

BOOK CLUB To Go!

Mockingbird: A Portrait Of Harper Lee

By Charles J. Shields

Introduction

To Kill a Mockingbird, the twentieth-century's most widely read American novel, has sold thirty million copies and still sells several hundred thousand a year. Yet despite the book's perennial popularity, its creator, Harper Lee has become a somewhat mysterious figure. Now, after years of research, Charles J. Shields has brought to life the warmhearted, high-spirited, and occasionally hardheaded woman who gave us two of American literature's most unforgettable characters – Atticus Finch and his daughter, Scout – and who contributed to the success of her lifelong friend Truman Capote's masterpiece, *In Cold Blood*.

At the center of Shields's lively book is the story of Lee's struggle to create her famous novel. But her life contains many other highlights as well: her girlhood as a tomboy in overalls in tiny Monroeville, Alabama; the murder trial that inspired her great work; her journey to Kansas as Capote's ally and research assistant to help report the story of the Clutter murders; the surrogate family she found in New York City.

Drawing on six hundred interviews and much new information, *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee* is the first book ever written about Harper Lee. Highly entertaining, filled with humor and heart, this is an evocative portrait of a writer, her dream, and the place and people whom she made immortal.

(CharlesJShields.com)

About the Author

Charles J. Shields spent four years researching and writing *Mockingbird*. A former English teacher who taught Harper Lee's novel for a number of years, he later became a writer of nonfiction books for young people. For *Mockingbird*, he interviewed over 600 of Harper Lee's neighbors, childhood friends, law school classmates, and Kansas residents who became her friends while she was there helping Truman Capote research *In Cold Blood*. As a result of Shields' research into Truman Capote's papers, the papers of Harper Lee's agent, and the archives in the courthouse and historical museum in Lee's hometown of Monroeville, Alabama, information never before known appears in this insightful portrait of the Pulitzer prize-winning author, who stopped giving interviews in 1964.

From her beginnings as an Alabama tomboy, to her novel's beginnings as a handful of stories, to a rough draft called *Atticus*, to its present form as one of the most popular books of the 20th century, the story of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and its author is told here for the first time.

Shields has a B.A. in English and an M.A. in American history from the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, where he was a James Scholar. He lives in central Virginia with his wife, Guadalupe.

(CharlesJShields.com)

Reviews

“An informative and genial biography that literary fiction lovers will flock to.” -- *Booklist Review*

“With all of the newly revived interest in Harper Lee that the movie *Capote* has generated, this first ever study of her life should, in turn, spark a bit of a buzz among scholars and the general public.” -- *Library Journal Review*

“This biography will not disappoint those who loved the novel and the feisty, independent, fiercely loyal Scout, in whom Harper Lee put so much of herself.” – *New York Times*

Further Reading

Portraits and Observations : The Essays of Truman Capote by Truman Capote

To Kill A Mockingbird by Harper Lee

In Cold Blood by Truman Capote

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Possible Discussion Questions

1. Hypothesize: in light of Nelle Harper Lee's relationship to her mother, why is there no mother in *To Kill a Mockingbird*?
2. On the surface, Truman Capote and Nelle Harper Lee appeared to be so opposite as children. What was it about their lives and circumstances that led them to become close friends?
3. Today, social services address many of the problems that were taken for granted about life in Monroeville, Alabama in the 1930s. If Nelle Harper Lee was growing up in Monroeville now, how might her upbringing and experiences be different?
4. In his *New Yorker* magazine review of *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee*, Thomas Mallon writes about Harper Lee's father, "Mr. Lee was a 'fond and indulgent father,' who, in addition to practicing law, edited Monroeville's local paper and served in the state legislature. He believed in segregation, low taxes, and noblesse oblige, and, as an elder of the First United Methodist Church, was prepared to scold the pastor for too much sermonizing about racial prejudice and unfair labor conditions. . . Ambivalent and stretchable, he seems, all in all, a more interesting figure than Atticus Finch, the plaster saint for whom he provided the mold." How does Atticus Finch compare to Mallon's description of A.C. Lee?
5. When *In Cold Blood* was nearly ready for publication, Capote told one of the detectives on the Clutter case that Nelle wouldn't be given any special credit in the book - "she was just *there*." How would you describe Nelle's contribution to *In Cold Blood*?
6. Gregory Peck insisted that the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* be reedited several times to make the character of Atticus more prominent at the expense of the children's scenes. If you've seen the film, is the film better or worse for Peck getting his way?
7. What do you think was the Lee family's reaction to Nelle's success and why?
8. What are some of the reasons you think that Harper Lee never published another novel?
9. Would you characterize Miss Lee as a "recluse" the way many reporters have?

10. In his introduction to *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee*, Shields writes, "Despite her desire for privacy, I believe it is important to record Lee's story while there are still a few people alive who were part of it and can remember. I have tried to balance her desire for privacy with the desire of her millions of readers who have long hoped for a respectful, informative view of this rarely seen writer." Do you agree with his reason for writing the book while Lee was alive, and do you think he accomplished his goal?

(CharlesJShields.com)

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