



To kill a mockingbird

By Harper Lee

First published in 1960

Genre & subject

Classical fiction

African Americans

Trials (Rape)

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, in Monroeville, Alabama. While enrolled at Monroe County High School, Lee developed an interest in English literature. After graduating from high school in 1944 she attended the then all-female Huntingdon College in Montgomery for a year, then transferred to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, where she studied law for several years and wrote for the university newspaper, but did not complete a degree.

She was an American novelist widely known for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, published in 1960. Immediately successful, it won the 1961 Pulitzer Prize and has become a classic of modern American literature. Though Lee had only published this single book, in 2007 she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her contribution to literature. Additionally, Lee received numerous honorary degrees, though she declined to speak on those occasions. She was also known for assisting her close friend Truman Capote in his research for the book *In Cold Blood* (1966). Capote was the basis for the character Dill in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The plot and characters of *To Kill a Mockingbird* are loosely based on Lee's observations of her family and neighbours, as well as an event that occurred near her hometown in 1936, when she was 10 years old.

Another novel, *Go Set a Watchman*, was written in the mid-1950s and published in July 2015 as a "sequel", though it was later confirmed to be *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s first draft.

Lee died in her sleep on February 19, 2016, aged 89.

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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