

Title: Harper Lee

Known As: Lee, Nelle Harper; Lee, Harper

American Novelist (1926 -)

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Harper Lee (1926-), considered by many to be a literary icon, is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), the story of a Southern lawyer modeled after Lee's father.

Nelle Harper Lee was born April 28, 1926, in Monroeville, Alabama, a descendent of Confederate Army commander Robert E. Lee. She attended Huntingdon College, a private school for women in Montgomery, from 1944 to 1945. She entered the University of Alabama in 1945 and enrolled in the university's law school in 1947. Six months short of completing her law degree, she left school and moved to New York. After friends offered to loan her enough money to write full-time for a year, she penned the first draft of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In 1957 she submitted the manuscript to a publishing house and began a two-year process of revision.

Shortly after Lee finished the first draft of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, her friend Truman Capote invited her to accompany him to Kansas to research the murder of a farm family. Lee and Capote had known each other since 1928, when Capote moved to Monroeville to live with his aunts, who were the Lees' next-door-neighbors. Lee is acknowledged in the dedication to the resulting book, Capote's best-selling *In Cold Blood* (1966).

In 1960, after much revision, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published. The novel, which takes place at the end of the Great Depression in the small Alabama town of Maycomb, covers three years in the life of its narrator, Jean Louise "Scout" Finch; her older brother, Jem; her widower father, Atticus; and the family housekeeper, Calpurnia. The story interweaves two plotlines. The central plot revolves around Atticus Finch's defense of an African American man, Tom Robinson, falsely accused of raping a white woman. Although Robinson is clearly innocent, the jury finds him guilty, and he is killed trying to escape from prison.

The second plotline concerns Scout and Jem's fascination with the notorious and eccentric local recluse, Boo Radley. Radley saves their lives when the father of Robinson's accuser tries to kill them on Halloween night. Both Robinson and Radley are symbolic of the mockingbird in the title, which comes from the proverb "It is a sin to kill a mockingbird."

Lee's novel won praise from both critics and readers. While some considered the book's ending to be overly dramatic and unnecessarily violent, the book rose above censure to become an American literary icon. In 1966 President Lyndon Johnson appointed Lee to the National Council on the Arts.

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