ReadingGroupGuides
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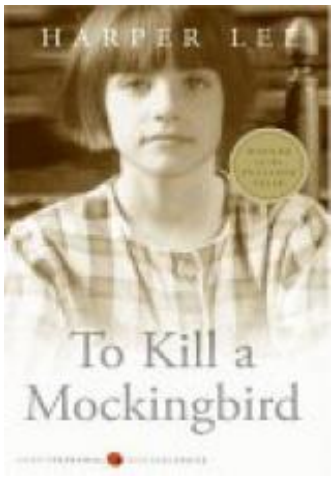
To Kill a Mockingbird

by Harper Lee



About the Book

One of the best-loved stories of all time, **To Kill a Mockingbird** has earned many distinctions since its original publication in 1960. It won the Pulitzer Prize, has been translated into more than forty languages, sold more than thirty million copies worldwide, and been made into an enormously popular movie. Most recently, librarians across the country gave the book the highest of honors by voting it the best novel of the twentieth century.

Discussion Guide

1. How do Scout, Jem, and Dill characterize Boo Radley at the beginning of the book? In what way did Boo's past history of violence foreshadow his method of protecting Jem and Scout from Bob Ewell? Does this repetition of aggression make him more or less of a sympathetic character?

2. In Scout's account of her childhood, her father Atticus reigns supreme. How would you characterize his abilities as a single parent? How would you describe his treatment of Calpurnia and Tom Robinson vis a vis his treatment of his white neighbors and colleagues? How would you typify his views on race and class in the larger context of his community and his peers?

3. The title of Lee's book is alluded to when Atticus gives his children air rifles and tells them that they can shoot all the bluejays they want, but "it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." At the end of the novel, Scout likens the "sin" of naming Boo as Bob Ewell's killer to "shootin' a mockingbird." Do you think that Boo is the only innocent, or mockingbird, in this novel?

4. Scout ages two years-from six to eight-over the course of Lee's novel, which is narrated from her perspective as an adult. Did you find the account her narrator provides believable? Were there incidents or observations in the book that seemed unusually "knowing" for such a young child? What event or episode in Scout's story do you feel truly captures her personality?

5. To Kill a Mockingbird has been challenged repeatedly by the political left and right, who have sought to remove it from libraries for its portrayal of conflict between children and adults; ungrammatical speech; references to sex, the supernatural, and witchcraft; and unfavorable presentation of blacks. Which elements of the book-if any-do you think touch on controversial issues in our contemporary culture? Did you find any of those elements especially troubling, persuasive, or insightful?

6. Jem describes to Scout the four "folks" or classes of people 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 do you think of the ways in which Lee explores race and class in 1930s Alabama? What significance, if any, do you think these characterizations have for people living in other parts of the world?

7. One of the chief criticisms of **To Kill a Mockingbird** is that the two central storylines -- Scout, Jem, and Dill's fascination with Boo Radley and the trial between Mayella Ewell and Tom Robinson -- are not sufficiently connected in the novel. Do you think that Lee is successful in incorporating these different stories? Were you surprised at the way in which these story lines were resolved? Why or why not?

8. By the end of **To Kill a Mockingbird**, the book's first sentence: "When he was thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow," has been explained and resolved. What did you think of the events that followed the Halloween pageant? Did you think that Bob Ewell was capable of injuring Scout or Jem? How did you feel about Boo Radley's last-minute intervention?

9. What elements of this book did you find especially memorable, humorous, or inspiring? Are there individual characters whose beliefs, acts, or motives especially impressed or surprised you? Did any events in this book cause you to reconsider your childhood memories or experiences in a new light?

Author Bio

Nelle Harper Lee was born on April 28, 1926 in Monroeville Alabama, a city of about 7,000 people in Monroe County. Monroeville is in southwest Alabama, about halfway between Montgomery and Mobile.

She is the youngest of four children of Amasa Coleman Lee and Frances Finch Lee. Harper Lee attended Huntingdon College 1944-45, studied law at the University of Alabama 1945-49, and studied one year at Oxford University. In the 1950s she worked as a reservation clerk with Eastern Air Lines and BOAC in New York City.

In order to concentrate on writing, Harper Lee gave up her position with the airline and moved into a cold-water apartment with makeshift furniture. Her father's sudden illness forced her to divide her time between New York and Monroeville, a practice she has continued.

In 1957 Miss Lee submitted the manuscript of her novel to the J. B. Lippincott Company. She was told that her novel consisted of a series of short stories strung together, and she was urged to rewrite it. For the next two and a half years she reworked the manuscript with the help of her editor, Tay Hohoff, and in 1960 TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD was published, her only published book. In 1961 she had two articles published: "Love - In Other Words" in Vogue, and "Christmas To Me" in McCall's. "Christmas To Me" is the story of Harper Lee receiving the gift of a year's time for writing from friends. "When Children Discover America" was published in McCall's in 1965.

In June of 1966, Harper Lee was one of two people named by President Johnson to the National Council of Arts. Also named to the 26 member council was artist Richard Diebenkorn Jr.

There has not been as much published on the doings of Miss Lee since 1966.

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--- After being instructed to rewrite it, Lee worked on it for two and a half more years

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Critical Praise

"All of the tactile brilliance and none of the precocity generally supposed to be standard swamp-warfare issues for Southern writers...Novelist Lee's prose has an edge that cuts through cant, and she teaches the reader an astonishing number of use truths about little girls and about Southern life...Scout Finch is fiction's most pealing child since Carson McCullers's Frankie got left behind at the wedding."

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