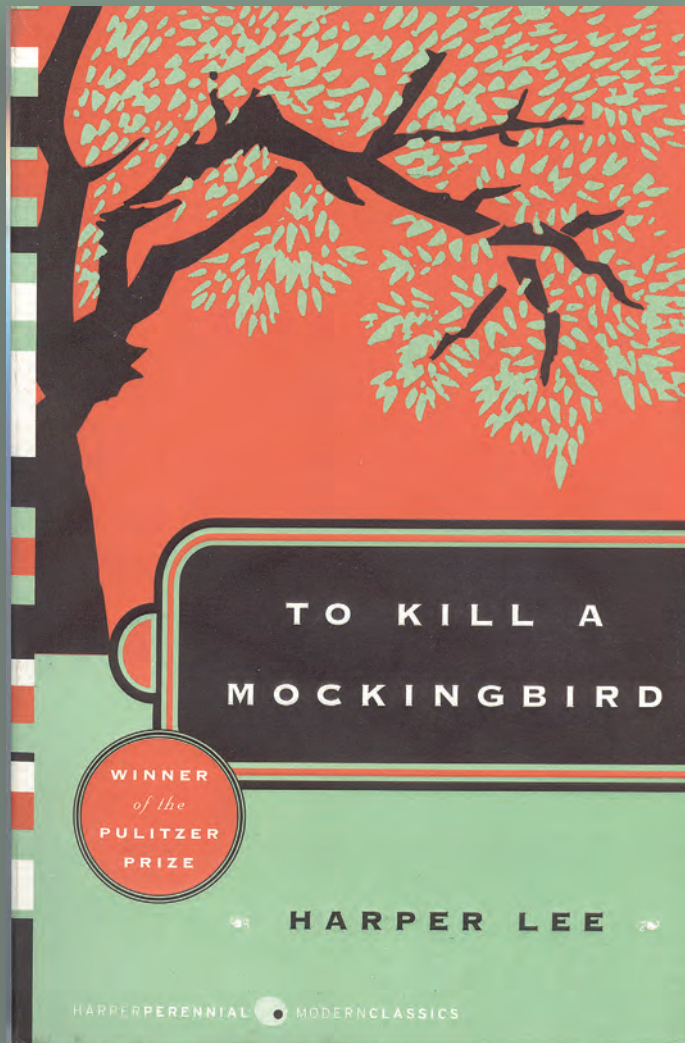


CELEBRATING FIFTY YEARS OF *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*

Kathleen A. Guthrie



“Hey, Boo.”

Anyone who has taken a high school literature course will be able to name the book the line “Hey, Boo” comes from and the character who speaks these immortal words: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Jean Louise “Scout” Finch. After the spark of recognition come the remembrances of favorite lines, beloved characters, and long-ago epiphanies of when the book first took hold of our imaginations.

Fifty years after Nelle Harper Lee published her only novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird* still sells nearly 1 million copies a year. Lee received the Pulitzer Prize for her work and, in December 1962, attended the premiere of the film adaptation starring Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch, a modest small-town attorney who bravely faces institutionalized racism and segregation in the fight for justice. Acclaim and popularity for the book and the film elevated both to classic status. Atticus became a national hero, and his spunky daughter, Scout, an icon.

This year, Lee’s controversial story is celebrated and dissected in the seventy-two-minute documentary film *Hey, Boo: Harper Lee and To Kill a Mockingbird*, which includes archival footage, clips from the film, and personal photographs. A companion book, *Scout, Atticus & Boo: A Celebration of Fifty Years of To Kill a Mockingbird* (HarperCollins, \$24.99, available at bookstores and online), features expanded transcripts of the filmed interviews. In both, various authors share

how the book inspired them to work their craft and become better writers. Teachers remember it as the book that first turned them on to great literature when they were teens, and thrill when they recognize that same spark in their students. Law students and attorneys cite Atticus as their hero and inspiration for going into the field; Americans of all backgrounds claim the story motivates them to be better humans.

Documentary filmmaker Mary McDonagh Murphy (*Cry for Help* for PBS) was on her back porch, reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* for the third time, when inspiration struck. As a producer at CBS News for twenty years, she had pitched several angles on putting together a piece on the book; however, “Word always came back: Can’t do it unless you get Harper Lee,” she says. Lee has

ties—weigh in on the creation of what Oprah Winfrey has dubbed “our national novel” and the impact it has had and still has on our national consciousness.

Wally Lamb, author of best-sellers *I Know This Much Is True* and *She’s Come Undone*, writes in the foreword about his long relationship with the book, first, reluctantly, as a teenager, then as a teacher, later as a writer. His sister had been “yapping” about a novel she’d just read, and it piqued his curiosity. Two days later, he finished reading. “It was the first time in my life that a book had sort of captured me,” he says. “That was exciting; I didn’t realize that literature could do that.”

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Richard Russo (*Empire Falls*) and news correspondent Tom Brokaw were drawn

“I never expected any sort of success with *Mockingbird*. I was hoping for a quick and merciful death at the hands of the reviewers but, at the same time, I sort of hoped someone would like it enough to give me encouragement. Public encouragement. I hoped for a little, as I said, but I got rather a whole lot, and in some ways this was just about as frightening as the quick merciful death I’d expected.”

Harper Lee, quoted from interview with Roy Newquist, 1964

declined all interviews since 1964, preferring a quiet, private life away from the noise and notoriety of celebrity. While Murphy has respected Lee’s desire to remain out of the limelight, she believed “absolutely” that something could be done to celebrate this enduring classic. “The story was the novel and its endurance,” she says, “a phenomenon if ever there was one.”

Several prominent people were eager to share their opinions on why this phenomenon is still relevant and remarkably popular fifty years after it first appeared on bookshelves. They also discuss their favorite lines, favorite characters, the quality of the writing, why the story remains meaningful to them on their first and subsequent reads, and they speculate as to why Lee has chosen not to publish anything else.

The cast of contributors Murphy assembled is impressive. Writers, teachers, celebrities, and Lee’s friends and sister—Alice Finch Lee (Finch was Alice and Nelle’s mother’s maiden name), still practicing law in her nine-

ties to Atticus and Scout’s unique father/daughter relationship. Brokaw refers to the scene in which Scout asks her father why he has agreed to represent Tom Robinson in what seems to be a lost cause. Atticus replies, “Every lawyer gets at least one case in his lifetime that affects him personally.” Brokaw was struck by Lee’s honest portrayal of the personal relationships. “There was self-doubt. Atticus knew that he wasn’t a perfect man. You can see him working his way through why he was going to take this case,” Brokaw says. “He knew that there would be consequences for him, and that conversation, the dialogue between the two of them, is sophisticated in its own way, and yet it’s still between a father and a daughter.”

David Kipen, a former book reviewer for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and recent director of literature for the National Endowment of the Arts, was surprised by the book’s humor. “Scout’s voice is a very comic voice. She’s a scamp and hysterically funny, and no less funny as an adult looking back. She’s just great company.” Another Pulitzer Prize winner, Diane McWhorter, recalls recit-

ing Scout-isms with her classmates, such as “What in the Sam Hill are you doing?” and the “Hey, Mr. Cunningham” speech. On a deeper level, as a child growing up in 1960s Birmingham, McWhorter was disturbed by what she experienced when she saw the film for the first time and realized Atticus was not going to win Tom Robinson’s freedom. “I started getting really upset about being upset, because by rooting for a black man, you were kind of betraying every principle that you were raised to believe in,” she says. “Crying for a black man was so taboo that I never forgot it.” Although set in the Jim Crow South of the 1930s, it’s significant that the book came out in 1960, before the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement. For generations of young people, reading this book forced them to face the realities of racism in their own towns. “But it also gave us hope that justice could prevail,” says Andrew Young, who worked alongside Martin Luther King Jr.

Lee’s original manuscript was titled, simply, *Atticus*, and many people argue that Atticus, not the narrator Scout, is the key character in the story. The character Atticus Finch seems based on Lee’s father, Amasa Coleman (A.C.) Lee, although Lee has never confirmed this. A.C. was an attorney in Monroeville, Alabama, the model for Lee’s fictional Maycomb. Lee spent many days of her youth in the gallery of the courthouse, watching her father work, and, in the documentary, clips show the original courthouse as well as the carefully reconstructed interiors built on Universal Studio’s back lot for the film’s pivotal scenes. The original courthouse today is home to the Monroe County Heritage Museum. Executive director Jane Ellen Clark reports, “People in town say that Mister A.C. Lee was a lot like the character of Atticus—soft-spoken, dignified, and did the right thing.”

Peck’s performance earned the actor an Academy Award, and the film has been ranked by the American Film Institute (AFI) as the number one courtroom drama. In 2003, AFI named Atticus Finch, as portrayed by Peck, the “Greatest Screen Hero of All Time”; he beat out number two Indiana Jones and number three James Bond. It’s clear this character still inspires respect, especially among young and aspiring attorneys.

Scott Turow, author of the legal thriller *Presumed Innocent*, recalls reading the book as a student: “I promised myself that when I grew up and I was a man, I would try to do things just as good and noble as what Atticus had done for Tom Robinson.” Once he started his own law

practice, Turow says, he made a commitment to doing pro bono work in part because of Atticus’s influence. “It’s true there aren’t many human beings in the world like Atticus Finch—perhaps none,” he says, “but that doesn’t mean that it’s not worth striving to be like him.”

Scout certainly revered her father. Readers admire him. Attorneys consider him their folk hero. And few people can keep a dry eye when they read or hear: “Miss Jean Louise, stand up. Your father’s passing.”

In addition to the serious discussions, behind-the-scenes tidbits are offered up by Alice Lee Finch, Boaty Boatwright, who cast the children in the film, and Mary Badham, the actress who played Scout and was honored with an Academy Award nomination for her performance. Clark points out places of note around Monroeville, such as the house where the town’s “Boo” supposedly lived, and shares local gossip about which characters resembled Lee’s real-life neighbors. (The only character Lee has confirmed as based on a real person is Scout’s young friend, Dill, based on Lee’s childhood friend, Truman Capote, the author of *In Cold Blood*).

Is it our “national novel”? Was Lee “courageous” to write it? Is she “the conscience of our country”? Whether you agree or not, it’s clear *To Kill a Mockingbird* is an enduring classic that crosses racial and generational lines. Russo observes: “...masterpieces are masterpieces not because they are flawless, but because they’ve tapped into something essential to us, at the heart of who we are and how we live.”

Debates are sure to continue as fans reread and rewatch the story and as new generations “discover” it on film, in print, and in Murphy’s two new additions to the conversation. If you think you know everything there is to know about Harper Lee’s classic novel, as Scout would say, “You have another think coming.”

Kathleen Guthrie’s work has appeared in 805 Living, Real Simple, and Via magazines. She lives in San Francisco with her attorney fiancé and their dogs, Beau and, naturally, Scout.

Editor’s Note:

Visit marymurphy.net for information about TV broadcast schedules and the release of *Hey, Boo* on DVD. You can sign up to preorder the DVD or join the mailing list for availability updates.