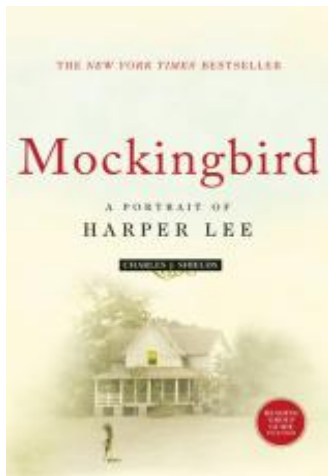


# Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee

by Charles J. Shields

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## About the Book

The colorful life of the remarkable woman who created *To Kill a Mockingbird*-the classic that became a touchstone for generations of Americans.

**To Kill a Mockingbird**, the twentieth-century's most widely read American novel, has sold thirty million copies and still sells several hundred thousand a year. Yet despite the book's perennial popularity, its creator, Harper Lee has become a somewhat mysterious figure. Now, after years of research, Charles J. Shields has brought to life the warmhearted, high-spirited, and occasionally hardheaded woman who gave us two of American literature's most unforgettable characters-Atticus Finch and his daughter, Scout-and who contributed to the success of her lifelong friend Truman Capote's masterpiece, **In Cold Blood**.

At the center of Shields's lively book is the story of Lee's struggle to create her famous novel. But her life contains many other highlights as well: her girlhood as a tomboy in overalls in tiny Monroeville, Alabama; the murder trial that inspired her great work; her journey to Kansas as Capote's ally and research assistant to help report the story of the Clutter murders; the surrogate family she found in New York City.

Drawing on six hundred interviews and much new information, **Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee** is the first book ever written about Harper Lee. Highly entertaining, filled with humor and heart, this is an evocative portrait of a writer, her dream, and the place and people whom she made immortal.

## Discussion Guide

1. Hypothesize: in light of Nelle Harper Lee's relationship to her mother, why is there no mother in **To Kill a Mockingbird**

2. On the surface, Truman Capote and Nelle Harper Lee appeared to be so opposite as children. What was it about their lives and circumstances that led them to become close friends?
3. Today, social services address many of the problems that were taken for granted about life in Monroeville, Alabama in the 1930s. If Nelle Harper Lee was growing up in Monroeville now, how might her upbringing and experiences be different?
4. In his *New Yorker* magazine review of **Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee**, Thomas Mallon writes about Harper Lee's father, "Mr. Lee was a 'fond and indulgent father,' who, in addition to practicing law, edited Monroeville's local paper and served in the state legislature. He believed in segregation, low taxes, and noblesse oblige, and, as an elder of the First United Methodist Church, was prepared to scold the pastor for too much sermonizing about racial prejudice and unfair labor conditions. Ambivalent and stretchable, he seems, all in all, a more interesting figure than Atticus Finch, the plaster saint for whom he provided the mold." How does Atticus Finch compare to Mallon's description of A.C. Lee?
5. When **In Cold Blood** was nearly ready for publication, Capote told one of the detectives on the Clutter case that Nelle wouldn't be given any special credit in the book- "she was just *there*." How would you describe Nelle's contribution to **In Cold Blood**?
6. Gregory Peck insisted that the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* be reedited several times to make the character of Atticus more prominent at the expense of the children's scenes. If you've seen the film, is the film better or worse for Peck getting his way?
7. What do you think was the Lee family's reaction to Nelle's success and why?
8. What are some of the reasons you think that Harper Lee never published another novel?
9. Would you characterize Miss Lee as a "recluse" the way many reporters have?
10. In his introduction to **Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee**, Shields writes, "Despite her desire for privacy, I believe it is important to record Lee's story while there are still a few people alive who were part of it and can remember. I have tried to balance her desire for privacy with the desire of her millions of readers who have long hoped for a respectful, informative view of this rarely seen writer." Do you agree with his reason for writing the book while Lee was alive, and do you think he accomplished his goal?

## Author Bio

Charles J. Shields is the author of Harper Lee's *New York Times* bestselling biography **MOCKINGBIRD**, the Kurt Vonnegut biography **AND SO IT GOES**, and the biography of John Edward Williams, **THE MAN WHO WROTE THE PERFECT NOVEL**. Shields has spoken to hundreds of large audiences in schools, libraries, museums and historic theaters, and appeared in newspapers and magazines worldwide, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *New Yorker*, *Huffington Post* and *New York Times*.

## Critical Praise

"Harper Lee caught the beauty of America with **To Kill a Mockingbird**, but has remained something of a mystery ever since. Charles J. Shields's portrait of her, **Mockingbird**, shows us a quietly reclusive, down-to-earth woman with an enormous gift and documents her struggle to live with that gift for the rest of her life. Shields's evocation of both the woman and her beautiful, sleepy, and smoldering South are pitch-perfect."

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### **Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee**

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