



To Kill a Mockingbird

By Harper Lee
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Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

"Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."

Introduction *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the story of the early childhood of Jean Louise "Scout" Finch, chronicling the humorous trials and tribulations of growing up in Maycomb, Alabama, from 1933 to 1935. Maycomb's small-town Southern atmosphere -- in which nobody locks their doors at night and the local telephone operator can identify callers solely by their voices -- contributes to the security of Scout's world, just as pervasive forces of racism threaten to unsettle it. Scout's devotion to her older brother, Jem, and her hero-worship of her father, the defense attorney Atticus Finch, infuse this story with an uncommon intimacy and affection. An acknowledged tomboy, Scout -- along with her ubiquitous playmates Jem and Dill -- spends her days lamenting that she must attend school and her afternoons engaged in various schemes to provoke a mysterious neighbor, Boo Radley, to emerge from

his house. As Scout, Jem, and Dill become increasingly obsessed with luring Boo outside, they put themselves at greater risk, at one point incurring Boo's brother's gunfire. Scout and Jem's misadventures suggest an idyllic childhood, one tempered only by the rules of their beloved servant, Calpurnia; the standards imposed on them by their prudish Aunt Alexandra; and the particularities of their neighbors, Miss Maudie Atkinson and Mrs. Dubose. Over the course of the novel, both children learn to appreciate the values held by their father, whose boyhood nickname, "Ol' One-Shot," is put to the test in an episode with a mad dog. When Atticus is assigned a case defending a local black man, Tom Robinson, who has been unjustly accused of rape by Mayella Ewell, a poor white woman from a family of ill-repute, Scout explores her beliefs, her father's moral obligations, and the dynamics of her community. As the untroubled realm of her childhood collides with the adult world of the courthouse, Scout discovers that redemption -- salvation, even -- can come from unexpected sources. **Discussion Questions**

1. How do Scout, Jem, and Dill characterize Boo Radley at the beginning of the book? In what way did Boo's past history of violence foreshadow his method of protecting Jem and Scout from Bob Ewell? Does this repetition of aggression make him more or less of a sympathetic character?
2. In Scout's account of her childhood, her father Atticus reigns supreme. How would you characterize his abilities as a single parent? How would you describe his treatment of Calpurnia and Tom Robinson vis a vis his treatment of his white neighbors and colleagues? How would you typify his views on race and class in the larger context of his community and his peers?
3. The title of Lee's book is alluded to when Atticus gives his children air rifles and tells them that they can shoot all the bluejays they want, but "it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." At the end of the novel, Scout likens the "sin" of naming Boo as Bob Ewell's killer to "shootin' a mockingbird." Do you think that Boo is the only innocent, or mockingbird, in this novel?
4. Scout ages two years--from six to eight--over the course of Lee's novel, which is narrated from her perspective as an adult. Did you find the account her narrator provides believable? Were there incidents or observations in the book that seemed unusually "knowing" for such a young child? What event or episode in Scout's story do you feel truly captures her personality?
5. *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been challenged repeatedly by the political left and right, who have sought to remove it from libraries for its portrayal of conflict between children and adults; ungrammatical speech; references to sex, the supernatural, and witchcraft; and unfavorable presentation of blacks. Which elements of the book--if any--do you think touch on controversial issues in our contemporary culture? Did you find any of those elements especially troubling, persuasive, or insightful?
6. Jem describes to Scout the four "folks" or classes of people 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 do you think of the ways in which Lee explores race and class in 1930s Alabama? What significance, if any, do you think these characterizations have for people living in other parts of the world?
7. One of the chief criticisms of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is that the two central storylines -- Scout, Jem, and Dill's fascination with Boo Radley and the trial between Mayella Ewell and Tom Robinson -- are not sufficiently connected in the novel. Do you think that Lee is successful in incorporating these different stories? Were you surprised at the way in which these story lines were resolved? Why or why not?
8. By the end of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the book's first sentence: "When he was thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow," has been explained and resolved. What did you think of the events that followed the Halloween pageant? Did you think that Bob Ewell was capable of injuring Scout or Jem? How did you feel about Boo Radley's last-minute intervention?
9. What elements of this book did you find especially memorable, humorous, or inspiring? Are there individual characters whose beliefs, acts, or motives especially impressed or surprised you? Did any events in this book cause you to reconsider your childhood memories or experiences in a new light?

About the Author: Nelle Harper Lee was born on April 28, 1926 in Monroeville Alabama, which produced two world-renowned authors in the same generation. Harper Lee was the grade school classmate of the young Truman Capote, with whom she maintained a friendship well into adulthood. (In 1966 Capote dedicated *In Cold Blood* to her). The youngest of four children of Amasa Coleman Lee and Frances Finch Lee, Harper attended Huntingdon College 1944-45, studied law at University of Alabama 1945-49, and spent a year at Oxford University. In the 1950s she moved to New York City where, after working briefly as an airline reservation clerk, she decided to focus exclusively on her writing. She moved into a cold-water flat and began writing *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In 1957 she submitted the manuscript to the J. B. Lippincott Company and was told that her novel read too much like a series of loosely connected short stories. She spent the next two and a half years revising the book and in 1960 it was published to widespread acclaim, winning the Pulitzer Prize and thousands of devoted readers.