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What 'To Kill a Mockingbird' Isn't

By *Allen Barra*

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Georgia had Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers; Mississippi had William Faulkner and Eudora Welty; Louisiana inspired the major works of Kate Chopin and Tennessee Williams. Alabama had. . .



Gregory Peck and Brock Peters in the 1962 film version of Harper Lee's novel.

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Well, while Zora Neale Hurston and Walker Percy were born in Alabama, those two great writers didn't stick around my home state for long. And as for Harper Lee—Alabama born, raised and still resident—she doesn't really measure up to the others in literary talent, but we like to pretend she does.

Ms. Lee is at the head of the Southern class in one big way, however: The numbers are imprecise, but according to a 1988 report by the National Council of Teachers of English, her novel, "To Kill a Mockingbird," was required reading in three-quarters of America's high schools. Since its publication 50 years ago this summer, it probably ranks just behind "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," with American high-school students not only required to read the book but to tackle related projects. These range from drawing the courthouse where Tom

Robinson, a black man accused of raping a white woman, was defended by Atticus Finch, to writing articles for the *Maycomb Tribune* recounting the trial, and recasting the movie with contemporary actors. (In 2006 my daughter, attending a public high school in New Jersey, cast Kevin Kline as Atticus and Abigail Breslin as his young daughter, Scout.)

One estimate credits the book with over 30 million copies sold—many, no doubt, due to the enduring popularity of the hugely successful 1962 film version, described by *The New Yorker's* Pauline Kael as “part eerie Southern gothic and part Hollywood self-congratulation for its enlightened racial attitudes.” (Gregory Peck’s Atticus, Kael wrote, was “virtuously dull,” surely a phrase that can be accurately applied to Ms. Lee’s model.)

Ms. Lee’s only novel came along at exactly the right time: the year John F. Kennedy was elected president and the beginning of the decade in which the civil-rights movement began to change the South forever.

Naturally, it won the Pulitzer Prize. Its sentiments and moral grandeur are as unimpeachable as the character of its hero, Atticus. He is an idealized version of Ms. Lee’s father, who, in real life and by contrast, according to biographer Charles J. Shields, once remonstrated a preacher in the family’s hometown of Monroeville, Ala., for sermonizing on racial justice. Atticus bears an uncanny resemblance to another pillar of moral authority—the Thomas More depicted in Robert Bolt’s “*A Man for All Seasons*,” which appeared on the English stage the year “*To Kill a Mockingbird*” was published. Atticus does not become a martyr for his cause like Sir Thomas, but he is the only saint in a courtroom full of the weak, the foolish and the wicked. And like Sir Thomas, Atticus gets all the best lines.

Atticus speaks in snatches of dialogue that seem written to be quoted in high-school English papers. Among them:

- “The one thing that doesn’t abide by majority rule is a person’s conscience.”
- “Why reasonable people go stark raving mad when anything involving a Negro comes up is something I can’t pretend to understand.”
- “If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you’ll get along better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his

point of view . . ."

- When asked if he loves Negroes: "I do my best to love everybody."

Atticus is a repository of cracker-barrel epigrams. He actually seems to believe the fairy tale about the Ku Klux Klan that he tells Scout: "Way back about nineteen-twenty, there was a Klan, but it was a political organization more than anything. Besides, they couldn't find anyone to scare." They gathered one night in front of a Jewish friend of Finch's, Sam Levy, and "Sam made 'em so ashamed of themselves they went away."

It's impossible that anyone who grew up in Alabama in the mid-1930s, when the book is set, would believe that story, but it's a sugar-coated myth of Alabama's past that millions have come to accept.

In all great novels there is some quality of moral ambiguity, some potentially controversial element that keeps the book from being easily grasped or explained. One hundred years from now, critics will still be arguing about the real nature of the relationship between Tom and Huck, or why Gatsby gazed at that green light at the end of the dock across the harbor. There is no ambiguity in "To Kill a Mockingbird"; at the end of the book, we know exactly what we knew at the beginning: that Atticus Finch is a good man, that Tom Robinson was an innocent victim of racism, and that lynching is bad. As Thomas Mallon wrote in a 2006 story in *The New Yorker*, the book acts as "an ungainsayable endorser of the obvious."

It's time to stop pretending that "To Kill a Mockingbird" is some kind of timeless classic that ranks with the great works of American literature. Its bloodless liberal humanism is sadly dated, as pristinely preserved in its pages as the dinosaur DNA in "Jurassic Park."

Harper Lee's contemporary and fellow Southerner Flannery O'Connor (and a far worthier subject for high-school reading lists) once made a killing observation about "To Kill a Mockingbird": "It's interesting that all the folks that are buying it don't know they are reading a children's book."

Fifty years later, we can concede both that Harper Lee's novel inspired a generation of adolescents and that Flannery O'Connor was right.

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