

# **BOOK CLUB To Go!**

## **To Kill a Mockingbird**

### **Harper Lee**

#### **Introduction**

Scout (Jean Louise) Finch and her older brother, Jem Finch, live in the town of Maycomb, Al. during the 1930s. Their mother died long before the story begins, and the children are being raised by their lawyer father, Atticus, with the help of Calpurnia, the African-American cook who has worked for the Finches for a long time. Jem and Scout spend their summers playing with their friend Dill Harris, who comes to stay with his aunt, Miss Rachel Haverford, every summer. One summer Dill convinces the Finch children that they should try to get the town bogeyman, Arthur "Boo" Radley, to come out of his house. Nobody has seen him for 20 years or more, and all the children are petrified of him. Jem manages to run up to the Radley house and touch it, but their games don't get much farther than that. The following fall, Scout starts first grade and the children begin finding small objects in a knothole of a tree on the corner of the Radley property. They are curious about these things, and are disappointed one day when they find that Mr. Nathan Radley, Boo's brother, has filled the hole with cement.

Their interest in Boo Radley wanes somewhat as their relations with the other children in town begin to be strained by a court case their father is working on. Atticus is defending Tom Robinson, a black man accused of raping a white woman, Mayella Ewell. Scout gets into fights with other children, and Jem tears up the camellia bushes at the house of old Mrs. Dubose, who has insulted their father. Atticus makes him apologize, and Mrs. Dubose requests that Jem come to read to her every afternoon for a month.

The following summer Dill doesn't come to visit his aunt and Atticus has to go away to sit in the Legislature. During this time, Calpurnia takes the Finch children to her church and they get a glimpse of Negro life. Soon after, their Aunt Alexandra comes to live with them and tries to make the children behave properly. Dill Harris shows up soon afterwards, having run away from home, and they are all happy that he is allowed to stay for the rest of the summer.

As the trial approaches, Atticus goes out one night. The children sneak out too, and see him sitting in front of the jailhouse reading a book. A band of white men arrive, drunk and asking Atticus to let them have Tom. The children approach and break up the tension between the men and Atticus, and the gang leaves. When the trial finally begins, the children go down to the courthouse even though Atticus has told them not

to. The only available seats are in the balcony, where the black people have to sit. From there they watch the whole trial. Atticus makes a good defense, and it becomes obvious that Mayella Ewell forced her affections on Tom. She was seen kissing Tom by her violent father, Bob Ewell, who beat her and then encouraged her to accuse Tom of rape. Tom says that he had been around the Ewell house trying to help Mayella because he felt sorry for her, and because he has one crippled hand, it is obvious that he could not have caused the injuries that she suffered. The Ewells are furious that they have been made fools of and the jury sits out a long time, but in the end a guilty verdict is returned. Tom is sent away to a prison camp to await an appeal, and while there he tries to escape and is shot dead. The black community shows their appreciation to Atticus by leaving all sorts of food on his back porch. Bob Ewell spits in Atticus' face, harasses Tom Robinson's widow, and is suspected of having tried to break into the judge's house.

Atticus dismisses Bob Ewell's actions, saying that he's too cowardly to do anything truly dangerous. But in the fall, Jem and Scout go to a Halloween pageant, and as they are walking home at night, they are attacked in the dark. There is a scuffle, and eventually they are carried home. Jem has been knocked out and has a broken arm; Scout is confused. The doctor examines Jem, and Scout notices a stranger in the room, a man she decides must have been a country person who came to see the pageant. Sheriff Heck Tate arrives a little later with the news that Bob Ewell is lying dead down the street, stabbed between the ribs. He was the person who attacked the children, and the stranger is the person who has saved them. Scout looks at the stranger again and utters her now famous line, "Hey, Boo." Sheriff Tate tells Atticus that Bob Ewell must have fallen on his knife and that is how he will report the case. Scout walks the pale and silent Boo Radley back home, and they never see him again.

*(Novelist)*

## **About the Author**

**Harper Lee** is an elusive figure. Since the publication of her first and only (known) novel, she has carefully guarded her privacy and does not give interviews. She was born Nelle Harper Lee on April 28, 1926 in Monroeville, Ala. Her parents were Amasa Coleman Lee and Frances Finch Lee, and she is the youngest of four children, including two sisters and a brother. She went to Huntingdon College and the University of Alabama, where she studied law. Though her father and older sister, Alice, were lawyers, Lee herself left law school before earning her degree. In the 1950s she worked as an airline clerk in New York City, and in 1957 she submitted the manuscript of a novel to Lippincott. For the next several years she revised this manuscript, and in 1960 *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1961 and was named by President Lyndon Johnson to the National Council of Arts in 1966.

In 1959 she went with her childhood friend Truman Capote (on whom the character Dill Harris is said to be based) to Kansas as a research assistant for the book that would become *In Cold Blood* (1966). Capote dedicated the book partially to her, and invited

Lee to what has become one of the most famous parties of the twentieth century -- his glamorous Black and White ball in honor of Katherine Graham.

In 1962 the movie *To Kill a Mockingbird* was released. The screenplay was written by Horton Foote. Gregory Peck went on to win a Best Actor Oscar for his portrayal of Atticus Finch. In a rare interview with Roy Newquist (published in *Counterpoint*, Rand McNally, 1964), Lee said "I have nothing but gratitude for the people who made the film.... I'm no judge, and the only film I've ever seen made was *Mockingbird*, but there seemed to be an aura of good feeling on the set." She said that at first, though she liked Gregory Peck when she met him, she was unsure that he was right for the part. However, when she saw him in costume, she said "I knew everything was going to be all right because he *was* Atticus."

Since it first appeared in 1960, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has never been out of print and is considered a classic all over the world. In recent years, Lee has split her time between New York and Monroeville, where she lives with her sister. Aside from her famous novel, Harper Lee has written only four essays for publication. Many speculate that she has written books under another name or that she has been working on her memoirs or other novels, but there is no confirmation of these rumors. However, it is hard to believe that Harper Lee has given up writing. In her interview with Newquist, she said "You know, many writers really don't like to write.... I like to write. Sometimes I'm afraid that I like it too much because when I get into work I don't want to leave it. As a result I'll go for days and days without leaving the house or wherever I happen to be. I'll go out long enough to get papers and pick up some food and that's it. It's strange, but instead of hating writing I love it too much."

*(Novelist)*

## **Reviews**

"Despite a melodramatic climax and traces of sermonizing, the characters and locale are depicted with insight and a rare blend of wit and compassion." – *(Reviewed September 1, 1960 Booklist Review)*

"Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning first (and last) novel of racial injustice in a small Southern town ranks among just about everyone's favorite books. This 35th-anniversary edition contains a brief new foreword by the elusive Lee." – *(Library Journal Review 5/15/1960)*

YOUR KIRKWOOD PUBLIC LIBRARY

314-821-5770 [www.kpl.lib.mo.us](http://www.kpl.lib.mo.us)

## **Further Reading**

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou

*Ellen Foster* by Kaye Gibbons

*The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy

*Wolf Whistle* by Lewis Nordan

## **Film Adaptation of the Novel**

"The book was made into the well-received 1962 film with the same title, starring Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch. The film's producer, Alan J. Pakula, remembered Paramount Studios executives questioning him about a potential script: "They said, 'What story do you plan to tell for the film?' I said, 'Have you read the book?' They said, 'Yes.' I said, 'That's the story.'" The movie won three Oscars: Best Actor for Gregory Peck, Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, Black-and-White, and Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium for Horton Foote. It was nominated for five more Oscars including Best Actress in a Supporting Role for Mary Badham, the actress who played Scout.

Harper Lee was pleased with the movie, saying: "In that film the man and the part met... I've had many, many offers to turn it into musicals, into TV or stage plays, but I've always refused. That film was a work of art." Peck met Lee's father, the model for Atticus, before the filming. Lee's father died before the film's release, and Lee was so impressed with Peck's performance that she gave him her father's pocketwatch, which he had with him the evening he was awarded the Oscar for best actor. Years later, he was reluctant to tell Lee that the watch was stolen out of his luggage in London Heathrow Airport. When Peck eventually did tell Lee, he said she responded, "'Well, it's only a watch.' Harper—she feels deeply, but she's not a sentimental person about things." Lee and Peck shared a friendship long after the movie was made. Peck's grandson was named "Harper" in her honor.

In May 2005, Lee made an uncharacteristic appearance at the Los Angeles Public Library for an event in her honor. It was hosted by Peck's widow Veronique, who said of Lee: "She's like a national treasure. She's someone who has made a difference...with this book. The book is still as strong as it ever was, and so is the film. All the kids in the United States read this book and see the film in the seventh and eighth grades and write papers and essays. My husband used to get thousands and thousands of letters from teachers who would send them to him."

*(Wikipedia)*

## Honors

During the years immediately following the novel's publication, Lee enjoyed the attention its popularity garnered her, granting interviews, visiting schools, and attending events honoring the book. In 1961, when *To Kill a Mockingbird* was in its 41st week on the bestseller list, it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, stunning Harper Lee. It also won the Brotherhood Award of the National Conference of Christians and Jews in the same year. Starting in 1964, Lee began to turn down interviews, complaining of monotonous questioning. She has declined ever since to talk with reporters about the book. She has also steadfastly refused to provide an introduction, writing in 1995: "Introductions inhibit pleasure, they kill the joy of anticipation, they frustrate curiosity. The only good thing about introductions is that in some cases they delay the dose to come. *Mockingbird* still says what it has to say; it has managed to survive the years without preamble."

In 2001, Lee was inducted into the Alabama Academy of Honor. In the same year, Chicago mayor Richard M. Daley initiated a reading program throughout the city's libraries, and chose his favorite book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as the first title of the One City, One Book program. Lee declared that "there is no greater honor the novel could receive". By 2004, the novel had been chosen by 25 communities for variations of citywide reading programs, more than any other novel.

In 2006, Lee was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Notre Dame. During the ceremony, the graduating class and audience gave Lee a standing ovation, and the entire graduating class held up copies of *To Kill a Mockingbird* to honor her.

Lee was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom on Nov. 5, 2007, by President George W. Bush. In his remarks, Bush stated, "One reason *To Kill a Mockingbird* succeeded is the wise and kind heart of the author, which comes through on every page... *To Kill a Mockingbird* has influenced the character of our country for the better. It's been a gift to the entire world. As a model of good writing and humane sensibility, this book will be read and studied forever."

*(Wikipedia)*

# **BOOK CLUB To Go!**

## **To Kill a Mockingbird**

### **Harper Lee**

#### **Possible Discussion Questions**

1. Discuss why this book is considered to be a children's classic or young adult book when it deals with such serious subjects?
2. Atticus tells the children several times that they need to walk in someone else's shoes before judging the person. Describe times when Atticus, Scout or Jem walk in someone else's shoes. How does this change how they view the situations? What role does this advice play in sympathy and compassion?
3. Discuss race issues in this book. Why does Calpurnia speak differently around other black people? Why does Mr. Raymond pretend he is drunk to help people cope with his mixed marriage?
4. What does Boo Radley represent?
5. How does the trial and everything surrounding it change the town? Change Jem and Scout? Did it change you?
6. At one point Jem describes four kinds of "folks" in Maycomb County: "our kind of folks don't like the Cunninghams, the Cunninghams don't like the Ewells, and the Ewells hate and despise the colored folks." What does *To Kill a Mockingbird* teach us about how people cope with issues of race and class? Do you classify people in your world as different "folks?" Do you see those sort of distinctions today?
7. What does Miss Maudie mean when she says "His food doesn't stick going down, does it?"
8. In the last few lines of *To Kill a Mockingbird* Scout says, "he was real nice..." and Atticus replies, "most people are, Scout, when you finally see them." Do you agree that most people in the novel are nice once you see them? How is Atticus able to see the good side of people despite all he has experienced? Can you?
9. At the end of the book, Scout says that telling people Boo Radley committed the murder would have been "sort of like shootin' a mockingbird." What does that mean? Do you agree that Boo is like a mockingbird?
10. How does this book pertain to the world we live in today?

(*Novelist*) & (*About.com: Bestsellers*)