***To Kill a Mockingbird:* The Author, Context, and More**

**Harper Lee**

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* ´Born Nelle Harper Lee (April 28, 1926-February 19, 2016)
* ´American novelist widely known for *To Kill a Mockingbird.*
* ´Born in Monroeville, Alabama as the youngest of four children.
* ´Her parents were Frances Cunningham Finch (mother) and Amasa Coleman Lee (father\_.
* ´Her middle name, Harper, was chosen to honour the doctor who saved her sister’s life, and her first name was her grandmother’s name backwards.
* ´Her mother was a homemaker.  Her father was a newspaper editor, newspaper proprietor, and a lawyer.
* ´She had three siblings: Alice Finch Lee (1911-2014), Louise Lee Conner (1916-2009), and Edwin Lee (1920-1951).
* ´She was childhood friends with Truman Capote.

**Adulthood**

* ´While enrolled in her local county high school, she developed an interest in English literature.
* ´After high school, she attended Huntingdon College in Montgomery for a year, and then transferred to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa to study law.
* ´She also wrote for the university newspaper.
* ´She did not complete her degree.
* ´Summer 1948– Attended summer school at Oxford University, which was funded by her father to try and make her more interested in her law courses.
* ´1949 – Moved to NYC and took a job as an airline reservation agent, writing in her spare time about the people who lived in her home town.

**Writing**

* ´In 1957, she presented a manuscript titled *Go Set a Watchman* to a literary agent recommended to her by her friend Truman Capote.
* ´The agent was impressed but said it wasn’t fully formed, it was more of a series of anecdotes, and so worked with her to create what would eventually become *To Kill a Mockingbird.*
* ´*To Kill a Mockingbird* was published on July 11, 1960, using the pen name Harper Lee, because she didn’t want ‘Nelle’ to be misidentified as ‘Nellie.’
* ´Her publishers told her to not expect to sell very many copies, but the book was an immediate bestseller.  It won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1961. It is still a bestseller.
* In 1999, it was voted “Best Novel of the Century” by a poll from the Library Journal.

**Post TKAM**

* ´After the book was published, Lee travelled with childhood friend turned famous author Truman Capote to Holcomb, Kansas to write an article about a small town’s response to the murder of a farmer and his family.  It was later turned into a novel called *In Cold Blood*.
* ´She quickly withdrew from the press surrounding the book, finding the questions boring and repetitive and too close to the fame that celebrities thought.
* ´She started to write several projects over the years, but always set them aside as she was unsatisfied with them.
* ´Until 2015, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was her only book.  But in 2015 *Go Set a Watchman* was published.  It isn’t really a sequel, but a previous draft of TKAM and there are certain passages that are repeated word for word.  There was much controversy about its publication.
* ´She passed away in her sleep on February 19, 2016 at the age of 89.

**To Kill a Mockingbird**

**About the Book**

* The plot and characters of TKAM are loosely based on Lee’s observations of her family, neighbours, and an event that occurred near her hometown when she was 10 years old.
* The story is told by the six year old Jean Louise Finch, also known as Scout. It is told through her perspective as a young girl, but also as a grown woman looking back on the time.
* It is renowned for its warmth and humour, though it deals with serious issues such as rape and racial inequality.
* Atticus Finch, Scout’s father, has served as a moral hero and a model of integrity for lawyers.
* It is possibly the most widely read book dealing with race in America, and Atticus is the most enduring fictional image of racial heroism.
* Genre wise, the book is considered a Southern Gothic, with the aspects dealing with Boo Radley and the racial injustice involving Tom Robinson, and a Bildungsroman (a novel dealing with one person’s formative years or spiritual education), with Scout being so young and growing up over the course of the book.
* Themes involve racial injustice and the destruction of innocence.
* It deals with issues of class, courage, compassion, and gender roles in the American Deep South.
* Its lessons emphasize tolerance and decry prejudice.
* It blends the simplicity of childhood observation with adult situations complicated by hidden motivations and unquestioned tradition.

**Adaptation**

* It was made into a movie in 1962.
* Gregory Peck starred as Atticus Finch.
* The movie was a hit at the box office, grossing more than $20 million from a $2 million budget.
* It won three Oscars: Best Actor (Gregory Peck); Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, Black and White; and Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium (Horton Foote). It was nominated for five other Oscars as well.
* Gregory Peck met Lee’s father, the base for Atticus, before filming. Her father died before the film was released. Lee was so impressed with Peck’s performance that she gave him her father’s pocket watch. They became friends.

**Context**

**Setting**

* TKAM takes place during the 1930s, in the middle of the Great Depression.
* The Great Depression was a severe worldwide economic depression that began in the United States.
* It started on October 29, 1929 (Black Tuesday) after the stock market crashed.
* It had devastating effects in countries that were both rich and poor. Personal income, tax revenue, profits, and prices dropped. International trade plunged by more than 50%. Unemployment in the US rose to 25% and in some countries was as high as 33%.
* Those dependent on heavy industry were hit especially hard. Construction projects stopped.
* Farming communities and rural areas suffered as crop prices fell by about 60%.
* TKAM takes place during a time of racial segregation in the United States as a legacy of the Jim Crow laws (everyone was supposed to have the same public facilities, but they were separate for each race).
* Racial segregation in the US included the segregation or separation of access to facilities, services, and opportunities such as housing, medical care, education, employment, and transportation along racial lines.
* It most often refers to the legally/socially enforced separation of African Americans, but it also applies to general discrimination against people of colour by white communities.
* It also refers to the physical separation and provision of so-called “separate but equal” facilities, which were separate but rarely equal. The facilities for African-Americans were almost always of lower quality. For example, African-American schools received less funding.
* Signs were used to show non-whites where they could legally walk, talk, drink, rest, or eat.
* Segregated facilities extended from whites only schools to whites only graveyards.
* Legal separation of schools was stopped in the US by the federal enforcement of Supreme Court decisions after Brown v. Board of Education in 1954.
* All legally enforced public segregation (also known as segregation de jure) was abolished by the Civil Rights Act of 1964.
* This passed after demonstrations during the Civil Rights Movement resulted in public opinion turning against legally-enforced segregation.
* De facto segregation (segregation in fact, without law) persists in varying degrees to this day.

**The ‘N’ Word**

* In the English language, the word is a racial slur typically directed at black people.
* It originated from a variation of a Spanish and Portuguese word, and is a descendant of a Latin word.
* It was frequently used in a derogatory sense as a racist insult. Consequently it began to disappear from popular culture in the mid-twentieth century. The continued usage/inclusion of the word in classic literature has sparked much controversy over the years.
* It is a word that pops up over the course of TKAM, frequently used in a derogatory sense by certain characters. However, please understand that the message of the book is not one that encourages the use of this word in a derogatory sense.

**Honorifics**

* Honorifics are a title that conveys esteem or respect for position or rank when used in addressing or referring to a person.
* In English, the most common honorifics are placed before the name. They include:
	+ Mr: For a man, married or not.
	+ Miss: For a woman, unmarried.
	+ Mrs: For a woman, married.
	+ Ms: For a woman, if marital status is unknown, or they don’t wish to specify it.
	+ Mx: Gender neutral honorific (or Ind. Or Misc.)
* They are typically formatted with a period after the honorific (ie. Mr.).

**Themes**

* Southern Life
* Racial Injustice
* Class
* Courage and Compassion
* Gender Roles
* Laws, Written and Unwritten
* Loss of Innocence