

Book Review: "To Kill a Mockingbird" by Harper Lee

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I would come, many years later, to understand why Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" is considered "an important novel," but when I first read it at 11, I was simply absorbed by the way it evoked the mysteries of childhood, of treasures discovered in trees and games played with a summer friend. I loved that the narrator was a girl with the marvelously un-girly name of Scout. I loved her unsentimental nature, her sharp tongue and her humor.

She reminded me of the imagined version of myself I liked best. Her knowing older brother Jem was very much like my brother Okey, whose happy shadow I was, and her small Southern American town of Macomb, Alabama, was similar to my town, Nsukka in eastern Nigeria. It was a place of open doors, of the one strange family about whom everyone gossiped and of petty loyalties. But Macomb was also much less sophisticated than my town, in a way that was fascinating, with little boys who did not bathe for weeks and deals sealed by spitting into palms before shaking hands.

Racism Explodes In The Second Part

I was taken by how incredibly funny the novel was, with laugh-out-loud scenes, such as when Scout's teacher at school is horrified to discover that her student is literate. At 11, I read the novel with great delight. Or rather I read the first part with great delight and mostly skipped the second part. Perhaps it was because I wasn't able to understand the social and political details or because I was unprepared for the loss of innocence that the second part represents. In this half of the novel, Scout and her brother observe their father, Atticus Finch, who is a lawyer defending Tom Robinson, a black man accused of attacking a white woman. The racism hinted at in the first part explodes in all its savagery, and the town becomes a cesspit.

Rereading the novel as an adult, I came to admire it for its clear-eyed portrait of American tribalism in its three major forms: race, class and region of the country. Few contemporary American novels have such a sweep and fewer have the confidence to take on social issues in the way Harper Lee does. Much writing today about racism is cloaked in humor or in so much poetic language that it becomes vague. Lee refuses to hide behind literary effects. Her writing is so beautiful, so steady and even and clear, that she might have evaded confronting these tribalisms head-on, but she doesn't.

Lee's Characters Have Flaws

Nor does she create perfect characters — although Atticus Finch comes close. She complicates them all, so that while Scout is the lovable narrator whose family hates racism, we are not allowed to forget that she and her family benefit from the privilege of being white. When their summer friend, Dill, is upset by the dehumanizing way that the black man is questioned in court, Scout says, "He's just a negro." She speaks with the certainty that comes from being complicit, simply by being born, in a system of institutionalized inequality. It does not occur to Scout to question this, just as it does not occur to her to question why four black adults rise in the courtroom to give up their seats to little white children. The most moving line in the novel, for me, is spoken by the accused black man Tom. In response to a question about why he was scared even though he was innocent, Tom says: "If you was a black man like me, you'd be scared, too." That simple statement says all the reader needs to know about the larger system that Lee questions, in which being black is considered evidence of guilt.

That other great writer of the American South, William Faulkner, writes of racism as though it were an unavoidable occurrence. Lee, on the other hand, writes with a fiercely progressive ink, in which there is nothing unavoidable about racism and its very foundation is open to question. But she does so with confidence and skill that always carries the reader along. Her children characters may be politically smart but they are nevertheless still children, rather than adults in little bodies. Her rage is present, her sense of the ridiculous keen, but the issues are always encircled in a wonderful humanity.

Class Distinctions Are Glaring

While racism might be America's gravest sin — and it certainly is portrayed that way in this novel — class discrimination comes a close second. Macomb does not appear to have middle-class black people, or if it does Scout does not encounter them, but the class distinctions within her white world are glaring. The Ewells are racist, but they are also seen as "trash." They sign welfare checks and never bathe, and somehow serve as a form of self-congratulating entertainment for the better-placed whites. The white woman who accuses a black man of attacking her is so unused to being spoken to

courteously that she thinks she is being mocked. Lower-class children are clearly marked and the other children know them.

An Intelligent Novel That Is Entertaining

Sometimes novels are considered "important" in the way medicine is — they taste terrible and are difficult to get down your throat, but are good for you. The best novels are those that are important without being like medicine — they have something to say, are expansive and intelligent but never forget to be entertaining and to have character and emotion at their center. Harper Lee's triumph is one of those.

Using this text, explain what the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is about:

What does the author of this article want you to know about *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a literary work?