Cracking the Code on Harper Lee

Atticus through *Watchman* and *Mockingbird*.

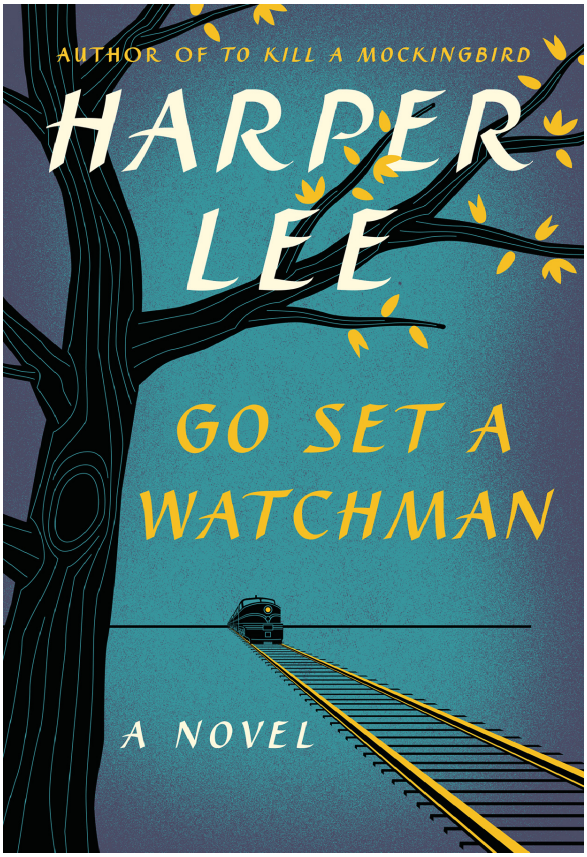
BY TALMAGE BOSTON

The barrage of early commentary following the much-hyped release of Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman* (HarperCollins, 2015) reeked of disillusionment. In the new book, Lee presents Atticus Finch—a character based on the author's father—not as an embodiment of human perfection worthy of worship, as he was seen in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but as a hypocrite whose late-in-life "black-is-black-and-white-is-white" talk and walk appear to be in total conflict with his words and deeds from 20 years earlier. It seemed that the world's most revered attorney was suddenly not so righteous.

The public has been reading and reflecting, drawing its own opinions about the author and her characters. Some disgruntled Atticus fans voiced outrage on Twitter; others turned to the blogosphere or the watercooler for discussion. Here are my own conclusions.

Both books are more memoir than fiction, based on our knowledge of events in Lee's life. *Mockingbird* is the story of her "coming of age" as a child, while *Watchman* is the story of her "coming of age" as a young woman. Throughout the two-decade personal history timeline, Jean Louise Finch managed to never backslide as her color-blind eyes kept opening wider to the ugly truth of race relations in Alabama during the 1930s and 1950s and the realities of African-Americans' struggle for civil rights in the Deep South.

Jean Louise's father, on the other hand, is a different story, as we learn in *Watchman* that an older Atticus becomes a member of the local anti-integration "Citizens' Council." But the critics of *Watchman* who have demonized this version of Atticus for allegedly possessing the attitude of a "racist" are imposing their 2015 racial sensibility into a mid-1950s mindset and moral compass. A society's going through any significant transformation is a historical process that takes some period of time to effect and involves communicating a morass of information that takes some period of time for human beings to digest.



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To understand the evolving story and characters, some background is in order. During the four years Harper Lee spoke to the media after *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s release, before she slammed the door on public life, the author (then in her mid-30s) acknowledged that the inspiration for Atticus Finch had come from her humble, dignified, high-integrity attorney-father, Amasa Lee, who practiced law in the small town where she grew up—Monroeville, Alabama.

Knowing the author's background, hometown, and relationship with the man on whom Atticus is based made it an easy task to connect the dots on what had led Lee to write her Pulitzer Prize-winning book. Fictional Maycomb, Alabama, in the 1930s was a setting identical to Monroeville in the 1930s. The age and tomboy personality of the protagonist Jean Louise "Scout" Finch matched the author's during that decade. Atticus's marital status was different than Amasa's (since Atticus was a widower and Amasa was married to Lee's mother, whose maiden name was Finch); but because Lee's mother had mental illness, Amasa, like Atticus, had full responsibility for his children's upbringing.

Parallels between *Mockingbird*'s characters and the people of Lee's childhood continue beyond her and her father. Like Scout, Lee had an older brother, Edwin, a budding hometown football star, whom she adored throughout her childhood, and who surely inspired the book's character Jem. She also had an eccentric running buddy during her youth named Truman Capote, who she acknowledged in interviews had inspired the character Dill.

Charles Shields's biography, *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee* (Henry Holt, 2006), provides details about additional residents who impacted Lee's childhood and then became important characters in her book—most notably a mysterious young man named Son Boleware, who inspired Boo Radley. There also was an African-American criminal defendant named Walter Lett who, when Lee was eight years old, was tried and convicted by an all-white jury for allegedly raping a young white woman, such that he surely inspired the character of Tom Robinson.

Discovering the details behind the characters and plot of *Mockingbird* is what led me and others to conclude that the book Oprah Winfrey has called "our national novel" is actually more memoir than fiction. This interpretation would help explain why, after 1960, Lee never wrote another book, because she either (1) lacked the imagination necessary to create a true novel, or (2) had said all she had to say in *Mockingbird*—something she repeatedly told non-media inquirers over the past five decades.

Publishing only one book seems an easy financial decision for Lee given the significant royalties and power of the motion picture version of *Mockingbird*. In that cinematic classic, Gregory Peck seized on the once-in-a-lifetime role of Atticus Finch, and it took him to Academy Award-winning heights, in part due to Oscar-winning screenwriter Horton Foote's decision to expand the role of Atticus by making the Tom Robinson trial the movie's centerpiece. Both the book and film presented Atticus as a virtuous Christ-like figure in the midst of deeply flawed sinners during a time of danger and high tension, thereby establishing him as the ultimate role model for the legal profession and the greatest hero ever portrayed in a motion picture, per a 2003 American Film Institute poll.

All these facts and circumstances about *Mockingbird* were firmly established in the public consciousness until the release of Lee's "new" "novel," *Go Set a Watchman*, on July 14, 2015. In the avalanche of news stories that have overwhelmed readers during the months leading up to its publication, we learned that *Watchman* had been delivered not at the initiative of the 89-year-old author, now residing in an assisted living center in Monroeville where a security guard allegedly stands by her door. Rather, it has been brought forth at the behest of the author's lawyer, Tonja Carter, who reportedly found the manuscript of *Watchman* amid several items in Lee's safety deposit box. Although *Watchman* had been submitted to (and rejected by) Lee's editor in 1957, its plot was set 20 years after *Mockingbird*, at a time when Jean Louise (who by then had ditched her childhood nickname) was a 26-year-old woman returning to her hometown of Maycomb in the mid-1950s in order to spend time with her declining 72-year-old dad after living many years in New York City, where she had moved following her higher education in Alabama.

Knowing Lee's history of leaving college and law school in Alabama behind to relocate to Manhattan in 1949 to pursue a writing career led to my prediction that *Watchman* would surely be the author's second published memoir. Eager readers operated under the expectation that the flawless Atticus of *Mockingbird* would remain so in *Watchman*, because if Lee was still operating with a sound mind (a fact disputed by at least some of Monroeville's residents) and had authorized Carter to arrange for the publication of *Watchman*, then surely she would not want to diminish readers' devotion to her patron saint father.

Wrong! In *Watchman*, Atticus's adult daughter suffers a rude awakening upon learning that her beloved father has joined the local Citizens' Council, whose purpose is to resist the high-speed desegregation movement in Alabama following *Brown vs. Board of Education*. These civil rights efforts were being led in the mid-1950s by NAACP members, who Maycomb residents saw as being far too aggressive and rapid in their advocacy for equal treatment of African-Americans. Jean Louise simply cannot understand how Atticus—the enlightened lawyer who, during her childhood, had done such a gallant job of representing Tom Robinson, who had always been so respectful to all of Maycomb's black residents, and who had always told her never to use the evil N-word—had decided to join the town's many bigots on the Citizens' Council. Atticus disgusts his daughter because of his refusal to embrace Thomas Jefferson's immortal words that "all men are created equal" (though Jefferson had hypocrisy issues of his own).

In *Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch, as an honorable person and a highly ethical lawyer, knew he had to do the right thing by providing vigorous legal representation on behalf of an innocent black man charged with a felony, knowing that his failure to do so would likely result in Robinson's being convicted and receiving the death penalty. In *Watchman*, however, Atticus finds himself in the mid-1950s presented with a less than life-and-death interracial conflict situation and believes that any segment of American society attempting to effect instantaneous, full-scale racial integration at that time—long before the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act—was asking for a socially disastrous second post-Civil War Reconstruction. As a responsible citizen mindful of the fallout that had occurred during the first Reconstruction, Atticus felt the need to be an active force in slowing the pace of civil rights advancement. For him, the only legal vehicle available to the people of Maycomb that appeared capable of doing this was the Citizens' Council.

AP PHOTO

Gregory Peck is shown as attorney Atticus Finch, a Southern small-town lawyer who defends a black man accused of rape, in a scene from the 1962 movie *To Kill A Mockingbird.*

The reader learns from Dr. Jack Finch, Atticus's brother in *Watchman*, that Jean Louise's dad joined the Citizens' Council for the same reason he had briefly joined the Ku Klux Klan as a young man after the turn of the century: to know exactly who the ringleaders were and what their ultimate agenda was. Upon learning that the local Klan's wizard was a minister and that the group's agenda was lynching and violence, young Atticus immediately disconnected himself from the KKK. It appeared to Atticus that, unlike the Klan, the council's agenda did not involve breaking any laws or committing acts of violence, but rather sought only to pursue a viable legal strategy for counteracting the NAACP's plan for expedited full-scale integration.

The appreciation for knowing the full biography of Harper and Amasa Lee, and their stories as portrayed in *Mockingbird* and *Watchman*, can be realized only now. Per a recent *Wall Street Journal* article by Jennifer Maloney and Laura Stevens, it appears that, like Atticus, Amasa disfavored rapid racial desegregation at least

through the first half of the 1950s. Then he had a change of heart. It may have been the result of his own epiphany as he watched the struggle for civil rights unfold. Whatever it was, Amasa Lee eventually got onboard the high-speed integration train. This moral transformation surely had a positive effect on the relationship with his daughter and, in all likelihood, inspired her to portray Atticus more favorably in *Mockingbird* than she had in her *Watchman* manuscript. After having depicted him so heroically in her one and only published book and having seen Gregory Peck enhance the public's appreciation for him in the movie, it's readily understandable why Lee decided that she had said all she ever wanted to say publicly about her father, who died a few months before the film's premiere in late 1962.

Another transformation in Amasa might have occurred by reason of a probable father-daughter confrontation, which definitely took place between Atticus and Jean Louise in *Watchman*. When Atticus argued his position on what the relationship between blacks and whites in Alabama should be and why he believed joining the Citizens' Council at that time was a reasonable thing to do, Jean Louise leveled him between the eyes with her righteous indignation counter-attack, while Atticus somehow remained calm and didn't stop being a gentleman. This was likely a real-life circumstance given Lee's forceful personality and her enlightened attitude on race relations. Fortunately for both Atticus and Jean Louise, Dr. Jack Finch intervened and acted as Jean Louise's post-argument conscience, encouraging her to strive to gain at least some understanding of Atticus's position and also to regain her emotional equilibrium. She, in fact, heeded her uncle's advice, and after accepting her dad's different political/moral positions, she and Atticus found a way to look each other in the eyes and affirm their love and respect for one another.

The timing of *Watchman*'s publication in 2015 is perfect, as was *Mockingbird*'s in 1960. Both books emphasize the need for empathy, civility, and humility if people with opposing positions have any hope of developing a harmonious relationship that will allow them to hear each other out and develop a sound strategy for improving race relations in America. Tough but wise Uncle Jack opened Jean Louise's eyes to the reality that her angry, adamant refusal to even consider her dad's perspective made her as much of a bigot as she thought he was; and Jack likely had an off-book conversation with brother Amasa to the same effect.

With American society as polarized as it is in 2015, in a mode of high volatility similar to Maycomb's "sittin' on a keg of dynamite" status in 1957, in which people in both eras are "fightin' to protect their identity," the following juicy nuggets from *Watchman* offer timeless wisdom for anyone attempting to bridge the great divide that often arises when people find themselves in heated confrontation on political or moral issues:

- Don't judge others by their words or actions until you know their motives.
- "A man can condemn his enemies, but it's better to know them."
- "Hypocrites have as much right to live in the world as anybody else," particularly because "men tend to carry their honesty in pigeonholes."
- No one can succeed in life by dependently clinging onto the conscience of someone else, no matter how virtuous that other person may appear to be.
- If a person refuses to take time to understand a person holding different views, he or she will never grow.
- A person's maintaining civility and humility while being engaged in disagreements has a transforming effect on the person who is on the other side of the argument.
- Addressing confrontation over conflicting ideological positions is "like an airplane. One side is the drag, the other is the thrust, and together they can fly—though too much of the thrust makes it nose heavy and too much drag and it's tail heavy—it's a matter of balance."

The best part of the Lee family father-daughter saga came toward the end of Amasa's life, when he received his final moment in the sun. As *Mockingbird* rocketed to the top of the *New York Times* Best Sellers list, where it would stay for 80 consecutive weeks, and Harper Lee told the world that her own lawyer-father had inspired the book's lawyer-father, ecstatic readers poured into Monroeville seeking autographs of both the author and her dad. Every time Amasa was handed a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* until the day he died, the name he wrote for his autograph was Atticus Finch—a man redeemed from his past prejudices by his own conscience and by his powerhouse daughter's appreciation for his having made that transformation.

Without knowing the full story contained in *Go Set a Watchman*, admirers of Harper Lee would never have gotten to know how her flawed father, as portrayed in her second book, had evolved into the flawless Atticus Finch of *Mockingbird*. **TBJ**

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