



To Kill a Mockingbird

by Harper Lee

In a Nutshell

When *To Kill a Mockingbird's* story of an African-American man falsely accused of raping a white woman first appeared in 1960, the [Civil Rights Movement](#) was well on its way toward significantly revolutionizing how the U.S. conceived of race. In 1954, the [Supreme Court](#) ruled in [Brown vs. the Board of Education](http://www.nps.gov/brvb/) that separate was not equal, paving the way for the integration of the public school system. In 1955, [Rosa Parks](#) refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white person and was arrested, sparking a series of boycotts that were ultimately successful in changing policy. Progress was far from smooth, however: in 1958 some southern schools closed altogether, rather than let African-Americans study alongside whites. And, in 1955, fourteen-year-old [Emmett Till](#) was brutally murdered after approaching a white woman in a store - an event that may have influenced author [Harper Lee](#) in writing *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Lee did not set her novel in contemporary late 1950s society, however. This novel instead takes place a few decades earlier, before the changes and conflicts of the [Civil Rights era](#). During this period, America was watching closely the infamous [Scottsboro Trials](#), in which two impoverished white women accused nine young black men of rape. These trials may have been one of several influences on Lee as she crafted the *Mockingbird* story. The book is set in the time period of Lee's own youth, and many critics have pointed out the similarities between her and Scout, and her childhood friend, [Truman Capote](#), and Dill. Lee herself has said that she did not intend the book to be an autobiography. She simply wrote what she knew. It's also her only book: she never published another novel, and, within a few years of *Mockingbird's* publication, she went into a seclusion to rival that of her character Boo Radley. (For more on Lee's childhood, see Shmoop's [Harper Lee Biography](#)).

If a person's only going to write one novel, they couldn't do much better than *Mockingbird*. Awarded the [Pulitzer Prize](#), it's also never been out of print, and has long been a staple of high school English classes. On at least one [list of top-whatever books](#), it's ranked #1. The novel has become an iconic example of a book that can make its readers into better people in 300 pages or less.

While *Mockingbird's* message of standing up for what's right even when the costs are high still receives acclaim, not everyone agrees that it holds the moral high ground. While the main reason it frequently appears on the [ALA's list of banned books](#) is its use of profanity, it's also been challenged for its one-dimensional representation of African-Americans as docile, simple folk who need whites to protect them. While some see the novel as a powerful statement against racism, others see it as reproducing racism in a less obvious form. No matter which side a reader leans towards, the strong reactions the novel provokes just go to show that its influence remains strong even today.

Why Should I Care?

One of the most infuriating things we hear as kids, usually from obnoxiously smug adults, is "Life isn't fair." The feeling behind this sentence usually isn't "but it should be, so let's get working on that," but rather "that's the way grown-ups roll - suck it up and deal, kid." And as we get older, we start believing that that's just the way it is, and nothing we can do will change it.

To Kill a Mockingbird portrays a society that is supremely, staggeringly unfair: the U.S. South in the 1930s in a small town where racism is part of the very fabric of society. Faced with this situation, an equality-minded person might be tempted to say, "Screw it, wake me up when the [Civil Rights Movement](#) gets here," and keep his or her head down until then.

Some people in the novel do just that.

But a few decide to do what they can to take action on the side of justice and equality, even though they think it's mostly hopeless.

To Kill a Mockingbird doesn't sugarcoat the results (minor spoiler: the book does not end with African-Americans and whites holding hands and singing "It's a Small World"). It does, however, suggest that doing something to make life a little more fair, even if it seems like it's not having any effect, is still worthwhile, and what's more, admirable.