

Reclusive mockingbird: a biography of nelle harper lee

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An aspiring writer from Alabama drops out of college and moves to New York to pursue her literary dreams.

The going is rough until friends give her enough money to live on for a year so that she can stop working and write full-time. What emerges has been called our “national novel” and the book that all adults should read before they die: *To Kill a Mockingbird*. What do we know about the author? Not much. Some have claimed that the book is autobiographical; others, that it is dangerous; others, that it is badly written. Yet the woman behind it all has disappeared, never following up her initial success with another novel. This book examines the life and work of the mysterious Nelle Harper Lee.

Chapter 1: Introduction to Nelle “Maybe Father was right,” Nelle thought as she trudged home through the blustery December wind from yet another day at her mind-numbing job as an airline ticket agent. “Maybe I should have become a lawyer after all. Then at least I would have some decent food and hot water. Maybe coming to New York was a mistake.” All Nelle had to look forward to was staying with her friends the Browns over Christmas, and that felt like a miniscule consolation in the face of her tedious job and utter lack of writing time (Shields 112).

Little did she know that, when gifts were exchanged on Christmas morning, she would be given a check and a letter saying, “You have one year off from your job to write whatever you please” (Shields 25). Her life, for years a hodgepodge of dull jobs and night writing (Shields 20), was turned upside down. Nelle Harper Lee had been waiting for such an opportunity all her life. As a child in Monroeville, Alabama, she befriended the boy next door,

Truman Capote. She was large, tough, and masculine, while he was small and had no taste for the rough-and-tumble games of the rest of the boys in the town (Shields 34); their friendship was unlikely, to say the least. Yet both “ childhood playmates from a tiny town, who once shared a beat-up Underwood typewriter Mr.

Lee brought home from the newspaper, would go on to write American classics” (Murphy 25). In addition to the early and heavy influence Capote had on Lee’s decision to write, her youth held another inspiring factor: Monroeville’s high school English teacher, Miss Gladys Watson (Shields 63). She introduced her students to classic, quality literature; emphasized the “ three Cs: clarity, coherence, and cadence” (Shields 64); and held all of her students to rigorous, exacting standards of grammar (Shields 64). “ English professors at state universities in Alabama were known to remark to some of their most proficient undergraduates, ‘ You must have taken Miss Watson’ ” (Shields 63). It is indubitable that Miss Watson had an enormous influence on Lee’s decision to become a writer. The first college Lee attended was Huntington College in Montgomery, Alabama (Baxter 1).

There, she wrote a few articles for the student newspaper, the Huntress (Shields 71). After a year at Huntington, however, she transferred to the University of Alabama (Baxter 1). After being denied a regular column in the university’s newspaper, she joined the staff of the campus humor magazine, Rammer Jammer (Shields 88). By her junior year, she was already in law school and was simultaneously editor in chief of the magazine, but, due to the rigors of law school, she quit Rammer Jammer entirely before beginning

her senior year (Shields 99). However, Lee hated law school (Shields 101). She quit one semester short of a degree (Baxter 1) and moved to New York on the hope that Capote could secure literary work for her there.

Literary job prospects didn't pan out, and Lee "supported herself as an airline ticket agent until friends, Michael and Joy Brown, gave her an unusual present on Christmas Day, 1956: the money to quit her job and write full-time for one year" (Murphy 26). She spoke with a literary agent named Tay Hohoff as well as a publishing couple named Annie Laurie Williams and Maurice Crain (Shields 113). Hohoff encouraged her to expand a short story she had written—at the time titled *Go Set a Watchman*—into a novel (InfoTrac). By May, the first draft was finished. Crain worked extensively with Lee, changing *Go Set a Watchman* into a revised story called *Atticus* (Shields 114), which eventually became the modern classic now known as *To Kill a Mockingbird*. After a painful and extensive re-writing, revising, and editing process (Shields 116), *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published.

The book was an instant success. Before its publication, it was selected by the Literary Guild and for abridgement by *Reader's Digest*. (Murphy 28) A year later, the book received the Pulitzer Prize. Though Lee appreciated her success, as any author receiving such recognition would, she also hated the attention. "As time passed and her fame grew, Lee became increasingly reclusive. She granted a single interview in 1964" (Baxter 2).

She was hounded by reporters asking for interviews, a demand she came to reflexively deny. Her stress and unhappiness levels reached unsustainable heights, leading her to drink herself out of any productive mindsets she may

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have had (Shields 270), ensuring that she would never publish another book. While *To Kill a Mockingbird* was soaring, its author was left behind, earthbound by her own inborn need for solitude. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one of the most influential books in American history. Oprah Winfrey named it “our national novel” (Murphy 3).

It’s also the most widely read twentieth-century novel by any American author (Murphy 7). Because of the themes it covers—race, class, and fatherhood, to name a few—it is still highly relevant, as much so today as fifty years ago. Yet without the determined dream chasing of a small-town girl named Nelle, and the generous, faithful belief of a couple of Browns, perhaps this book—“our national novel”—would never have existed. Chapter 2: Relationship with Writing Nelle Harper Lee was a writer from an early age. On the other hand, she was a perfectionist.

Lee “later stated that the novel emerged from ‘a long and hopeless period of writing the book over and over again’” (American Women Writers, 540). Once, in a fit of frustration, she threw her entire manuscript out of her apartment window and into the snow of the sidewalk below, only to then have to gather the already-wet pages and try to salvage the work (Shields 131). “As Lee once commented: ‘Writing is the hardest thing in the world . . . but writing is the only thing that has made me completely happy’ ” (InfoTrac).

For one so easily caught up in details and miniscule imperfections, writing was obviously a difficult profession. Yet positive reviews and literary success “brought Nelle unbroken, dizzying joy. Part of her delirium stemmed from

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vindication” (Shields 182). Lee saw her purpose in life as writing, and praise and publication meant that she was right to believe she was a writer. Lee hated fame, however. In her own words, her initial reaction to her book’s success “ was one of sheer numbness.

It was like being hit over the head and knocked out cold” (Murphy 38). She saw herself as her character Boo Radley (Murphy 41), a recluse who left his house on only one occasion throughout the entire book, and only to save a life. To Lee, “ success could be a ball and chain” (Shields 237). As much as she felt vindicated by the praise her book had garnered, she had not intended to spend her life hounded by reporters. Despite a less-than-ideal relationship with the inexhaustible press, Lee faced her life with gratitude. According to Shields, she said, “ I am as lucky as I can be.

I don’t know anyone who has been luckier” (Shields 200). Though it came at a steep price—her anonymity and her peace of mind—Lee’s dreams came true in the success of her novel, and, for that, she was grateful. Chapter 3: Literary Influences It is often said that, to write, one must read; Nelle Harper Lee followed this trend. When Lee was a very young child, too young even to read, her brother, Edwin, read to her books such as Edward Stratemeyer’s series *The Rover Boys* and Robert F. Schulkers’ *Seckatary Hawkins* stories (Shields 46). As soon as Lee and her friend Truman Capote learned to read, they enjoyed tales such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s detective stories together (Shields 46).

Lee had a number of favorite authors throughout her life. Many of these were British. She “ counted among her favorite authors Charles Lamb, Robert
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Louis Stevenson, Jane Austen, and Thomas Love Peacock” (InfoTrac). Miss Watson, Lee’s high school English teacher, had taught a class on British literature (Shields 63), and Lee had jumped at the chance to study abroad in England during law school in order to attend lectures on and by British authors such as Elizabeth Bowen, Joyce Cary, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Elliot, Thomas Mann, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Jean-Paul Sartre (Shields 108).

A particular favorite of Lee’s was Jane Austen (Shields 241). In a 1964 interview, Lee stated that “ all I want to be is the Jane Austen of south Alabama” (Shields 241). While Lee’s writing style is much more accessible and modern than Austen’s, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*’s elementary-school-aged narrator is much younger than Austen’s protagonists, perhaps it was partially due to Austen that Lee chose even to write at all. Clearly, Austen had quite an impact on Lee if that was Lee’s aspiration even after having already been published. Arguably the biggest influence on Lee’s writing was her lifelong friend Truman Capote.

While Lee and Capote were in elementary school, they were given an old typewriter by Lee’s father (Shields 50). The two wrote stories about their neighbors together, Capote talking while Lee typed (Shields 55). Were it not for this experience, it is possible that Lee would never have become a writer. As adults, Lee helped Capote with research for his book *In Cold Blood* (Baxter 2). Lee and Capote also read and helped edit each other’s books before publication (Shields 249). Lee greatly admired Capote throughout much of her life.

In 1964, after Lee had been published and won a Pulitzer Prize, she told an interviewer, “ There’s probably no better writer in this country today than Truman Capote” (Shields 240). Obviously, Capote made an enormous impact on Lee throughout their lives. Chapter 4: Publications Lee was a writer from an early age. However, as a child and teenager, she was sensitive about her work and did not let much of it come to light. Her first publication—aside from a single poem called “ Springtime” that appeared in her father’s newspaper when she was eleven (Shields 64)—was in the *Huntress*, the student newspaper of her first college, Huntington (Shields 79). There, she was also featured in the *Prelude*, the campus literary magazine (Shields 79).

After a year at Huntington, however, Lee transferred to the University of Alabama. While there, “ she wrote for the college humor magazine several satiric pieces, for the student newspaper eight editorial-page columns, and for both a few reviews” (Ash 131). Her column in *Rammer Jammer*, the literary magazine, was entitled “ Caustic Comment” (Shields 89). Lee’s only full-length book was *To Kill a Mockingbird*, published in 1960. What had started as a 50-page story called *Go Set a Watchman*—a working title drawn from a dramatic but rather minor scene in the finished work (Shields, 114)—had grown into a manuscript titled *Atticus* and then into the classic that continues to be widely read 50 years after its publication.

One example of Lee’s writing style, taken from a scene in *To Kill a Mockingbird* during a conversation between the young narrator’s brother and their father, is as follows: “ A lady?” Jem raised his head. His face was

scarlet. “ After all those things she said about you, a lady?” “ She was. She had her own views about things, a lot different from mine, maybe . .

. son, I told you if you hadn’t lost your head I’d have made you go read to her. 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.

Mrs. Dubose won, all ninety-eight pounds of her. According to her views, she died beholden to nothing and nobody. She was the bravest person I ever knew.” (Lee 124) After writing *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lee never finished another book.

However, she wrote several essays, including one titled “ Love—In Other Words” for *Vogue* magazine in 1961 and another called “ When Children Discover America” for *McCall’s* in 1965 (Shields 250). Despite lack of literary output later in life, Lee had already accomplished much with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The book won the Pulitzer Prize in 1961 (Shields 199). Lee was appointed to the National Council of the Arts in 1966 (Baxter 2). Over the years, she was also given many honorary degrees (Baxter 2), despite having never earned one during her college years. In 2007, President George Bush granted Lee the Presidential Medal of Freedom (Murphy 10).

Meanwhile, *To Kill a Mockingbird* remains a popular novel across America.

Chapter 5: Literary Criticism “‘ A love story, pure and simple’ is how Harper

Lee once described her first and only book” (Murphy 41). Once, when *To Kill a Mockingbird* was banned, Lee wrote to the school board prohibiting the book, “‘*To Kill a Mockingbird*’ spells out in words of seldom more than two syllables a code of honor and conduct, Christian in its ethic, that is the heritage of all Southerners,” going on to say that it was ridiculous for anyone to call *To Kill a Mockingbird* immoral and that she suspected that the board banning the novel was illiterate (Shields 255). That Lee would be so bold makes it clear that she thought highly of her book. A closer examination also reveals specifically what she thought of the work—that it was simply worded but complexly, deliberately themed.

Though *To Kill a Mockingbird* is now regarded as a modern American classic, it was not always so highly respected. Early criticisms of the book called the story “melodramatic” (InfoTrac) and found the narrator’s voice too sophisticated for belonging to a six-year-old, as the first-person storyteller, a spunky and precocious girl who calls herself “Scout,” is when the tale begins (InfoTrac). In *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Frank H. Lyell claims, “The narrator’s expository has a processed, homogenized, impersonal flatness quite out of keeping with the narrator’s gay, impulsive approach to life in youth” (340). *American Women Writers* states that “the book lacks the depth and breadth of a first-rate novel” (541). Indeed, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has drawn much criticism for its themes and the treatments thereof, but perhaps more for its narration.

The book is narrated both by Scout as a young girl (six years old at the beginning and nine by the end) and by Scout, now known by her real name,

Jean Louise Finch, a quarter century later, and the book switches between the two with what some would claim to be a “ dizzying frequency.” Other critics, however, praise Lee’s “ easy flowing prose style” (CLC 340) and call her setting “ tranquil and soft-spoken” (American Women Writers 541), seeming to contradict those who find the narration choppy and the plot melodramatic. Lyell, despite his criticism of the narration, calls the characters “ refreshingly varied” and the dialogue “ a constant delight in its authenticity and swift revelation of personality” (CLC 340). *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a Bildungsroman novel, meaning that the main character begins the story as an innocent and gains maturity through trials and adventures, winding up ready for adulthood (Masterplots 6595). Some claim that the narration is merely from an “ adult perspective” (Masterplots 6595), but a more complex analysis comes from Richard Sullivan in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*: The style is bright and straightforward; the unaffected young narrator uses adult language to render the matter she deals with, but the point of view is cunningly restricted to that of a perceptive, independent child, who doesn’t always understand what’s happening, but who conveys completely, by implication, the weight and burden of the story (CLC 340). Clearly, the true nature of the narration has long been a matter of some dispute.

Either the perspective is that of Jean Louise as an adult, or that of Scout as a child, or perhaps Scout has a sophisticated vocabulary. The range of opinions is such that sometimes it is hard to believe that all the critics actually read the same book. Lee’s subject matter is, in short, the South. Lyell’s analysis is that “ Lee writes with gentle affection, rich humor and deep understanding of

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small-town family life in Alabama” (CLC 340). Another review says that Lee really shows her readers the South, conveying the true nature of the place and making even readers who have never lived in the South understand what it is to be a native (Survey of Contemporary Literature 7681). In addition to offering a glimpse of the South, *To Kill a Mockingbird* covers universal themes.

“ Although the novel appears to be simple, the book presents several opposing pairs of themes: ignorance versus knowledge, cowardice versus heroism, guilt versus innocence, and prejudice versus tolerance” (InfoTrac). An alternate explanation adds, “ the ground *To Kill a Mockingbird* covers: childhood, class, citizenship, conscience, race, justice, fatherhood, friendship, love, and loneliness” (Murphy 4). Another view was this: “ Lee presents a dual vision throughout *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The two plot lines—the attempt to lure Boo Radley out and the trial of Tom Robinson—reinforce the contrasting dual themes of prejudice, ignorance, hypocrisy, and hate, opposed by courage, kindness, tolerance, calm reason—and humor” (Masterplots 6595). Despite the limited physical setting of the novel—a tiny Alabama town known as Maycomb County—Lee fit the world, with all its variances in characters and attitudes, into the story, subtly revealing truth after truth about humankind. One way Lee covered so much ground in one plainly worded paperback was by using symbolism.

The book is named after what seems at first to be a fairly insignificant scene in which Atticus, Scout’s father, tells his children that it’s a sin to shoot a mockingbird. However, the mockingbird really stands for two of the book’s

most vulnerable characters (InfoTrac), one of whom winds up dead at society's hand, while the other gains the children's respect, despite them having feared him at the beginning. Much of the other symbolism in the story relates to racism and the problems the South was having with it at both the time the book was set and the time it was written (Smykowski). For instance, in one scene, Scout's brother tries to make a snowman after a rare snowfall; however, the amount of snow is not sufficient to make a full snowman, so he makes a foundation of dirt and covers it in snow. When a fire sweeps through the town, the snow melts and all that is left is a clump of mud. The dirt, which was black, stands for the town's black residents, while the snow stands for the white inhabitants; the fire stands for prejudice, destroying the unity of black and white (Smykowski).

The book is rife with examples such as this in which Lee subtly comments on Southern racism. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a highly accessible book. It is taught in many high schools, but children of much lower reading levels could decipher enough of the book's vocabulary and sentence structure to make it through to the end. On the other hand, in 2006, when polled about which book every adult should read before dying, British librarians voted *To Kill a Mockingbird* first; the Bible was second (Murphy 7). The novel simply covers so many themes and connects with the lives of so many people—it is wonderfully relevant.

It won its author both the Pulitzer Prize and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. It tried to show the South truths about racism, but it also tried to show the North truths about the South—as Lee herself put it, " ' there isn't a

lynching before every breakfast' " (Murphy 35). By balancing both aims, the book became a classic unlike almost any other—transcendently relevant and lastingly beloved. Chapter 6: Autobiographical? To Kill a Mockingbird resembles the life of its author in many ways. Lee grew up in a town like the one in her book; her father was a lawyer similar in profession and character to the Scout's father, Atticus; and her neighborhood included a recluse similar to Boo Radley, a character in the novel (Masterplots 6595). There was a rumor involving poisoned pecans at the recluse's house in Lee's hometown while she was growing up, a suspicion that also appears in the book (Murphy 20).

As Scout does in To Kill a Mockingbird, a local girl really did dress up as a ham for an agricultural pageant (Murphy 20). The book's Hoover carts—cars pulled by farm animals because gas was too expensive—were drawn from Lee's Depression-era upbringing (Murphy 20). Newspaper reports from Monroeville during Lee's childhood include many events that are found in the book (Murphy 20). Lee wrote primarily about what she knew. Three characters in To Kill a Mockingbird were explicitly drawn from Lee's life.

Lee herself was likely the basis for Scout. Like Scout, Lee was the daughter of a highly respected lawyer and grew up in a small town in Alabama; the author and character were both very tough and far too advanced for their elementary classrooms (InfoTrac). Meanwhile, Dill Harris, Scout's childhood playmate, was based on Lee's friend Truman Capote. Together, the two had many of the "small-town adventures" that Scout and Dill shared in the book (InfoTrac). Atticus, Scout's heroic father, was modeled after Lee's father, A.

C. Lee. Lee watched her father argue cases at the local courthouse, as Scout watched Atticus (Murphy 18). As Lee herself put it, “ My father is one of the few men I’ve known with genuine humility, and it lends him a natural dignity. He has absolutely no ego drive, and so he was one of the most beloved men in this part of the state” (Murphy 19).

Likewise, Atticus was humble, dignified, and respected. Though she could have used artistic license to do so, Lee did not allow Atticus to win the story’s central case, showing her commitment to hold the character to the constraints that bound her father (The Companion to Southern Literature 419). However, in other ways, A. C. Lee was not Atticus at all.

While Atticus responded to Scout’s horrified question of “ You aren’t really a n*****-lover, are you?” with “ I certainly am” (Lee 124), A. C. “ believed that the current social order, segregation, was natural and created harmony between the races” (Shields 121). Despite this critical difference, though, his values shaped both his daughter and the character she created in his honor. Once, A.

C. threatened to defame the local Ku Klux Klan to such effect that the group’s previously military march was downgraded to a less-disruptive walk, and he used the newspaper he owned to lecture on “ taxes, overreaching government, drinking, hooliganism, and political corruption” (Shields 57). Like Atticus, A. C. was light-handed when it came to discipline and allowed his children to call him by his first name (Shields 59).

A. C., whether in details, spirit, or both, became the father—and, some would contend, hero—in his daughter's bestseller. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is often posed as a social commentary, critiquing topics such as racism, the justice system, and segregation. However, the book actually covers a wide expanse of ground: just as it is not simply a novel of childhood, neither is it typically a regional novel, though it trends in that direction.

Nor is it a 'legal' novel, even though a trial is the focus of attention for about one-fourth of the book. Harper Lee presents a good bit of social commentary, but yet one cannot term this a novel of social conscience (Survey of Contemporary Literature 7679). Some parts of the book indisputably comment on social issues—after all, one of the book's two main plots tells of the trial of a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman; though the man is innocent, he is convicted and dies attempting to escape prison. Many scholars, including those writing in several literary criticism journals, believe that the book's trial is based on the Scottsboro trial that took place when Lee was five, "in which nine African American youths were convicted of rape despite plain evidence to the contrary" (Companion to Southern Literature 193). However, in a letter written in 1999, "Lee said that she did not have so sensational a case as the Scottsboro Boys in mind" (Shields 118).

This is one example, the total of which we may never know, where what the author intends differs from what critics and reviewers claim and state as fact. Likewise, *To Kill a Mockingbird* may not have been as autobiographical as is often assumed. "'Everyone tries to make it an autobiography or biography or a true story,' she [Harper Lee's sister Alice] said . . .

Unlike the fictional Finches, ' we had a mother, we loved both parents'" (Murphy 23). However, Mrs. Lee was mentally ill for most of her daughter Nelle Harper's life. " From the time she was small, Nelle mainly knew her mother as an overweight woman with a host of demons" (Shields 39), which created tensions between mother and daughter. Perhaps writing Scout as motherless was Nelle's attempt to create a figuratively autobiographical or even idealized family life for the character who otherwise seems so based on the author. Due to Lee's reclusion, parts of her work will likely remain forever unfathomable, and we can only guess at her motives for the characters and scenes that made her famous.

It is obvious that she wrote more or less what she knew from her childhood, and her relationships and societal experiences had a great impact on her work. Lee's novel was born of determination to write in the face of societal and familial expectations to the contrary; despite her aversion to attention, at one point she obviously believed she had something to share with her world. What resulted was a classic, widely acknowledged for its universal themes and deep truths about humanity. Yet her magnum opus was also a love song for the South, dysfunctional as she clearly knew it was. Lee wrote what she knew and then made her exit from the public stage, leaving the world to guess at her purposes while wishing to thank her for her contribution to literature and to society.

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