

# Meet Harper Lee



[A writer] should write about what he knows and write truthfully.

—Harper Lee

Harper Lee has followed her own advice in writing about what she knows. In fact, critics have noted many parallels between the novel and Lee's early life. Maycomb, the setting for the novel, bears a striking resemblance to the small town of Monroeville, Alabama, where Lee grew up in the 1930s. Like Scout, the narrator of the novel, Lee's family has deep roots in Alabama. Her father, Amasa Coleman Lee, was a descendant of General Robert E. Lee. A lawyer and state legislator, Lee's father likely served as the model for Atticus Finch, Scout's father in the novel.

The author was born on April 28, 1926, as Nelle Harper Lee. During her childhood, Lee read avidly. By the time she was a teenager, she had begun to set her sights on a writing career—a goal she shared with her childhood friend, well-known author Truman Capote.

At the University of Alabama, Lee wrote reviews, editorials, and satires for college publications. After graduating, she pursued a law degree

at the same university. In 1949, however, she withdrew and moved to New York City with the goal of becoming a writer.

While working at other jobs, Lee submitted stories and essays to publishers. All were rejected. An agent, however, took an interest in one of her short stories and suggested she expand it into a novel. By 1957 she had finished a draft of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. A publisher to whom she sent the novel saw its potential but thought it needed reworking. With her editor, Lee spent two and a half more years revising the manuscript. By 1960 the novel was published. In a 1961 interview with *Newsweek* magazine, Lee commented:

*Writing is the hardest thing in the world,  
. . . but writing is the only thing that has  
made me completely happy.*

*To Kill a Mockingbird* was an immediate and widespread success. Within a year, the novel sold half a million copies and received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Within two years, it was turned into a highly acclaimed film.

Readers admire the novel's sensitive and probing treatment of race relations. But, equally, they enjoy its vivid account of childhood in a small rural town. Summing up the novel's enduring impact in a 1974 review, R. A. Dave called *To Kill a Mockingbird*

*. . . a movingly human drama of the  
jostling worlds—of children and adults, of  
innocence and experience, of kindness and  
cruelty, of love and hatred, of humor and  
pathos, and above all of appearance and  
reality—all taking the reader to the root of  
human behavior.*

For almost four decades, Harper Lee has declined to comment on her popular—and only—novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, preferring instead to let the novel speak for itself. Today, the novel continues to delight and inspire millions of readers.

# Introducing the Novel

*Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.*

—*To Kill a Mockingbird*

In 1991 the Library of Congress conducted a survey of book readers. Readers were asked to cite books that had made a difference in their lives. One of the books most often cited was Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The only book ranked higher by readers was the Bible.

Harper Lee's novel, originally published in 1960, opens with an adult Scout Finch reminiscing about her childhood. Through Scout's memories, the reader is transported into the world of a small southern town in the 1930s. Using a literary technique called **flashback**, Lee interrupts Scout's chronological narrative to reach back in time and enhance and amplify the story with prior events.

Throughout her childhood, Scout develops and expands her values and ideas as she encounters characters who come from all levels of Maycomb's society. While other novels have explored similar themes as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, few have done so in such a rich and enduring way. Scout learns about justice and injustice by watching the trial of an African American man. She witnesses the divisions of class and race in her small town. She discovers courage, both in herself and in those around her, and she comes to respect the diversity of the people in her community, people such as Tom Robinson and Boo Radley. There is rarely a situation in which Scout does not learn something new about education, superstition, bravery, or cowardice.

The story Lee tells evolves in a world where children lose their innocence as they grow up and encounter the harsh realities of adult life. Yet Lee's story is also about accepting people for who they are, whether they have a different skin color, like Tom Robinson, or are eccentric, like Boo Radley.

In a review of the novel for the *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, Richard Sullivan praised Lee's ability to tell a story. He wrote:

*There is a wit, grace, and skill in the telling. . . . [Each character] contributes to the quiet, sustained humor, the occasionally intense drama, the often taut suspense which all rise out of this rich and [diverse] complex of human relationships.*

Today, the novel is as widely read as it was in 1960. But it is more than a best-seller. It is a book that continues to influence its readers through its insightful depiction of human weaknesses and strengths in an imperfect society. Keith Waterhouse in his 1960 review of the novel said:

*Miss Lee does well what so many American writers do appallingly: she paints a true and lively picture of life in an American small town.*

## The Time and Place

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is set in a small town in rural Alabama in the early 1930s. Harper Lee, who was born in Monroeville, Alabama, would have been about the same age as Scout Finch at the time the story takes place. Many of the events that Lee experienced as a child were incorporated into the story that she wrote more than thirty years later.

The novel is set during the Great Depression, at a time in which millions of Americans lost their jobs. Many people also lost their homes, their land, and their dignity. They lived in flimsy shacks and stood in bread lines to receive government handouts of food. Some "rode the rails" to look for work in other towns, but the situation was dismal everywhere.

At the start of the Great Depression, about half of the African American population lived in the South. With few jobs available, blacks often found themselves edged out by whites, even for the poorest paying jobs. Racial tensions, which had existed since the end of the Civil War, increased. Mob actions by whites that led to the

hanging of African Americans and of those who sympathized with them continued throughout the South.

In Alabama, as in other southern states, segregation was a way of life in the 1930s. Schools, restaurants, churches, courtrooms, hospitals, and

all other public places had separate facilities for African Americans. In some courts, African Americans were even required to swear on separate Bibles. The Ku Klux Klan, a southern terrorist group, preached white superiority and engaged in violence against African Americans.

### Did You Know?

By the time Harper Lee was old enough to read a newspaper, the notorious Scottsboro Trials had been in the news for several years. The Alabama trial, which made national headlines, served as an ugly reminder of racial bigotry in the 1930s.

In March 1931, nine African American youths were arrested and charged with raping two white women. Over the next five years, a series of trials was held. The first trial began just twelve days after the arrest and lasted only three days. In spite of evidence of the men's innocence, eight of the nine men were found guilty and sentenced to death. The extreme sentences and hasty trial left many observers outraged. The case was appealed all the way to the Supreme Court, and several sets of new trials were held. By 1937 four of

the defendants were freed, while the others were sentenced to long prison terms.

The Scottsboro Trials share several similarities with the fictional trial of Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Like the Scottsboro defendants, Tom is charged with raping a white woman. There is also a parallel between Atticus Finch and Judge James E. Horton. Both acted in the interest of justice when an African American was wrongfully accused. In a 1933 trial of one of the Scottsboro defendants, Judge Horton set aside the jury's guilty verdict because he believed the jurors had ignored the evidence. Both the fictional and real trials had all-white juries. In the South of the 1930s, African American citizens were commonly excluded from serving on juries.

# Before You Read

## *To Kill a Mockingbird*, One through Eleven

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

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What do you think characterizes a person who has courage? What kinds of situations might call for courage?

#### Web It

Create a concept web for the word *courage*. Draw lines extending from the word, then on each line, list qualities that you associate with someone who shows courage. Discuss real-life situations you know of in which people have acted courageously.

#### Setting a Purpose

Read to find out what Scout and Jem learn about the meaning of courage.

### BACKGROUND

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#### Time and Place

The town of Maycomb, Alabama, the setting for the novel, is typical of southern towns in the 1930s. Its society reflects the strong class distinctions that were present in the Old South before the Civil War. Whites and blacks did not socialize, but there were different levels within black and white society. At the top, for example, were large landowners or educated professionals. The Finch family, for example, has connections to the land that go back more than a hundred years. Then there are middle-class citizens, such as Sheriff Tate and Mr. Underwood, the editor of the newspaper. Poor whites are represented by Scout's classmate Walter Cunningham and the Ewell family. Equally poor is Tom Robinson, the farm worker who goes on trial. Yet another level of black society is represented by Calpurnia, the Finches' maid, who has more formal education than many others. As you read, notice the social status of the characters. In particular, think about whether Atticus Finch exhibits attitudes that are typical or atypical of members of his social class as they are portrayed in the novel.

#### First-Person Point of View

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is told from a **first-person point of view**—that is, the narrator uses “I” and “me” to describe events in the novel. Although the narrator is an adult Scout Finch looking back at her childhood, the perspective is limited to what she saw and felt at that time. Scout the 6-year-old often does not understand the full meaning of what she observes, and her childlike perceptions are frequently a source of humor, as when she says of her father, “Atticus was feeble. He was nearly fifty.” Yet even in this instance, the narrator does not confine her vocabulary to that of a child. Here is another example of how the narrator recalls childhood events with an adult vocabulary: “I wasn't sure what Jem resented most, but I took umbrage at Mrs. Dubose's assessment of the family's mental hygiene.”

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

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**cantankerous** [kan tang'ker əs] *adj.* irritable; difficult to deal with

**compel** [kəm pel'] *v.* to force; to require

**conscience** [kon'shəns] *n.* inner sense of right and wrong

**feeble** [fē'bəl] *adj.* lacking strength

**harbor** [här'bər] *v.* to hold in the mind

**irk** [urk] *v.* to annoy

**perplexed** [pər plekst'] *adj.* puzzled; confused

**tranquil** [trang'kwəl] *adj.* peaceful; at ease

# Before You Read

## *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Twelve through Twenty-one

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

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What do you think is involved in making a fair judgment about a person or situation? Explain.

#### Quickwrite

Describe on paper an everyday situation in which one person might judge another incorrectly. What things can interfere with making a fair judgment?

#### Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how the jury in Maycomb judges Tom Robinson.

### BACKGROUND

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#### Did You Know?

Chapters twelve through twenty-one focus mainly on Tom Robinson's dramatic courtroom trial. Trials are a cornerstone of the criminal justice system in the United States. Any citizen accused of a crime has the right to a trial by an impartial (unbiased) jury. This right is guaranteed in Article 6 of the Bill of Rights. An important principle of the justice system is that a person accused of a crime is presumed innocent until proven guilty. This assumption requires the prosecution (the side arguing that the accused is guilty) to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the accused person committed the crime. If this is not proven, and the jury members are left with doubts about the person's guilt, they must find the accused innocent.

#### Conflict

At the heart of every novel is **conflict**, the struggle between two opposing forces. In an **external conflict**, a character struggles against some outside force, such as another person, nature, society, or fate. An **internal conflict** is a struggle between two opposing thoughts or desires within the mind of a character. As you read chapters twelve through twenty-one, notice how the external and internal conflicts introduced in the first section intensify.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

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**antagonize** [an tag' ə nīz'] v. to stir up anger; to oppose

**contradict** [kon' trə dikt'] v. to assert the contrary or opposite of

**convict** [kən vikt'] v. to prove or declare guilty

**reluctantly** [ri luk' tənt lē] adv. unwillingly

**sullen** [sul' ən] adj. silently gloomy or unfriendly

**testimony** [tes' tə mō' nē] n. evidence given in court

**verdict** [vur' dikt] n. judgment by a jury

# Before You Read

## *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Twenty-two through Thirty-one

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

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What does it mean to “put yourself in another person’s shoes”? What personal qualities are necessary to be able to see things as someone else does?

#### Sharing Experiences

In a small group, discuss different situations in which you learned something by putting yourself in another person’s shoes. What made it possible to adopt a different perspective? What was difficult about the experience?

#### Setting a Purpose

Read to find out what Scout learns about different perspectives and about justice in the concluding section of the novel.

### BACKGROUND

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#### Did You Know?

Many people, including Harper Lee, consider the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* to be highly faithful to the novel. In fact, after seeing the film, many think that the dialogue was taken word for word from the novel. “This is simply not so,” says the novel’s author, commenting on the screenplay by Horton Foote. “Scenes humorous, scenes tender, scenes terrifying, each with a definite purpose and value, blended so delicately with the original, created the illusion that these were Harper Lee’s words.” In further praise of the screenplay, Lee says, “For me, Maycomb is there, its people are there: in two short hours one lives a childhood and lives it with Atticus Finch, whose view of life was the heart of the novel.” The 1962 film won three Academy Awards.

#### Climax

Although the trial contains many suspenseful moments, the novel actually reaches its highest dramatic point in this last portion of the book. This high point is called the **climax**. All of the preceding events in the plot lead up to this point of highest tension. This last section also joins two seemingly separate strands of the plot: the trial of Tom Robinson and the mystery of Boo Radley. As you read the conclusion of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, note how the final events bring these two stories together.

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

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**aggravate** [əg' rə vāt'] *v.* to make worse

**apprehension** [əp' ri hen' shən] *n.* fear about a future event

**impertinence** [im pɜrt' ən əns] *n.* rudeness; improper behavior

**inevitable** [i nev' ə tə bəl] *adj.* impossible to avoid