



## To Kill A Mockingbird

By Harper Lee  
A Discussion Kit

Clermont County Public Library  
<http://www.clermont.lib.oh.us>

### About the book...

*"Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."*

A lawyer's advice to his children as he defends the real mockingbird of Harper Lee's classic novel--a black man charged with the rape of a white girl. Through the young eyes of Scout and Jem Finch, Harper Lee explores with rich humor and unswerving honesty the irrationality of adult attitudes toward race and class in the Deep South of the 1930s. The conscience of a town steeped in prejudice, violence, and hypocrisy is pricked by the stamina and quiet heroism of one man's struggle for justice--but the weight of history will only tolerate so much.

One of the best-loved classics of all time, To Kill a Mockingbird has earned many distinctions since its original publication in 1960. It has won the Pulitzer Prize, been translated into more than forty languages, sold more than thirty million copies worldwide, and been made into an enormously popular movie. Most recent, librarians across the country gave the book the highest of honors by voting it the best novel of the century (Library Journal).

## About the Author...



Nelle Harper Lee was born on April 28, 1926, to Amasa Coleman Lee and Frances Cunningham Finch Lee. Harper Lee grew up in the small southwestern Alabama town of Monroeville. Her father, a former newspaper editor and proprietor, was a lawyer who also served on the state legislature (1926-38). As a child, Lee was a tomboy and a precocious reader and enjoyed the friendship of her schoolmate and neighbor, the young Truman Capote, who provided the basis of the character of Dill in her novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Lee was only five years old in when the first trials began in April 1931 in the small Alabama town of Scottsboro surrounding the purported rapes of two white women by nine young black men. The defendants, who were nearly lynched before being brought to court, were not provided with the services of a lawyer until the first day of trial. Despite medical testimony that the women had not been raped, the all-white jury found the men guilty of the crime and sentenced all but the youngest, a twelve-year-old, to death. Six years of subsequent trials saw most of these convictions repealed and all but one of the men freed or paroled. The Scottsboro case left a deep impression on the young Lee, who would use it later as the rough basis for the events in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Lee studied first at Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama (1944-45), then pursued a law degree at the University of Alabama (1945-49), including one year abroad at Oxford University, England. She worked as a reservation clerk for Eastern Airlines in New York City until the late 50s, when she resolved to devote herself to writing. Lee lived a frugal lifestyle, traveling between her cold-water apartment in New York to her family home in Alabama to care for her ailing father. She worked in Holcombe, Kansas, as a research assistant for Truman Capote's novel *In Cold Blood* in 1959.

Lee published her first and only novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in 1960, after a two-year period of revising and rewriting under the guidance of her editor, Tay Hohoff, of the J. B. Lippincott Company. *To Kill a Mockingbird* won the 1961 Pulitzer Prize, despite mixed critical reviews. The novel was highly popular, selling more than fifteen million copies. Though she delved into her own experiences as a child in Monroeville, Lee intended for the book to impart the sense of any small Deep South town and the universal characteristics of people everywhere. The book was made into a successful movie in 1962, starring Gregory Peck as Atticus.

## Why join a book discussion group...

There are so many reasons to join or form a book discussion group. They're a great way for book-lovers to enjoy reading and the pleasure of each other's company. They can be a useful discipline for encouraging you to read more, or to read outside the genres you normally read. They can simply be a way to make new friends and meet like minded spirits

## Successful Book Discussions...

Here are some tips for leading a successful book discussion:

1. Have a comfortable environment for your discussion. Some groups meet in the same place monthly (a library meeting room or a church). Some groups like to rotate between their members' houses. In any case, make sure the location is conducive to quiet discussion.
2. Pick a comfortable seating arrangement. This is tougher than it sounds. Some groups will prefer to have tables in front of them for their books, notes, drinks, food, etc. Some groups would rather have an open circle with no tables. Try several arrangements.
3. Have a designated leader. It's nice to have someone who can bring control to a situation. As with any leader, diplomacy and good sense will be prerequisites for the job, but you might want to rotate the position around. Everybody has something useful to add to a group. Even the truly bad leaders teach us something, even if it's only to recognize good leadership.
4. Choose books that challenge your group but that are within everyone's tolerances. You might consider picking books that match a theme (mysteries, for example) or allowing each member to pick a book for each month. Some people like to have a year long plan of books; other people want to be surprised each month. It's really up to your group.
5. Give everyone the chance to participate. This doesn't mean that everyone has to participate, just that the choice is there. Some groups will have a different leader for each book they discuss. Some will have the same leader but set time limits for the amount of time any one member can speak. Be aware that some members may simply want to come and listen.

## If you like this book, you'll like...

### Juvenile Titles:

Angels in the dust by Raven by Margot Theis  
Darby by Jonathon Scott Fuqua  
Gold Dust by Chris Lynch  
The Journal of C.J. Jackson: a Dust Bowl Migrant by William Durbin  
Rose's Journal: the Story of a Girl in the Great Depression by Marissa Moss  
Speed of Light by Sybil Rosen  
The Trial by Jen Bryant

### Young Adult Titles:

The \$66 Summer by John Armistead  
Breakaway by Paul Yee  
Burning Up by Caroline Cooney  
The Legend of Buddy Bush by Shelia Moses  
Mississippi Trial, 1955 by Chris Crowe  
Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse  
A Perfect Snow by Nora Martin  
Return of Gabriel by John Armistead  
Shooter by Walter Dean Myers  
Spitting Image by Shutta Crum  
The Starplace by Vicki Grove  
The Strength of Saints by A. LaFaye  
Tulsa Burning by Anna Myers  
Unseen Companion by Denise Gosliner Orenstein  
Witness by Karen Hesse

### Adult Titles:

Jim the Boy: A Novel by Tony Earley  
Nora, Nora by Anne Rivers Siddons  
The Year the Colored Sisters Came to Town by Jacqueline Guidry  
Ellen Foster by Kaye Gibbons  
The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy  
I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou  
A Gathering of Old Men by Ernest J. Gaines  
Just Revenge by Alan Dershowitz  
The Rainmaker by John Grisham

## To Kill a Mockingbird :Discussion Questions

1. *To Kill a Mockingbird* has achieved a prominent place in American culture, both as a book that won the Pulitzer Prize and by librarians as the best novel of the century and as extraordinarily popular film. What had you heard about the novel before you read it? Had you seen the film? How was your experience of the book different from what you expected? How is it different from the film?
2. When Atticus gives Jem and Scout air rifles, he tells them, "Shoot all the blue jays you want, if you can hit 'em but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" (p. 103) Why does Atticus feel this way? Why do you think Lee chose this phrase for her title?
3. In what ways is the 1930s era with WWII looming on the horizon and the Great Depression in full swing, relevant to the events of the novel? How does what was happening in Nazi Germany at the time parallel relations between blacks and whites in the American South? Do any events of today parallel as well?
4. What kind of town is Maycomb, AL? How does Lee create such a vivid sense of the particular place and time in which her story is set? What details about the town, its history and its inhabitants, make the place feel real? Why is the setting important for the story? How would the story be different if it were set in NYC or Cincinnati?
5. Why is Boo Radley, a man who is hidden away for nearly the entire novel, such an important figure in *To Kill a Mockingbird*? Why are Jem and Scout and Dill so fascinated by him? In what way is it both ironic and appropriate that the man Jem and Scout most fear is the one who saves them?
6. Because the courtroom is so crowded, Scout and Jem watch Tom Robinson's trial from the "Colored balcony" with the Reverend Sykes and the rest of Maycomb's black community. Why would Lee place them there? What is the symbolic significance of Scout and Jem viewing the trial from this perspective?
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 connecting these different stories? Were you surprised at the way in which these story lines were resolved?
8. Since Atticus was appointed by the judge to defend Tom Robinson, some critics argue that he is not a hero or a moral lawyer because he was living his life as a passive participant. He did not actively attempt to change racism or sexism.
9. What symbolism might the following items from *To Kill a Mockingbird* carry?
  - The mad dog.
  - The tree house
  - Camellias
  - The gun
  - The cemented hole in the tree
  - Columns on buildings
  - Atticus's pocket watch
10. 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?

### **Additional Resources...**

The following websites provide additional information on starting and running your own book discussion group.

- Bookbrowse.com <http://www.bookbrowse.com/bookclubfun/index.cfm>
- Reading Group Choices <http://www.readinggroupchoices.com>
- Reading Group Guides <http://www.readinggroupguides.com>

In addition, many publishers have posted discussion guides on their websites. Here are a few:

- Ballantine Reader's Circle <http://www.randomhouse.com/BB/read/>
- Penguin Putnam <http://www.penguinputnam.com/>
- Random House <http://www.randomhouse.com>
- Simon and Schuster <http://www.simonsays.com/>
- St. Martin's Press <http://www.stmartins.com/>