

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one of the most important works in American literature. Its appeal, readability, and smooth-flowing narrative contribute to its success. The plots contrast the universal themes – “humor versus tragedy; innocence versus guilt; good versus evil; ignorance versus truth” (“Timeless”). This style unique to Harper Lee comes from the experiences that have defined her life.

Harper Lee was born on April 28, 1926, in Monroeville, Alabama. Her father, a descendent of Confederate Civil War General Robert E. Lee, was Amasa Coleman Lee, a lawyer, and her mother was Frances Finch Lee. She had two older sisters, Alice Finch Lee and Louise Lee Connor, and one older brother, Edwin Coleman Lee. Harper Lee was close friends with Truman Capote, another well-known author who grew up with her in Monroeville. There is very little else known about her due to her desire “to be left alone by the outside world” (Fischer). She is an intensely private woman, and, as a result, anecdotes and accounts recounted by friends tell her story.

Several former schoolmates have described her as a feisty child, known for her love to fight. George Thomas Jones called her the “Queen of the Tomboys,” describing an incident where she “whipped [a bully] before he knew

what hit him" (Fischer). Jones also recalled Lee's protectiveness of Truman Capote, always coming to his rescue when he got himself into various troubles.

Harper Lee's higher education was encouraged by her father, a lawyer who practiced in Monroeville. Others in her family, including her sister Alice, became lawyers, and Lee's father wanted her to become a lawyer in the law firm at which he worked. She studied law at Huntington College in Montgomery (1944-45) and the University of Alabama (1945-1949). She transferred to Oxford University as an international student during her last year. However, she had actually wanted to become an author, and, six months before finishing her studies, she began her writing career. She penned several short stories and submitted them to a literary agent. At his suggestion, she expanded one of the short stories, and, after much work, she submitted it for publication in 1957. The publisher rejected it, saying that it was too much like a collection of short stories strung together. With the help of Tay Hohoff, her editor, she rewrote the manuscript and successfully published it as *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 1960. *To Kill a Mockingbird* became popular with both the public and the critics, who have lauded the novel as a realistic portrait of a small, southern town. Indeed, as stated by Dr. Nadiya Matuzova, this book will "forever belong in the treasure [sic] of progressive American literature" (Harper).

Although it was Lee's only work, *To Kill a Mockingbird* rocketed her into the crème de la crème in American literature. Lee has won numerous awards, including a nomination to the National Council of Arts by President Johnson in

1966. Her book was a marvel in itself, as within the year, it had already won many prestigious awards, including the 1961 Pulitzer Prize and the 1961 Alabama Library Association award. Shortly thereafter, it won the *Best Sellers' 1962 Paperback of the Year Award* and was also adapted into a movie.

Lee denies the popular myth that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is autobiographical. However, many aspects of *To Kill a Mockingbird* are based off of various parts of Lee's life, including Capote's similarity to the character Dill. Many readers identify Lee with Scout, the main character in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Indeed, Scout bears a striking resemblance to Lee. In fact, many events in *To Kill a Mockingbird* are similar to events in Lee's life, including the main plot of the book, the trial of Tom Robinson. Robinson's trial may have been based on the notorious Scottsboro Trials. There are obvious parallels between James E. Horton, the judge of the one of the Scottsboro Trials, and Atticus Finch, Scout's father and Robinson's lawyer. Both the real and fictional trials convicted black men who were accused of rape by white women by a prejudiced all-white jury. In the case of the Scottsboro Trials, outrage at the blatant discrimination overturned some of the original convictions six years later.

When the Library of Congress conducted a survey in 1991, in which readers were asked to cite books that have made impacts on their lives, the Bible was the only book ranked higher than *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It is evident that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a true classic, as it is still and always will be relevant. Everything that has happened in Harper Lee's life – from the Scottsboro Trials to

her friendship with Truman Capote – has affected *To Kill a Mockingbird*. These aspects of her life have manifested themselves either as her unique flair or as events in the book. Few other books rival Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a cornerstone in American literature.

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