

THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO HARPER LEE'S



TO KILL A
MOCKINGBIRD

“Clear, elegant, authoritative – worthy of the great
masterpiece it analyses”

ROBERT HARRIS

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Stephen Fender

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Harper Lee's*

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Introduction

“I would not have believed that I would ever again be completely enthralled by a story of young children – especially a young girl narrator – growing up in a typical southern town,” wrote Katherine Gauss Jackson in *Harper’s Magazine* when *To Kill a Mockingbird* came out in 1960. “After all, we had *Member of the Wedding* not so long ago, with... the Negro cook in the kitchen so earthily wise in answering difficult questions when parents are not at hand. And here it all is again, but different.”

This one was different all right. For one thing, as part of her growing up this little girl, Scout Finch, had to watch her father Atticus confront their community’s racism. Within two years *To Kill a Mockingbird* had been translated into ten languages, won the Pulitzer Prize, emerged as an Oscar-winning film and spent 88 weeks on the American bestseller lists. By 1964 it had sold five million copies; now the book’s world sales total over six times that. It has never been out of print, in either hardback or paperback. British librarians have voted it the book they would most recommend. In 1991 a Library of Congress survey of reading habits found that it was one of three books “most often cited as making a difference”, second only to the Bible.

Early reviewers welcomed it tepidly, giving no signs of the sensation to come. “Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*... is sugar water served with humor,”

said the august *Atlantic Monthly*. It is “pleasant, undemanding reading”. In its “Briefly Noted” section *The New Yorker* provided a notice of just 76 words, 26 of which read: “Miss Lee is a skilled, unpretentious and totally ingenuous writer who slides unconcernedly and irresistibly back and forth between being sentimental, tough, melodramatic, acute, and funny.”

While escaping early critical challenge, the novel quickly attracted opposition of another kind. Like *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), that other 60-million bestseller about childhood, *Mockingbird* was widely banned from local libraries and school curricula from the 1960s through to the 1980s. Those charged with the care of the youth were hypersensitive about what the fictional young should be made to see and hear in novels: words like “damn”, “piss”, “whore lady” – and (as with *Huckleberry Finn*) “nigger” – even though in the context of a critique of racial prejudice. But the objections went beyond words alone. The story of children being confronted by a rape case seemed inappropriate in a book to be read by real-life children. So did the book’s portrayal of “institutionalized racism”, as one group of protestors in Indiana put it, “under the guise of ‘good literature’”.

Set in the author’s own youth, when the Great Depression was more on people’s minds than the need for racial equality, *Mockingbird* emerged into

the ferment of the Civil Rights movement. How well would Atticus Finch's liberal understanding of his neighbours' fear and hatred of "the Negro" – his teaching that in time tolerance of the other would sort the problem out – measure up to the radical activism of James Baldwin and Eldridge Cleaver, or the mass rallies organized by Ralph Abernathy and Martin Luther King to change the law and get it applied?

Another early reviewer called *To Kill a Mockingbird* "a wholesome book on an unwholesome theme". That wholesomeness is partly to do with childhood, the point of view from which the narrator tells her story, but Atticus's authoritative voice conditions the mood too. His critique of white prejudice is gradualist rather than genuinely progressive; it imagines change as coming about first through a transformation in human sympathy before it can be enshrined in the law.

After the turmoil of the Civil Rights movement, after the Vietnam War, after the election of America's first black president, has *To Kill a Mockingbird* come to look like "a period piece", as Harold Bloom has called it? Or does the novel survive, perhaps even transcend historical change? Certainly its popularity remains undimmed, and no one now thinks it unfit for children.

A summary of the plot

The story is told by the tomboy Jean Louise "Scout" Finch, six years old at the start of her narrative. Scout lives with her older brother Jem and their widowed father, the lawyer Atticus Finch, in a "tired old town" in southern Alabama. Their black housekeeper Calpurnia acts as surrogate mother for the children. Jem and Scout play with Dill Harris, who comes to stay with his aunt every summer.

The children are fascinated by their neighbour Arthur "Boo" Radley, who lives unseen with his father in a shuttered old house surrounded by live oaks. The children dare each other to approach the house. Using a fishing pole, Jem tries unsuccessfully to leave a note at Boo's window. One moonlit night they crawl under a barbed wire fence, through the Radleys' field of collard greens, in order to get a glimpse of Boo through his window. A shadow moves across the porch, someone shoots a shotgun in the air, the children scatter, and Jem tears his breeches on the wire, slipping out of them to escape. When he summons up courage to go back for them, he finds his trousers folded up over the fence, the rip sewn up.

On their way to and from school the children often find little gifts in a knothole in one of the big oaks outside the Radley house – trinkets like two Indian-head pennies, a ball of twine and two

figurines carved out of soap.

Atticus is charged by the town judge to defend Tom Robinson, an African American accused of raping a white girl. He agrees reluctantly. Townspeople call him “nigger-lover”, puzzling and upsetting the children. On the eve of the trial a posse of country people arrives to lynch the defendant. Atticus sits in the jailhouse door reading a newspaper to bar their way. The children arrive to see what’s going on, refusing to leave when Atticus orders them to. Scout talks to one of the men, the father of a school friend, asking how he is and sending his boy her greetings. Embarrassed, the men leave the scene.

Next day the children, whom Atticus has forbidden from the trial, hide in the African-American gallery overlooking the courtroom. The prosecution opens the trial by interviewing Tom Ewell, father of the alleged victim, Mayella. He describes hearing her scream, running to the window and looking in to see “that black nigger yonder ruttin’ on my Mayella”. She had been beaten too, according to the Sheriff, who found her “bunged up” on the right side of her face, with “a black eye comin’” and bruises on her neck and right arm.

Through his adroit questioning of Mayella, her father, and the defendant, Atticus shows that Tom Robinson, whose left arm is paralysed, could never have committed the assault, but that instead

Mayella had propositioned him, been caught in the act and beaten by her father. Atticus’s powerful concluding speech for the defence invokes the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal – if not in everyday life then at least in court. Despite the evidence and Atticus’s plea, the jury convicts by a unanimous vote.

Bob Ewell, humiliated by the revelations in court, spits tobacco juice in Atticus’s face as he is coming out of the post office. Though Atticus plans to appeal the verdict, Tom Robinson panics and tries to escape from the town jail. He is shot dead while trying to climb the outer fence.

Coming home from a school pageant, Scout and Jem are attacked in the dark. In the struggle Jem’s arm is broken, and only Scout’s costume saves her from a knife wound. A mysterious stranger interrupts the assault, carrying Jem home while Scout follows. This turns out to be Boo Radley, the source of all those little gifts in the tree, and the children’s hidden protector all along.

The town sheriff arrives to reveal that the assailant had been Bob Ewell, and that he has been stabbed – “Fell on his own knife,” he insists against Atticus’s protest that the law should be allowed to take its course. Scout agrees with the sheriff; otherwise, she says, “It’d be sort of like shootin’ a mockingbird, wouldn’t it?”

What is *To Kill a Mockingbird* about?

On one level *To Kill a Mockingbird* is about racial prejudice in the southern states of America. The climax of the plot, Tom Robinson's trial and its aftermath, certainly reinforces this theme. And the novel's appearance in the midst of the great civil rights campaign made that story reverberate for contemporary readers.

Early critics certainly experienced *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a shape-changing novel about race. "In the twentieth century," wrote Joseph Crespino, "*To Kill a Mockingbird* is probably the most widely read book dealing with race in America, and its protagonist, Atticus Finch, the most enduring image of fictional heroism." For James Carville, reading the book was like St Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. As a schoolboy during the Civil Rights turmoil he remembered wishing "the blacks just didn't push so damn hard to change" segregation. Then the woman who drove the mobile library round his neighbourhood suggested he read *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

I couldn't put it down. I stuck it inside another book and read it under my desk during school. When I got to the last page, I closed it and said, "They're right and we're wrong." The issue was

literally black and white, and we were positively on the wrong side.

Some support to the racial theme, not noticed by the critics, is the fact that almost every white character is slightly odd, and their relationships to others skewed. Scout is a tomboy (about which more later); Dill is "a curiosity": childlike, looking far younger than his age, with snow-white hair, and light blue shorts that button to his shirt instead of the overalls worn by the other children. Boo Radley, whose arrested development has kept him secluded at home for 20 years, is the strangest of all.

Not only that, but there is hardly a conventional marriage or family in the book. Scout's and Jem's mother has died; they are looked after by their black housekeeper, Calpurnia, and see their father Atticus only when he gets home late from work. We don't read of any family weekends spent together, let alone outings or holidays. Aunt Alexandra is married, but estranged from her husband. Across the street lives Miss Maudie, a spinster. Mrs Dubose, an ill and embittered widow addicted to morphine, is two doors down. Dill is only available to play with Scout and Jem because he has been offloaded by his parents, who live separately from each other pursuing their own affairs. Then there's Tom Ewell, who beats his daughter and (it is hinted) sexually abuses her.