



## [To Kill a Mockingbird](#), by Harper Lee

### **In A Nutshell**

When *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s story of an African-American man falsely accused of raping a white woman first appeared in 1960, the Civil Rights Movement was well on its way toward significantly revolutionizing how the U.S. conceived of race. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown vs. the Board of Education* that separate was not equal, paving the way for the integration of the public school system. In 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white person and was arrested, sparking a series of boycotts that were ultimately successful in changing policy. Progress was far from smooth, however: in 1958 some southern schools closed altogether, rather than let African-Americans study alongside whites. And, in 1955, fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was brutally murdered after approaching a white woman in a store – an event that may have influenced author Harper Lee in writing *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Lee did not set her novel in contemporary late 1950s society, however. This novel instead takes place a few decades earlier, before the changes and conflicts of the civil rights era. The book is set in the time period of Lee's own youth, and many critics have pointed out the similarities between her and Scout, and her childhood friend, Truman Capote, and Dill. Lee herself has said that she did not intend the book to be an autobiography. She simply wrote what she knew. It's also her only book: she never published another novel, and, within a few years of *Mockingbird*'s publication, she went into a seclusion to rival that of her character Boo Radley.

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If a person's only going to write one novel, they couldn't do much better than *Mockingbird*. Awarded the Pulitzer Prize, it's also never been out of print, and has long been a staple of high school English classes. On at least one list of top-whatever books, it's ranked #1. The novel has become an iconic example of a book that can make its readers into better people in 300 pages or less.

While *Mockingbird*'s message of standing up for what's right even when the costs are high still receives acclaim, not everyone agrees that it holds the moral high ground. While the main reason it frequently appears on the ALA's list of banned books is its use of profanity, it's also been challenged for its one-dimensional representation of African-Americans as docile, simple folk who need whites to protect them. While some see the novel as a powerful statement against racism, others see it as reproducing racism in a less obvious form. No matter which side a reader leans towards, the strong reactions the novel provokes just go to show that its influence remains strong even today.

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## Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 The events of *To Kill a Mockingbird* are set in the 1930s, but racism is still with us – for example, just a few years ago, African-American students at a Southern high school were harassed for sitting under a tree unofficially reserved for white students and then prosecuted for fighting back against their tormentors (they became known as the Jena Six). What can the novel tell us about facing racism today?

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- 2 How do gender and race intersect in the novel? How much of Mayella 's treatment is due not just to her being a white person accusing an African-American, but a white woman accusing an African-American man?
- 3 After *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee never wrote another novel. If she had written a sequel continuing Scout 's story, what might it be like?

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