ewells, and the Ewells hate and despise the colored folks." What does To Kill a Mockingbird teach us about how people cope with issues of race and class? Do you classify people in your world as different "folks"? Do you see these sort of distinctions today?
- Who is your favorite character and why?
- At the end of the book, Scout says that telling people Boo Radley committed the murder would have been "sort of like shootin' a mockingbird." What does that mean?
- In the last few lines of To Kill a Mockingbird, Scout says, "He was real nice..." and Atticus replies, "Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them." Do you agree that most people in the novel are nice after they're "seen?" How is Atticus able to see the good side of people despite all he has experienced? Can you?

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- *Snow Falling on Cedars* by David Guterson
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