



Go Set A Watchman

By Harper Lee

First published in 2015

Genre and Subject

Race relations

Legal fiction

Fathers and daughters

Synopsis

Twenty years after the trial of Tom Robinson, Scout returns home to Maycomb to visit her father and struggles with personal and political issues as her small Alabama town adjusts to the turbulent events beginning to transform the United States in the mid-1950s.

This book is an historic literary event: the publication of a newly discovered novel, the earliest known work from Harper Lee, the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning classic, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Originally written in the mid-1950s, *Go Set a Watchman* was the novel Harper Lee first submitted to her publishers before *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Assumed to have been lost, the manuscript was discovered in late 2014. *Go Set a Watchman* features many of the characters from *To Kill a Mockingbird* some twenty years later.

Returning home to Maycomb to visit her father, Jean Louise Finch -- Scout -- struggles with issues both personal and political, involving Atticus, society, and the small Alabama town that shaped her. Exploring how the characters from *To Kill a Mockingbird* are adjusting to the turbulent events transforming mid-1950s America, *Go Set a Watchman* casts a fascinating new light on Harper Lee's enduring classic. Moving, funny and compelling, it stands as a magnificent novel in its own right

Author Biography

Nelle Harper Lee (April 28, 1926 – February 19, 2016) was an American novelist best known for her 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It won the 1961 Pulitzer Prize and has become a classic of modern American literature. Lee published only two books, yet she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2007 for her contribution to literature. She also received numerous honorary degrees, though she declined to speak on those occasions. She assisted her close friend Truman Capote in his research for the book *In Cold Blood* (1966). Capote was the basis for the character Dill Harris in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The plot and characters of *To Kill a Mockingbird* are loosely based on Lee's observations of her family and neighbors, as well as an event that occurred near her hometown in 1936 when she was 10. The novel deals with the irrationality of adult attitudes towards race and class in the Deep South of the 1930s, as depicted through the eyes of two children. It was inspired by racist attitudes in her hometown of Monroeville, Alabama. She also wrote the novel *Go Set a Watchman* in the mid-1950s and published it in July 2015 as a sequel to *Mockingbird*, but it was later confirmed to be her first draft of *Mockingbird*.

Discussion Starters

- GO SET A WATCHMAN takes place more than 20 years after TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD begins. When WATCHMAN opens, Jean Louise Finch --- now 26 and living in the North, in New York City --- is returning to her hometown of Maycomb, Alabama. Describe the Maycomb of GO SET A WATCHMAN. If you have read MOCKINGBIRD, has the town changed in the intervening years? If so, how?
- Maycomb is a town without train service, and its bus service “was erratic and seemed to go nowhere.” How does this lack of connection isolate the citizens of Maycomb, and how does that isolation affect how they see themselves and outsiders? Early in the novel, her longtime friend Henry Clinton tells her “you’re gonna see Maycomb change its face completely in our lifetime.” What does he foresee that Jean Louise cannot --- or perhaps does not want to see?
- Think about the extended Finch family. What is their status in Maycomb? What is the significance of being a Finch in this small Southern town? Does it afford them privileges --- as well as expectations of them and responsibilities --- that other families do not share? Do the Finches have freedoms that others do not enjoy?
- Describe the relationship between Jean Louise and Atticus at the beginning of the novel. Does Jean Louise idealize her father too much? How does she react when she discovers that her father is a flawed human being? How does this discovery alter her sense of herself, her family, and her world? By the novel’s end, how do father and daughter accommodate each other?
- “Integrity, humor, and patience were the three words for Atticus Finch.” After your reading of WATCHMAN, do these three words still hold true? What words would you use to describe him?
- What are Jean Louise’s feelings toward Henry Clinton? Would he make a good husband for her? Both her aunt and her uncle tell her that Henry isn’t “suitable,” that he “is not her kind.” What do they mean, and what does it mean to Jean Louise? Is it strictly because of Henry’s background or is there something more? What adjectives would you use to describe Henry’s character?
- Is Henry like Atticus, his mentor and friend? Is Jean Louise’s assessment of Henry later in the novel correct? Are Henry and Atticus good men? Can you be a moral person and hold views that may be unacceptable to most people? How do Atticus’s actions toward the blacks of Maycomb compare with his views about them?
- What kind of reception does Jean Louise receive in the Quarters when she visits Calpurnia, the Finches’ retired housekeeper? How does Calpurnia react to seeing Jean Louise, and what is Calpurnia’s response when Jean Louise asks her how she truly felt about her family? Would Calpurnia have answered the same way if asked that question a few years earlier --- or if asked a few years later?
- How have our attitudes about race evolved since the 1950s when WATCHMAN was written? In what ways have we progressed? Is the stain of racism indelible in our national character, or can it eventually be erased? Can it be eradicated for good?

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