

# Harper Lee's Novel Achievement

**With *To Kill a Mockingbird*, published 50 years ago, Lee gave America a story for the ages. Just don't ask her about it**

By Charles Leerhsen, *Smithsonian* magazine, June 2010

To spend an hour in Monroeville, Alabama, is to know why Harper Lee, the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, ranks as one of the crankiest writers on the planet. Strongly inclined to put aside the hype and hoopla and let literature speak for itself, Lee, the best-known native of the town (pop. 6,372) that served as the model for her novel's Maycomb, has found herself living a short drive from one restaurant called the Mockingbird Grill and another named Radley's Fountain, after Boo Radley, the character in *Mockingbird* who might be voted Least Likely to Become a Restaurateur. That would be a mere T-shirt's toss from a gift shop peddling *Mockingbird* hats, tote bags, necklaces, Christmas ornaments, refrigerator magnets, wrist bands (inscribed "I see it, Scout, I see it!") and paper fans. The gift shop is in the venerable courthouse where as a child Lee watched her father practice law, and which she later rendered so vividly in her book. The courthouse has long since been turned into a *Mockingbird* museum, to the delight of a constant stream of camera-toting tourists, foreign and domestic. I sympathize with Lee, who has steadfastly refused to take part in the merchandising of her most famous accomplishment. Life can't be easy when everything you hate about success stands between you and the Piggly Wiggly.

This could be an especially maddening season for the 84-year-old author, given that 2010 marks the 50th year since *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published, and we all know how the media love anniversaries. Witness this very article, for example, though believe me no novelists were annoyed during its production. After what I had heard about her, I was too scared to knock on the door of her residence of record, a neat brick, reportedly book-lined house she shared with her older sister Alice, or even to request an interview through the closest thing there are to proper channels. I should also disclose at this juncture that I am working under the influence of Inspirational Writer's Water, purchased at the gift shop described above.

Lee relied on perspiration as much as inspiration during the drawn-out creation of the book that, when it finally appeared on July 11, 1960, changed her life instantly and forever. Translated into more than 40 languages, *Mockingbird* has sold over 30 million copies; with help from the anniversary hullabaloo, HarperCollins (the book was originally published by the now-defunct Lippincott) will probably sell at least a million more this year, mostly to high schools and junior high schools, where it has been a staple of reading lists since it won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1961. The 1962 movie version, starring Gregory Peck, won three Oscars, yet somehow that earnest black-and-white film never trumped the three-dimensional chiaroscuro *Mockingbird* that shimmers in peoples' imaginations after they experience Lee's work on the printed page. Indeed, many say the story of Scout Finch; her lawyer father, Atticus; her brother, Jem; their neighbor Dill; and the ill-fated Tom Robinson is their all-time favorite novel. In surveys

asking what one book every civilized person should read, *Mockingbird* routinely finishes second to the Bible, and in one (if I may go a bit Maycomb on you here) it up and finished first.

Readers have been living with the book for so long that they may not realize how profoundly odd this is. *Mockingbird* is hardly a marketer's or publicist's dream, and could easily have been dismissed as a downer. Set in the "tired old town" of Maycomb, in the unglamorous era of the Great Depression, it tells the story of a widower attorney who tries in vain to defend a black laborer from a wrongful charge of rape. It's pretty clear at the outset that Tom Robinson's word won't be taken over that of the unstable white incest victim who accuses him. And...guess what? It isn't. That maddening miscarriage of justice is not even the worst thing that happens to Robinson in the book. Like life itself, *Mockingbird* has no neat, symmetrical story arc, allowing obstacles to be introduced and then overcome before the ending. (That may be one reason the movie's producer, Alan J. Pakula, said there was no studio stampede to acquire film rights.) The other thing *Mockingbird* lacks is what salespeople might call synergistic potential: it has no series mates, or even a sequel, that can help turn a book into a brand. There is no *To Kill a Cockatiel* or *Valley of the Dills* or *Am I Boo?* *Mockingbird* is Harper Lee's one and only published book.

Lee has never discussed her output, or lack of one, publicly. Not since the mid-'60s has she said anything for the record about her career. "My book had a universal theme," she told the Birmingham *Post-Herald* in 1962. "It's not a 'racial' novel. It portrays an aspect of civilization, not necessarily Southern civilization."

But don't call her a recluse. Miss Nelle, as she's known around town (she went with her middle name on the dust jacket because she didn't want Yankees to elide Nelle Lee into "Nellie"), is that tallish woman with closely cropped white hair who over the years you could see in the aisles of the grocery store or having coffee at Hardees, often in the company of Alice, who also never married. (Lee is rumored to have had a slight stroke in 2008.) They were living comfortably but not extravagantly a short walk from the site of the modest wood-frame house where she, and the book's narrator, Scout, were raised. (In its place now is an ice-cream stand known, surprisingly, as Mel's Dairy Dream, and not *To Chill a Mockingbird*.) She would play golf and, occasionally, fish. ("I'm not like Thomas Wolfe," Lee said in a 1961 *Life* magazine interview. "I can go home again.") During the summer, when she would migrate to New York City, she would go to museums and the theater and root for the Mets, the natural choice for someone with an underdog thing as big as the Ritz. In 2007, Lee went to the White House to accept the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian honor, from President George W. Bush (and said nothing that was reported). She has a quick and easy smile for those who respect her privacy. But reporters who request an interview through 98-year-old Alice, a sneaker-wearing attorney at the family firm and her sister's semiofficial gatekeeper, can expect a polite but ironclad refusal. ("Hell no," Lee herself once wrote in reply to a scribe's request.)

It was not always thus. At first, perhaps buoyed by the mostly rave reviews and strong sales, Lee talked to almost anyone with a pad or microphone, saying that Atticus only superficially resembled her beloved father, A.C. ("one of the few men I've known who has

genuine humility”) and the trial in her novel “was a composite of all the trials in the world” (as opposed to, say, a gloss on the Scottsboro Boys’ trial, as has been widely supposed). The questions, though, tended to be repetitive, annoyingly so. Journalists seemed obsessed with determining the degree to which the novel was autobiographical. Lee tended to say that her characters were basically fictional, but her biography does seem more ambiguous. After all, she had been a tomboy like Scout, with an older brother like Jem. A Boo Radleyish character lived just down her street. Dill, meanwhile, closely resembled the young Truman Capote, who as a boy had spent summers at his cousin’s house, next door to Lee’s.

Once interviewers broached the subject of Capote, Lee might have braced herself for a question that would have been not just annoying but insulting: Wasn’t it true that her pal Truman had written much of her book? Capote—always competitive, and, of course, a bit of a crackpot—didn’t discourage the rumor, answering vaguely when asked about his contributions to her novel. The truth (as is evident from Capote’s private correspondence) is that he did not write a word of *Mockingbird*, and that Lee, who assisted him as a reporter and researcher on *In Cold Blood*, contributed substantially more to Capote’s 1966 blockbuster than he ever admitted. Still, the rumor persists—to the point where it is addressed (and debunked) in one of the Monroeville museum’s exhibits.

Another distasteful question was the inevitable two-parter about what she was doing next and when the world would see it. Soon after *Mockingbird* appeared, Lee said, only half-jokingly, “All I want to be is the Jane Austen of south Alabama,” and she began work on a second Southern novel, but its progress was slow. This in itself was not surprising: *Mockingbird* had not exactly fallen fully formed from Lee’s brain. She had turned out essays, humor pieces and short stories for campus publications during her one year at Huntingdon College in Montgomery and her years at the University of Alabama (where she studied law), but writing did not come easily to her. After she moved to New York City in 1949, she struggled for years with a hodgepodge of anecdotes about small-town Southern life, first called *Go Set a Watchman* and then *Atticus*. She received encouragement from an agent, Maurice Crain, and an editor, Lippincott’s Tay Hohoff, who had seen the work-in-progress, but one night in 1957 she flung the unfinished manuscript out the window of her Manhattan cold-water flat. After a teary phone call to Hohoff, Lee charged down the stairs, recovered the forsaken pages—and then began a title-on-down revision that resulted in a book that would become a Literary Guild selection and Book of the Month Club alternate, and that the *New Yorker* would call “unpretentious and totally ingenious” and the *Chicago Tribune* would hail as “a novel of strong contemporary national significance.”

Many years later, to a fan who engaged her in conversation in a fast-food restaurant in Monroeville, Lee would say straightforwardly that the success of *Mockingbird* “overwhelmed” her, making it impossible for her to write a follow-up book. She wrestled with that second novel for several years—and then one day Alice rather too calmly told a BBC interviewer that the manuscript had been stolen from their home and the project had been abandoned. (And Alice later told a *Chicago Tribune* reporter that the book never got beyond the conceptual stage.) In the mid-1980s Lee began researching a nonfiction book about an Alabama preacher suspected of being a serial killer, tentatively titled *The Reverend*. But she abandoned it, too, perhaps feeling that just as she could not out-Lee Lee she could not out-Capote Capote.

From this low point, however, Lee seems to have found her way to a place of relative peace. She did squawk a few years ago when the museum crossed a line in her mind and started selling a collection of recipes called *Calpurnia's Cookbook*, after the black housekeeper in the novel. (The book was withdrawn.) But it seems that Lee has come to accept that she will publish only one book, and to enjoy that she exceeded her expectations in doing so. "When you're at the top," she once told her cousin Dickie Williams, "there is only one way to go."

Lee will in all likelihood stand aside and let *Mockingbird's* 50th anniversary happen. Truth be told, Monroeville is a charming place, where the palpable pride in its native daughter's achievement tends to make up for the occasional crassness. Besides, Monroe--villians have been exploiting Lee's work for decades: when the movie came out in '62, Charles J. Shields reports in his biography *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee* (2006), the local theater offered \$10 to the first five people who showed up with live mockingbirds. Jane Ellen Clark, director of the Old Courthouse Museum, notes that pilgrims started flocking spontaneously to Monroeville in 1960, as soon as the book was published. "All these people who said it was their favorite book would save up for the trip and find the town," she says. For thousands each year, "this was their vacation, and we created the museum because we wanted to give them something to see." Every spring since 1991, the town has staged a several-times-a-week theatrical production of *To Kill a Mockingbird* with local volunteer actors in the roles. Act I takes place on the town square, weather permitting, and Act II inside the courthouse. If the air conditioning isn't working, it can get steamy in that cavernous chamber, especially up in the "colored balcony" (as it was called in the '30s), where I saw last year's production. But if you've got a bottle of water, inspirational or otherwise, it makes for a uniquely American evening, right down to the realization that, as you're standing and applauding for the sometimes contradictory notions of small-town values and racial tolerance, Harper Lee would prefer to be a thousand miles to the north, cheering, "Let's Go, Mets!"

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