



Georgetown Township Public Library
Book Discussion Kit
To Kill a Mockingbird
Harper Lee (1960)

About This Book

At the age of eight, Scout Finch is an entrenched free-thinker. She can accept her father's warning that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird, because mockingbirds harm no one and give great pleasure. The benefits said to be gained from going to school and keeping her temper elude her.

The place of this enchanting, intensely moving story is Maycomb, Alabama. The time is the Depression, but Scout and her brother, Jem, are seldom depressed. They have appalling gifts for entertaining themselves—appalling, that is, to almost everyone except their wise lawyer father, Atticus.

Atticus is a man of unfaltering good will and humor, and partly because of this, the children become involved in some disturbing adult mysteries: fascinating Boo Radley, who never leaves his house; the terrible temper of Mrs. Dubose down the street; the fine distinctions that make the Finch family "quality"; the forces that cause the people of Maycomb to show compassion in one crisis and unreasoning cruelty in another.

Also because Atticus is what he is, and because he lives where he does, he and his children are plunged into a conflict that indelibly marks their lives—and gives Scout some basis for thinking she knows just about as much about the world as she needs to. (*From Barnes and Noble.*)

Published July 11, 1960, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was an immediate bestseller and won [the author] great critical acclaim, including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1961. It remains a bestseller today, with over 30 million copies in print. In 1999, it was voted "Best Novel of the Century" in a poll conducted by the *Library Journal*. (*Adapted from Wikipedia.*)

From: <http://www.litlovers.com>

About the Author

- Birth—April 28, 1926
- Where—Monroeville, Alabama, USA
- Education—B.A. (later studied law), University of Alabama
- Awards—Pulitzer Prize, 1961; Presidential Medal of Freedom, 2007
- Currently—Monroeville, Alabama; New York City

Harper Lee, known to friends and family as Nelle, was born in the small southwestern Alabama town of Monroeville, Alabama, on April 28, 1926, the youngest of four children. Her father, a former newspaper editor and proprietor, was a lawyer who also served on the state legislature from 1926 to 1938. As a child, Lee was a tomboy and a precocious reader, and enjoyed the friendship of her schoolmate and neighbor, the young Truman Capote.

While pursuing a law degree at the University of Alabama, she wrote for several student publications and spent a year as editor of the campus humor magazine. Though she did not complete the law degree, she pursued studies for a summer in Oxford, England, before moving to New York in 1950, where she worked as a reservation clerk with Eastern Air Lines and BOAC in New York City. Lee continued working as a reservation clerk until the late 50s, when she resolved to devote herself to writing.

She lived a frugal lifestyle, traveling between her cold-water-only apartment in New York to her family home in Alabama to care for her ailing father. Having written several long stories, Harper Lee located an agent in November 1956. The following month at the East 50th townhouse of her friends writer Michael Brown and Joy Williams Brown, she received a gift of a year's wages with a note: "You have one year off from your job to write whatever you please. Merry Christmas." Within a year, she had a first draft. Working closely with J. B. Lippincott & Co. editor Tay Hohoff, she completed *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the summer of 1959. (*Adapted from Wikipedia.*)

From: <http://www.litlovers.com>

Discussion Questions

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? (*Questions issued by publisher.*)

From: <http://www.litlovers.com>

Resources for additional information about book discussion choices and authors:

Books & Authors (Access through links to MeL Databases on Library's webpage.)
<http://bna.galegroup.com/bna/>

LitLovers.com
www.litlovers.com

Overbooked.com
<http://www.overbooked.com>

Penguin.com (USA)
<http://www.us.penguin.com/static/pages/bookclubs/index.html>

Reading Group Center
<http://reading-group-center.knopfdoubleday.com>

Reading Group Guides
<http://www.readinggroupguides.com>

Suggested print resources:

The Book Club Companion: A Comprehensive Guide to the Reading Group Experience
Diana Loevy
374.22 Loevy 2006

The Book Group Book: A Thoughtful Guide to Forming and Enjoying a Stimulating Book Discussion Group
Ellen Slezak (editor)
374.22 Book 2000

Good Books Lately: The One-Stop Resource for Book Groups and Other Greedy Readers
Ellen Moore and Kira Stevens
374.22 Moore 2004

Read It and Eat: A Month-by-Month Guide to Scintillating Book Club Selections and Mouthwatering Menus
Sarah Gardner
028.9 Gardner 2005

The Reading Group Handbook: Everything You Need to Know, From Choosing Members to Leading Discussions
Rachel W. Jacobsohn
374.22 Jacobsohn 1994

What Do I Read Next? (Multi-volume set, annual editions)
Gale Research Inc.
R 016.813 What