



# TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD


H A R P E R L E E

*With gentle beauty and unwavering honesty, Harper Lee takes readers back to the Deep South of the 1930s to illuminate a close-knit small Alabama town steeped in prejudice, violence, and hypocrisy, the quiet heroism of one man who struggles for justice in an unjust world, and two young siblings—Scout and Jem Finch—who try to make sense of the irrationality of adult attitudes toward race and class.*

## General Discussion Questions



1. How does the author introduce the novel's major issues of race and class? In addition to its social commentary, the novel is also a coming-of-age story and a tale about childhood memories. How does Harper Lee combine both?
2. The book is narrated by Scout looking back to her childhood self between the ages of six and nine. How does a narrator influence how a story is told? If Jem were telling the story, how might it compare to Scout's version? What if it were told from an adult's point of view—that of Atticus or their neighbor Miss Claudia? What kind of a story would Boo or Calpurnia tell?
3. Describe Scout, Jem, and their friend Dill. Would you say they are ordinary children? If not, what sets them apart from other children? How does being raised by a single father affect who they are and how they are growing up? What role does their housekeeper, Calpurnia, play in their lives?
4. What do the adult women in Scout's life—Calpurnia, Aunt Alexandra, Miss Maudie, and even Mrs. Dubose—teach her about being a lady? How does she contend with others' expectations of her because of her gender? Are there fewer strictures on young girls today?
5. How do Scout and Jem change over the course of the novel? Are these changes inevitable, or are they shaped by the people around them and the events they are both witness to and participants in?
6. How do Scout and Jem view their father, Atticus? How does the town regard him? What do they learn about their father over the course of the novel? What lessons does he teach his children both directly and indirectly about life, community, duty, decency, and courage?
7. What draws the children to the Radley place? What are their perceptions of the Radley family, and especially the mysterious Boo? What hints does Harper Lee give us about Boo Radley's character and how do they contrast with what the children believe about him?
8. Scout explains, "The misery of that house began many years before Jem and I were born. The Radleys, welcome anywhere in town, kept to themselves, a predilection unforgivable in Maycomb." Why does she call their behavior a "predilection" and why was it unforgivable? Why do people value privacy? Why do others often not trust people who choose not to be sociable or socialize?

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9. Think about the portrait of small town life Harper Lee paints in *Mockingbird*. Does this kind of close-knit small town still exist today? What are the benefits—and problems—of living in a place where everyone knows you and your family?
  10. Jem tells Scout that there are four kinds of folks in Maycomb County: “our kind of folks don’t like the Cunninghams, the Cunninghams don’t like the Ewells, and the Ewells hate and despise the colored folks.” Is this a good description of Maycomb? Does it describe American society itself during the 1930s? What about our society today? Why does Scout see everyone as “folks” without divisions?
  11. What is Maycomb like through Atticus’s eyes? Do you think the Finches are like other people in Maycomb? How does the trial involving Tom Robinson impact how the town regards Atticus and his family?
  12. Would you call Atticus’s sister, Aunt Alexandra, a snob? What does she think of Atticus and how he’s raising Jem and Scout? When she disapproves of them knowing the details of the Robinson case and watching the trial, Atticus tells her, “This is their home, sister. We’ve made it this way for them, they might as well learn to cope with it.” Should Atticus have tried to keep this knowledge away from them, or is he being a responsible father by exposing them to the realities of their world?
  13. How do Scout and Jem learn about the Tom Robinson case? Why does Atticus defend Tom? What does Scout understand about race when we first meet her and what does she learn as the story unfolds? What about Jem?
  14. One of the most famous lines in literature comes from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. “Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit ’em, but remember it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.” Explain Atticus’s meaning. Who is the “mockingbird” in the novel? Is it an allusion to the notion of innocence itself?
  15. The night before the trial, a group of men arrive at the jail. What do they want and how does Jean Louise defuse the situation? Do you think she understands what she did? Can friendliness and kindness overcome cruelty?
  16. Would children be allowed to witness such a trial today? What did the children discover about their town, their father, and themselves by attending? Are adults today too protective of children? What are they trying to protect them from—and what happens when those children grow up and become adults themselves? How does the trial and its aftermath affect Jem and Scout?
  17. Consider the cast of supporting characters—Calpurnia, Mr. Dolphus Raymond, Miss Maudie, Aunt Alexandra, the Ewells, Miss Stephanie Crawford, Mrs. Dubose. How do they add color and depth to the story? What do Scout, Jem, and Dill learn about life from them?
  18. What role does the setting play in the story? Could the same story have taken place elsewhere in America at the time? Could a similar story happen today?
  19. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set during the 1930s and was published in 1960 in the midst of events that would lead to the passage of the Civil Rights bill. How did America change in the intervening years between the book’s time, its publication, and today? How have racial and class attitudes evolved over the past fifty years?
  20. Librarians across America voted *To Kill a Mockingbird* the best novel of the twentieth century, yet the book is continuously challenged and often banned by schools and communities. What makes the novel so important and so divisive? What does the novel say about America in the recent past? What insights and lessons does it hold for us today?
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