

About the Author

Harper Lee was born Nelle Harper Lee in 1926 in Monroeville, Alabama. She is the youngest of three children, and, like Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, her father was a practicing lawyer. Her family is related to Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

She entered the University of Alabama to study law but left before completing her degree and moved to New York, where she worked as an airline reservation clerk. While living in New York, she took manuscripts of two essays and three short stories to a literary agent. The agent suggested that she expand one of the stories into a novel. She left her position at the airline to concentrate fully on her writing and divided her time between Monroeville and New York. Her story eventually became *To Kill a Mockingbird* and was met with popular success and critical acclaim.

In 1961, Harper Lee was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, her only novel to date.

Synopsis

In the sleepy southern town of Maycomb, Alabama, Scout Finch and her brother Jem revel in the glory days of childhood, trading stories and superstitions with Dill Harris, the imaginative nephew of their neighbor. Dill is especially fascinated with the legends surrounding the mysterious Boo Radley, who stays in his house all day, but, it is rumored, comes out at night to dine on squirrels and cats and peek in windows. Their summer days are spent adding to the Boo Radley legends or devising ways to make Boo come out.

Scout becomes increasingly uneasy about playing games that revolve around Boo Radley. Guided by the wisdom of her father, Atticus, and Calpurnia, their cook, Scout is learning the ways and unwritten rules of southern society and how to get along in it.

Atticus is a lawyer with an extremely difficult case on his hands. Tom Robinson, a black man, has been accused of raping a white girl. With deep-seated prejudice working against him, Atticus must prove his client innocent. Scout and Jem watch while their otherwise civilized neighbors show subtle disapproval or outright distaste for Atticus's defense of a black man.

While Atticus struggles to do the right thing, Scout struggles with her Aunt Alexandra, Atticus's sister, who comes to live with them. Aunt Alexandra is set on making Scout into a refined southern lady by instilling in her the rules of social decorum. Atticus is more concerned that his children simply do what is right.

And meanwhile, the trial of Tom Robinson reaches its conclusion, but not before Atticus challenges the very structure of southern society.

Book Summary of *To Kill a Mockingbird*

An instant classic, millions of people have read *To Kill a Mockingbird* since its publication in 1960. Narrated by an adult Jean Louise Finch (Scout) reflecting on her childhood, the novel addresses timeless issues such as prejudice, social class, gender roles, and family and friend relationships. Set in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama, during the Great Depression in the 1930s, the book spans three years and is divided into two parts.

Scout and her older brother, Jem, live with their unconventional father, Atticus, who allows the children to call him by his first name and speaks to them as though they are adults. Atticus, a lawyer and a state legislator, is the moral compass of the story and, as another character states, "is the same in his house as he is on the public streets." Atticus is a widower; Scout's mother passed away when she was two and Jem was six. The Finches also have an African American cook named Calpurnia who is a respected part of their household.

Part one begins with six-year-old Scout, ten-year-old Jem, and their friend and neighbor, Dill Harris, who spends his summers in Maycomb. They spend their days playing outside, making up games, and trying to lure their mysterious neighbor, Boo Radley, out of his house. The children have never seen Boo, but the rumors surrounding him both scare and intrigue the trio. Scout's misadventures at school are also narrated. At one point, she is chastised by her first grade teacher for already knowing how to read and write. She is bored and horribly disappointed with her school experience.

The second part of the book chronicles a trial in which Atticus is defending Tom Robinson, an African American man accused of raping and beating a white woman named Mayella Ewell. Though Mayella and her family are considered disgraceful and the evidence clearly points to Tom's innocence, the biases of the time cause what should be an obvious verdict to become a prejudicial affair. The aftermath of the trial teaches Scout and Jem that it truly is a sin "to kill a mockingbird."

Background Information

During the period of Southern Reconstruction after the Civil War (1865–1877), much legislation was passed to help establish equal rights for the newly freed slaves. Three amendments to the Constitution that moved the United States toward total equality of the races were quickly ratified. Black citizens made use of their new freedom by taking an active part in the politics of the day. They voted in large numbers and held political office at local and state levels. Fourteen black Americans were elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, and two were elected to the U.S. Senate.

However, there was still great opposition to the idea of equal rights for blacks, especially in the post-war South where many felt that the Union's Reconstruction policies were overly oppressive. Many in the South hoped to return to the way things were before the war. When the Reconstruction period ended in 1877 and all federal troops were withdrawn from the South, white rule of the Southern states returned.

The federal government, which had promoted equal rights for the freed slaves immediately after the war, began to ignore issues regarding equality of race. Blacks were refused service in restaurants and hotels. They were made to use separate public facilities, sit in separate sections of public gathering places, and occupy separate sections of vehicles of public transportation. In 1896 the federal government upheld the separation of races by declaring constitutional a Louisiana law forcing black Americans to use a separate section on railroad passenger cars. The court held that separation was legal if facilities for both races were equal. Facilities for blacks, however, were usually inferior to those used by whites.

By 1914, every Southern state had established laws that kept black and white citizens separated. Although these laws would continue to be challenged in the legal system, the legal structure of segregation did not begin to crumble until the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s.