Resisting Atticus’s Allure

On the eve of Harper Lee’s new book release, reconsidering the legacy of To Kill a Mockingbird

By Stephen Goodwin

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With Harper Lee’s new novel, Go Set a Watchman, coming out, it seemed like high time to revisit her To Kill a Mockingbird. For more than 50 years I have felt slightly churlish for not liking the book as much as most Alabamians, and most Americans, did and do. The story of Scout, Boo Radley, and the noble, crusading Atticus might have started as a novel, but it has long since moved up into a more elevated category—cultural touchstone, American classic, national treasure. What did I hold against it?

My problem with this book dates back to 1961, when I had a summer job in an oil field in south Alabama, not far from Monroeville, the small town that was in the first flush of its reputation as the home of Harper Lee and the setting for To Kill a Mockingbird. My job consisted mostly of clearing brush, but some nights I was stationed at a pump house where I had to read the gauges once an hour; the rest of the time I kept myself awake by reading Southern writers. I was pretty sure that I wanted to be one myself. Keep in mind that, 50-plus years ago, this label Southern writer, now little more than a marketing category, was charged with electricity. In the fall I was going north to college, and on those muggy summer nights, with the humming of the pumps and the susurrus of katydids in my ears, I read a lot of Faulkner. He was my literary god, fierce, remote, and immortal. He was as different from Harper Lee as a bear is from a berry.

One reviewer called To Kill a Mockingbird “that rare literary phenomenon, a Southern novel with no mildew on its magnolia leaves. Funny, happy, and written with unspectacular precision.” In my eyes, that was exactly what was wrong with it. To an 18-year-old under the spell of the South, the book seemed like a sugarcoated myth. Faulkner and other writers of the Southern Renaissance wrote from deep inside the culture and mythology of a place that might as well have been a separate
nation, but the famed “tragic sense” of Southern literature—the very thing that gave Southern literature its power and authenticity—is absent from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Even though the plot turns on the death of an innocent black man, the tone is jarringly cheerful. Take out the trial and death of Tom Robinson, and the book is like *The Little Rascals*, all about the pranks and high jinks of a bunch of loveable kids.

Lee sounds like a bemused anthropologist as she leads the reader through the folkways of her fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama, circa 1935. Here we find picket fences, tire swings, and nosy neighbor ladies rocking on their porches. Most of the adult characters are appealing, and they are familiar Southern types: the devoted and dignified black maid, the good country people, the ladies of the Missionary Society. The God-fearing, right-thinking people of the community keep a watchful eye on Scout and her sidekicks, her brother Jem and her friend Dill. The kids talk Southern, saying leastways and ain’t and speaking of colored folks. Despite the Southern idiom and manners, however, Maycomb evokes—and for decades has been emblematic of—a vanished, idealized, small-town America.

As for Atticus Finch, he is an American archetype, a just man who by sheer force of character (and with a little help from his eight-year-old daughter) can stare down a lynch mob. The qualities that he encourages in his children—fairness, integrity, responsibility, empathy—are bedrock American virtues. Nuggets of unimpeachable wisdom drop regularly from his lips, making nearly every occasion a teaching moment. “Atticus speaks in snatches of dialogue,” said Allen Barra in a 2010 essay in *The Wall Street Journal*, “that seem written to be quoted in high-school English papers.”

Surely, one reason for the enduring popularity of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is precisely this ability to tap into an American civic religion. The book tells us what we want to believe about ourselves as a nation. Because the story is set in the Jim Crow South, it’s nothing short of heroic that Atticus is so determined that Tom Robinson—a black man who has been falsely accused of raping a white woman—gets a fair trial. “Our courts have their faults, as does any human institution,” he says to the jury composed entirely of white men, “but in this country our courts are the great levelers, and in our courts all men are created equal.”

In a Faulkner novel, Atticus might have been a brooding, eloquent, Hamlet-like character, his mind chaotic with an awareness of historical injustice and the psychic scars inflicted by centuries of racism. In Lee’s novel, Atticus is measured and restrained, betraying his passion only in his closing argument in Tom’s defense.
Atticus is a righteous but a reasonable man. He knows that his actions don’t always sit well with his fellow citizens, and when Scout asks him about a certain insult, he replies:

“Scout,” said Atticus, “nigger-lover is just one of those terms that don’t mean anything—like snot-nose. It’s hard to explain. Ignorant, trashy people use it when they think somebody’s favoring negroes over and above themselves. It’s slipped into usage with some people like ourselves, when they want a common, ugly term to label somebody.”

“You aren’t really a nigger-lover then, are you?”

“I certainly am. I do my best to love everybody.”

To be sure, Atticus is trying to explain something to a young child in terms she can understand; but in classical tragedy, or in a story by Flannery O’Connor, his display of moral complacency would immediately be perceived as a fatal flaw, and the reader would shift uneasily, knowing that Atticus was headed for certain punishment.

In the moral economy of To Kill a Mockingbird, however, Atticus gets off with a mild scare. He has never taken Bob Ewell seriously, even though Ewell—the father of the alleged rape victim—spits in his face and threatens to kill his children. By the standards of contemporary parents, Atticus is negligent to the point of culpability; he lets Scout and Jem roam freely, day and night. On Halloween night, Ewell does attack them with intent to murder, but Boo Radley—the neighbor who seemed so terrifying—comes to their rescue, and Ewell is the one who ends up dead. Boo might be peculiar, but he’s been watching over these children. That doesn’t come as a surprise, not in this novel where there is never any real confusion about what’s right or wrong, good or bad, and who is innocent or guilty. “It’s interesting that all the folks that are buying it don’t know they are reading a children’s book,” said Flannery O’Connor, who had no patience for moral simplification.

Simplification is usually the result of abstraction; precepts are a lot tidier than the messy lives of human beings. Atticus, as portrayed in the novel, is more at ease dealing with principles than with people. At important moments that could be emotional, he is strangely detached and distant. For instance, when Tom is shot dead attempting to escape from prison camp, Atticus offers a terse, factual description of the event. Then, when his sister declares that this is the “last straw,” he answers
reasonably: “Depends on how you look at it ... What was one Negro, more or less, among two hundred of ’em? He wasn’t Tom to them, he was an escaping prisoner.”

Always a great one for looking at things from someone else’s point of view, Atticus empathizes with the guard, not with Tom. Less than two pages later, Scout has settled on her response to Tom’s death: “If Aunty could be a lady at a time like this, so could I.”

Thus the tragedy at the core of the novel is neatly wrapped up in a little pair of lessons. Admittedly, the first-person narration makes it almost impossible for Lee to present the scene of Tom’s death more fully, or to articulate the kind of rage, grief, and despair that an adult might feel at such a time. The reader sees everything through Scout’s eyes, and she is only eight years old at the end of the book.

At the risk of sounding blasphemous—as if I haven’t already—I will urge anyone who wants to revisit *Mockingbird* to watch the movie instead of reading the book. Because it is not limited by Scout’s perspective, the movie tells a richer, more complex story. The viewer no longer sees Atticus through the filter of Scout’s adoration. Through the lens of the movie camera, Atticus, as played by Gregory Peck (who won an Oscar for best actor), is not infallible but full of hesitancy, misgivings, doubts about his decisions and his ability to carry them out. Scout sometimes reminds us that her father is old, but in the movie we see Peck move slowly and with a grave weariness, the weight of the world on his shoulders. When Tom is killed, Peck can’t speak but wanders off in a daze of grief.

As for Tom Robinson, I don’t know how anyone who sees the movie can ever forget the searing performance of Brock Peters. In the book, Tom is clearly frightened; on screen, Peters makes the viewer understand the full measure of Tom’s anguish and despair. When Atticus urges him to answer truthfully because he is in a court of law, Tom summons every atom of will in an effort to comply. He wants to trust this white man. Sweating, moving in his chair as if invisible shackles are holding him in place, he tells the courtroom that the white woman made advances toward him, and that he ran from her. He speaks the truth that Atticus has requested, but it is clear from the pain in his voice that he knows that truth is not going to set him free, not in this court. He knows, and we know, that his fate is sealed.

The success of the movie helped establish *To Kill a Mockingbird* as one of America’s canonical stories. The novel was published in 1960, and the movie came out in 1962. Together, they created an alternative narrative to the bloody events that marked the Civil Rights Movement of that decade. In the actual South in the 1960s, there were church bombings, murders of activists, assassinations of black leaders.
Against this background of violence, the book was a rebuke to bigots and a parable of courage.

Some 40 million copies of To Kill a Mockingbird have been sold, mostly to middle and high school students who have no trouble understanding its teachings. The book is notable, as Thomas Mallon wrote in 2006 in The New Yorker, as “an ungainsayable endorser of the obvious.” Yes, but most influential and well-loved novels endorse the obvious. Lord of the Flies, 1984, Fahrenheit 451—there’s not much complexity or nuance on that list. Today, when every week brings new reports of racial violence and inequal justice, To Kill a Mockingbird remains what it has always been, an introduction for young readers to heartbreaking problems that have no discernible solution.

When revisionist critics (like me) point out shortcomings of the novel, we must respectfully acknowledge that Lee herself had courage, conviction, and a kind of storytelling skill that can’t be measured merely in literary terms. Stories don’t enter the cultural mainstream unless they touch some collective nerve. Out of her own Southern childhood, Lee fashioned a fable that still resonates, and not only with Southerners; it comes as near as need be to a universal story. It catches a sliver of the child’s hope for a world that is safe, kind, and just. In Lee’s vision, the old curse of the South does not lie so heavily upon its children, and her characters are modest, fair-minded, small-town people—good Americans—who make it seem that the arc of the moral universe does indeed bend toward justice.

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