Go Set a Watchman

by Harper Lee
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Tompkins County Public Library Book Kit

Book Summary

From Harper Lee, comes a landmark new novel set two decades after her beloved Pulitzer Prize-winning masterpiece, To Kill a Mockingbird.

Maycomb, Alabama. Twenty-six-year-old Jean Louise Finch--"Scout"--returns home from New York City to visit her aging father, Atticus. Set against the backdrop of the civil rights tensions and political turmoil that were transforming the South, Jean Louise's homecoming turns bittersweet when she learns disturbing truths about her close-knit family, the town and the people dearest to her. Memories from her childhood flood back, and her values and assumptions are thrown into doubt. Featuring many of the iconic characters from To Kill a Mockingbird, Go Set a Watchman perfectly captures a young woman, and a world, in a painful yet necessary transition out of the illusions of the past--a journey that can be guided only by one's conscience.

Written in the mid-1950s, Go Set a Watchman imparts a fuller, richer understanding and appreciation of Harper Lee. Here is an unforgettable novel of wisdom, humanity, passion, humor and effortless precision--a profoundly affecting work of art that is both wonderfully evocative of another era and relevant to our own times. It not only confirms the enduring brilliance of To Kill a Mockingbird, but also serves as its essential companion, adding depth, context and new meaning to an American classic.
Author Biography

Nelle Harper Lee was born on April 28, 1926, to Amasa Coleman Lee and Frances Cunningham Finch Lee. Harper Lee grew up in the small southwestern Alabama town of Monroeville. Her father, a former newspaper editor and proprietor, was a lawyer who also served on the state legislature (1926-38). As a child, Lee was a tomboy and a precocious reader, and she enjoyed the friendship of her schoolmate and neighbor, the young Truman Capote, who provided the basis of the character of Dill in her novel To Kill a Mockingbird.

Lee was only five years old in when, in April 1931 in the small Alabama town of Scottsboro, the first trials began with regard to the purported rapes of two white women by nine young black men. The defendants, who were nearly lynched before being brought to court, were not provided with the services of a lawyer until the first day of trial. Despite medical testimony that the women had not been raped, the all-white jury found the men guilty of the crime and sentenced all but the youngest, a twelve-year-old boy, to death. Six years of subsequent trials saw most of these convictions repealed and all but one of the men freed or paroled. The Scottsboro case left a deep impression on the young Lee, who would use it later as the rough basis for the events in To Kill a Mockingbird.

Lee studied first at Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama (1944-45), and then pursued a law degree at the University of Alabama (1945-49), spending one year abroad at Oxford University, England. She worked as a reservation clerk for Eastern Airlines in New York City until the late 1950s, when she resolved to devote herself to writing. Lee lived a frugal lifestyle, traveling between her cold-water-only apartment in New York to her family home in Alabama to care for her ailing father. In addition, she worked in Holcombe, Kansas, as a research assistant for Truman Capote's novel In Cold Blood in 1959. Ever since the first days of their childhood friendship, Capote and Lee remained close friends.

Lee published her first and only novel, To Kill a Mockingbird, in 1960 after a two-year period of revising and rewriting under the guidance of her editor, Tay Hohoff, of the J. B. Lippincott Company. To Kill a Mockingbird won the 1961 Pulitzer Prize despite mixed critical reviews. The novel was highly popular, selling more than fifteen million copies. Though in composing the novel she delved into her own experiences as a child in Monroeville, Lee intended that the book impart the sense of any small town in the Deep South, as well as the universal characteristics of human beings. The book was made into a successful movie in 1962, starring Gregory Peck as Atticus.

President Johnson named Lee to the National Council of Arts in June 1966, and since then she has received numerous honorary doctorates. She continues to live in New York and Monroeville but prefers a relatively private existence, granting few interviews and giving few speeches. She has published only a few short essays since her debut: "Love--In Other Words" in Vogue, 1961; "Christmas to Me" in McCall's, 1961; and "When Children Discover America" in McCall's, 1965.
Book Reviews

Publishers Weekly:

The editor who rejected Lee's first effort had the right idea. The novel the world has been waiting for is clearly the work of a novice, with poor characterization (how did the beloved Scout grow up to be such a preachy bore, even as she serves as the book's moral compass?), lengthy exposition, and ultimately not much story, unless you consider Scout thinking she's pregnant because she was French-kissed or her losing her falsies at the school dance compelling. The book opens in the 1950s with Jean Louise, a grown-up 26-year-old Scout, returning to Maycomb from New York, where she's been living as an independent woman. Jean Louise is there to see Atticus, now in his seventies and debilitated by arthritis. She arrives in a town bristling from the NAACP's actions to desegregate the schools. Her aunt Zandra, the classic Southern gentlewoman, berates Jean Louise for wearing slacks and for considering her longtime friend and Atticus protégé Henry Clinton as a potential husband—Zandra dubs him trash. But the crux of the book is that Atticus and Henry are racist, as is everyone else in Jean Louise's old life (even her childhood caretaker, Calpurnia, sees the white folks as the enemy). The presentation of the South pushing back against the dictates of the Federal government, utilizing characters from a book that was about justice prevailing in the South through the efforts of an unambiguous hero, is a worthy endeavor. Lee just doesn't do the job with any aplomb. The theme of the book is basically about not being able to go home again, as Jean Louise sums it up in her confrontation with Atticus: "there's no place for me anymore in Maycomb, and I'll never be entirely at home anywhere else." As a picture of the desegregating South, the novel is interesting but heavy-handed, with harsh language and rough sentiments: "Do you want them in our world?" Atticus asks his daughter. The temptation to publish another Lee novel was undoubtedly great, but it's a little like finding out there's no Santa Claus.

Kirkus Reviews:

The long-awaited, much-discussed sequel that might have been a prequel--and that makes tolerably good company for its classic predecessor.

It's not To Kill a Mockingbird, and it too often reads like a first draft, but Lee's story nonetheless has weight and gravity. Scout—that is, Miss Jean Louise Finch--has been living in New York for years. As the story opens, she's on the way back to Maycomb, Alabama, wearing "gray slacks, a black sleeveless blouse, white socks, and loafers," an outfit calculated to offend her prim and proper aunt. The time is pre-Kennedy; in an early sighting, Atticus Finch, square-jawed crusader for justice, is glaring at a book about Alger Hiss. But is Atticus really on the side of justice? As Scout wanders from porch to porch and parlor to parlor on both the black and white sides of the tracks, she hears stories that complicate her--and our--understanding of her father. To modern eyes, Atticus harbors racist sentiments: "Jean Louise," he says in one exchange, "Have you ever considered that you can't have a set of backward people living among people advanced in one kind of civilization and have a social Arcadia?" Though Scout is shocked by Atticus' pronouncements that African-Americans are not yet prepared to enjoy full civil rights, her father is far less a Strom Thurmond--school segregationist than an old-school conservative of evolving views, "a healthy old man with a constitutional mistrust of paternalism and government in large doses,"
as her uncle puts it. Perhaps the real revelation is that Scout is sometimes unpleasant and often unpleasantly confrontational, as a young person among oldsters can be. Lee, who is plainly on the side of equality, writes of class, religion, and race, but most affecting of the clash of generations and traditions, with an Atticus tolerant and approving of Scout’s reformist ways: “I certainly hoped a daughter of mine’d hold her ground for what she thinks is right--stand up to me first of all."

It’s not To Kill a Mockingbird, yes, but it’s very much worth reading.

Library Journal:

As every reader knows, Lee’s second novel, from which her iconic To Kill a Mockingbird was spun 55 years ago, has just been published by Harper with considerable excitement and some still-shifting uncertainty, as reported by the New York Times, about how the manuscript was rediscovered. Lee’s original work has feisty 26-year-old Jean Louise Finch, nicknamed Scout as a child and the basis for Mockingbird’s beloved heroine, returning home from New York to Maycomb Junction, AL, post-Brown v. Board of Education and encountering strongly resistant states’-rights, anti-integrationist forces that include boyfriend Henry and, significantly, her father, Atticus Finch, Mockingbird’s moral center. Readers shocked by that revelation must remember that there are now two Atticus Finches; the work in hand is not a sequel but served as source material for Lee’s eventual Pulitzer Prize winner, with such reworked characters a natural part of the writing and editing processes. Even if one can imagine that the seeds of the older Atticus are there in the younger Atticus—and that’s possible—these are different characters and different books. More significantly, the current work stands as you-are-there documentation of a specific time and place, contextualizing both Mockingbird and the very beginnings of the civil rights movement, and for that reason alone it’s invaluable and recommended reading. Mockingbird’s Atticus was right for 1960, just after the Little Rock integration crisis, with his defense of a wrongly accused African American making him a moral beacon and a lesson for all. Yet for many readers, even those who love and admire Mockingbird, it also smacked of white self-congratulation, and the current book is a rawer, more authentic representation of Southern sentiment at a tumultuous time, years removed from the solidly (and safely) segregationist era of Mockingbird. If Watchman is occasionally digressive or a bit much of a lecture, it’s good enough to make one wish that Lee had written a dozen works. It’s also a breathtaking read that will have the reader actively engaged and arguing with every character, including Jean Louise. In the end, despite Jean Louise’s powerful articulation that the court had to rule as it did, that “we [whites] deserve everything we’ve gotten from the NAACP,” and that Negroes (as the novel says) will rise and should rise, it’s unsettling and, yes, disappointing that the confrontation between Jean Louise and Atticus is ultimately an engineered effort to make her stand up for herself and stop worshipping her father. That’s not quite believable, and what’s right gets a little lost in states’ rights, which Jean Louise herself supports. At least she doesn’t run back to New York, but did she really win her argument? The ugly things she hears around her are still being said today. VERDICT Disturbing, important, and not to be compared with Mockingbird; this book is its own signal work.
Discussion Questions

1. **Go Set a Watchman** takes place more than 20 years after *To Kill a Mockingbird* begins. When *WATCHMAN* opens, Jean Louise Finch --- now 26 and living in the North, in New York City --- is returning to her hometown of Maycomb, Alabama. Describe the Maycomb of *GO SET A WATCHMAN*. If you have read *MOCKINGBIRD*, has the town changed in the intervening years? If so, how?

2. Harper Lee writes, “Until comparatively recently in its history, Maycomb County was so cut off from the rest of the nation that some of its citizens, unaware of the South’s political predilections over the past ninety years, still voted Republican.” What are these predilections, and where do they originate? What is Harper Lee telling us about the period and the politics and attitudes of this small Southern town?

3. Maycomb is a town without train service, and its bus service “was erratic and seemed to go nowhere.” How does this lack of connection isolate the citizens of Maycomb, and how does that isolation affect how they see themselves and outsiders? Early in the novel, her longtime friend Henry Clinton tells her “you’re gonna see Maycomb change its face completely in our lifetime.” What does he foresee that Jean Louise cannot --- or perhaps does not want to see?

4. Think about the extended Finch family. What is their status in Maycomb? What is the significance of being a Finch in this small Southern town? Does it afford them privileges --- as well as expectations of them and responsibilities --- that other families do not share? Do the Finches have freedoms that others do not enjoy?

5. Describe the Jean Louise Finch of *WATCHMAN*. How does this grown-up woman compare to her younger self? How does Jean Louise conform --- or not --- to the ideal of womanhood in the 1950s? What was that ideal? Compare her to her Aunt Alexandra and the women of Maycomb. Does she fit in with these women? What did you learn about them at the Coffee social that Aunt Alexandra hosts in Jean Louise’s honor? In both *MOCKINGBIRD* and *WATCHMAN*, Alexandra tells Jean Louise that she is part of a genteel family and that she must act like a “lady.” How did ladies “act” in the first half of the 20th century, and is there such a thing as a “lady” today?

6. Has living away from Maycomb --- and in a place like New York --- had an impact on Jean Louise? What does she think about New York and life there? What does the big city offer her that Maycomb does not --- and vice versa? Now that Atticus is older and suffering from arthritis, why doesn’t Jean Louise move back to Maycomb permanently? “Maycomb expected every daughter to do her duty. The duty of his only daughter to her widowed father after the death of his only son was clear: Jean Louise would return and make her home with Atticus; that was what
a daughter did, and she who did not was no daughter.” What responsibilities do children --- especially female children --- owe their parents?

7. Describe the relationship between Jean Louise and Atticus at the beginning of the novel. Does Jean Louise idealize her father too much? How does she react when she discovers that her father is a flawed human being? How does this discovery alter her sense of herself, her family, and her world? By the novel’s end, how do father and daughter accommodate each other?

8. Talk about the Atticus portrayed in GO SET A WATCHMAN. If you read WATCHMAN first, how might the novel color your ideas about the Atticus Finch in TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD? What was your reaction to some of the opinions he voices in WATCHMAN? Do they make him a more realistic --- if less heroic --- character than that portrayed in MOCKINGBIRD? Is Atticus racist? Would he consider himself to be racist?

9. “Integrity, humor, and patience were the three words for Atticus Finch.” After your reading of WATCHMAN, do these three words still hold true? What words would you use to describe him?

10. What are Jean Louise’s feelings toward Henry Clinton? Would he make a good husband for her? Both her aunt and her uncle tell her that Henry isn’t “suitable,” that he “is not her kind.” What do they mean, and what does it mean to Jean Louise? Is it strictly because of Henry’s background or is there something more? What adjectives would you use to describe Henry’s character?

11. Is Henry like Atticus, his mentor and friend? Is Jean Louise’s assessment of Henry later in the novel correct? Are Henry and Atticus good men? Can you be a moral person and hold views that may be unacceptable to most people? How do Atticus’s actions toward the blacks of Maycomb compare with his views about them?

12. Why does Maycomb have a citizens’ council, and why does this upset Jean Louise when she discovers that nearly everyone in town belongs to it? By allowing the likes of a racist segregationist like Grady O’Hanlon to speak at the meeting, are Atticus and Henry defending O’Hanlon’s First Amendment right to free speech --- or are they condoning his message?

13. Harper Lee writes, “Had she been able to think, Jean Louise might have prevented events to come by considering the day’s occurrences in terms of a recurring story as old as time: the chapter which concerned her began two hundred years ago and was played out in a proud society the bloodiest war and harshest peace in modern history could not destroy, returning, to be played out again on private ground in the twilight of a civilization no wars and no peace could save.” Why would this realization have helped Jean Louise? Are we still fighting the Civil War today?
14. Harper Lee offers a window into Jean Louise’s turmoil after she attends the citizens’ council meeting. “Had she insight, could she have pierced the barriers of her highly selective, insular world, she may have discovered that all her life she had been with a visual defect which had gone unnoticed and neglected by herself and by those closest to her: she was born color blind.” Why is Jean Louise’s color blindness a “visual defect”? How does being color blind shape who she is and how she sees the world?

15. Trying to reconcile the knowledge Jean Louise has learned with her views of those she loves forces her to confront painful questions. “What was this blight that had come down over the people she loved? Did she see it in stark relief because she had been away from it? Had it percolated gradually through the years until now? Had it always been under her nose for her to see if she had only looked? No, not the last.” What makes her say no to this question? And finally, “What turned ordinary men into screaming dirt at the top of their voices, what made her kind of people harden and say ‘nigger’ when the word had never crossed their lips before?” What answers can you give her?

16. What kind of reception does Jean Louise receive in the Quarters when she visits Calpurnia, the Finches’ retired housekeeper? How does Calpurnia react to seeing Jean Louise, and what is Calpurnia’s response when Jean Louise asks her how she truly felt about her family? Would Calpurnia have answered the same way if asked that question a few years earlier --- or if asked a few years later?

17. Near the novel’s end, Jean Louise questions herself. “Everything I have ever taken for right and wrong these people have taught me --- these same, these very people. So it’s me, it’s not them. Something has happened to me.” Do you agree with her? Has she changed --- or is she truly the person who she was raised to be? Atticus tells her, “I’ve killed you, Scout. I had to.” What does he mean?

18. Do you think that the white community of Maycomb sees itself as being victimized in GO SET A WATCHMAN? How do these people justify this belief --- and how does this belief justify their attitude and behavior toward the emerging Civil Rights movement and those who are a part of it, especially the black people of Maycomb?

19. GO SET A WATCHMAN was written three years after the landmark Supreme Court decision in Brown v. the Board of Education. How did that decision impact the nation and especially the South? What is Jean Louise’s opinion of that decision? What about Atticus’s? How do their responses reflect comments about Supreme Court decisions involving minority rights in our own time? What does this tell us about ourselves as Americans and about our views of race today?

20. Consider the novel’s title, GO SET A WATCHMAN. What is its significance? Why do you think Harper Lee chose this as her title for the book? Though it is fiction, the book is a historical
document of its time. What does reading it tell us about the modern Civil Rights movement and its effect on the South? What lessons does the book offer us in understanding our own turbulent times?

21. How have our attitudes about race evolved since the 1950s when WATCHMAN was written? In what ways have we progressed? Is the stain of racism indelible in our national character, or can it eventually be erased? Can it be eradicated for good?

22. Late in the novel, Uncle Jack tells his niece, “Every man’s island, Jean Louise, every man’s watchman, is his conscience.” What wisdom is he imparting to her? Uncle Jack also calls Jean Louise a “turnip-sized bigot.” Is she? Why?
Further Reading

If you enjoy reading the works of Harper Lee, try the works of these authors or any of the titles linked below.

Truman Capote
David Guterson
Olive Ann Burns
Audrey Niffenegger
Geraldine Brooks
Richard Wright
Alice Walker

Four Spirits
By Naslund, Sena Jeter
2003-09 - William Morrow & Company
0066212383

From the acclaimed author of the bestseller "Ahab's Wife" comes this eagerly anticipated new bestseller--an inspiring, brilliantly rendered novel set in the Deep South of the 1960s.

Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter
By Franklin, Tom
2011-05 - Harper Perennial
9780060594671

In a small Mississippi town, two men are torn apart by circumstance and reunited by tragedy, in this resonant new novel from the award-winning author of the critically acclaimed "Hell at the Breech."

The Secret of Magic
By Johnson, Deborah
2014-01 - Amy Einhorn Books
9780399157721

In 1946, a young female attorney from New York City attempts the impossible: attaining justice for a black man in the Deep South.
Eudora Welty: Complete Novels
By Welty, Eudora
Editor Ford, Richard
Editor Kreyling, Michael
1998-08 - Library of America
188301154X

This two-volume collection reveals the singular imaginative power of one of America's most admired Southern writers. "Complete Novels" gathers all of Welty's longer fiction, from "The Robber Bridegroom" (1942) to her Pulitzer Prize-winning "The Optimist's Daughter" (1972).

Gilead
By Robinson, Marilynne
2004-11 - Farrar Straus Giroux
0374153892

In 1956, toward the end of Rev. John Ames's life, he begins a letter to his young son, an account of himself and his forebears. This is also the tale of wisdom forged during his solitary life and how history lives through generations, pervasively present even when betrayed and forgotten.

The Time Traveler's Wife
By Niffenegger, Audrey
2004-07 - Harvest Books
015602943X

Alex Award Winner - 2004
A BookPage Notable Title

A dazzling novel in the most untraditional fashion, this is the remarkable story of a passionate love affair that endures across a sea of time and captures the two lovers in an impossibly romantic trap.

Snow Falling on Cedars
By Guterson, David
1995-09 - Vintage
067976402X

San Piedro Island, north of Puget Sound, is a place so isolated that no one who lives there can afford to make enemies. But in 1954 a local fisherman is found suspiciously drowned, and a Japanese
American named Kabuo Miyamoto is charged with his murder.

In the course of the ensuing trial, it becomes clear that what is at stake is more than one man's guilt. For on San Piedro, memory grows as thickly as cedar trees and the fields of ripe strawberries -- memories of a charmed love affair between a white boy and the Japanese girl who grew up to become Kabuo’s wife; memories of land desired, paid for, and lost. Above all, San Piedro is haunted by the memory of what happened to its Japanese residents during World War II, when an entire community was sent into exile while its neighbors watched. Gripping, tragic, and densely atmospheric, Snow Falling on Cedars is a masterpiece of suspense -- but one that leaves us shaken and changed.

Wives and Daughters
By Gaskell, Elizabeth Cleghorn
Introduction by King, Amy M.
Notes by King, Amy M.
2005-03 - Barnes & Noble
1593082576

Tremendously popular in her lifetime, Elizabeth Gaskell has often been overshadowed by her contemporaries the Brontes and George Eliot. Yet the reputation of her long-neglected masterpiece "Wives and Daughters" continues to grow, fulfilling Henry James's prophecy that the novel would "continue for years to come to be read and relished . . .so delicately, so elaborately, so artistically, so truthfully, and heartily is the story wrought out."

Ellen Foster
By Gibbons, Kaye
1987-05 - Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill
0912697520

One of the most talked-about and endearing first novels in years bears the story of a female Huck Finn and her search for a true home.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter
By McCullers, Carson
2004-04 - Mariner Books
0618526412

An Oprah's Book Club selection

With the depression as a murky backdrop, this first novel depicts the
bleak landscape of the American consciousness below the Mason-Dixon line. Miss McCullers' picture of loneliness, death, accident, insanity, fear, mob violence and terror is perhaps the most desolate that has so far come from the South. Her quality of despair is unique and individual; and it seems to me more natural and authentic than that of Faulkner. Her groping characters live in a world more completely lost than any Sherwood Anderson ever dreamed of. And she recounts incidents of death and attitudes of stoicism in sentences whose neutrality makes Hemingway's terse prose seem warm and partisan by comparison. Hovering mockingly over her story of loneliness in a small town are primitive religion, adolescent hope, the silence of deaf mutes - and all of these give the violent colors of the life she depicts a sheen of weird tenderness.

**Lesson Before Dying**

By [Gaines, Ernest J.](#)

Author [Parr, Terence](#)

1997-09 - Knopf Publishing Group

9780679455615

**Awards:**

Eliot Rosewater Indiana High School Book Award (2002)

From the author of A Gathering of Old Men and The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman comes a deep and compassionate novel. A young man who returns to 1940s Cajun country to teach visits a black youth on death row for a crime he didn't commit. Together they come to understand the heroism of resisting.

**The Queen of Palmyra**

By [Gwin, Minrose](#)

2010-04 - William Morrow & Company

9780061840326

Gwin delivers an atmospheric debut novel about growing up in the changing South in 1960s Mississippi, in the tradition of "The Secret Life of Bees."
I Am Scout: The Biography of Harper Lee
By Shields, Charles J.
2008-04 - Henry Holt & Company
0805083340

The story of an unconventional, high-spirited woman who drew on her love of writing and her Southern home to create a book that continues to speak to new generations of readers. Anyone who has enjoyed "To Kill a Mockingbird "will appreciate this glimpse into the life of its fascinating author.

Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee
By Shields, Charles J.
2006-05 - Henry Holt & Company
080507919X

A BookPage Notable Title

The colorful life of the remarkable, rarely written-about woman who created To Kill a Mockingbird--the classic that became a touchstone for generations of Americans.

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks
By Skloot, Rebecca
2010-02 - Crown Publishing Group (NY)
9781400052172

Awards:

Skloot brilliantly weaves together the story of Henrietta Lacks--a woman whose cells have been unwittingly used for scientific research since the 1950s--with the birth of bioethics, and the dark history of experimentation on African Americans.

Their Eyes Were Watching God
By Hurston, Zora Neale
Afterword by Gates, Henry Louis, Jr.
Foreword by Danticat, Edwidge
2006-01 - HarperCollins Publishers
0060838671
Hurston's beloved classic--one of the most important American novels of the 20th century--follows the fortunes of Janie Crawford, a woman who was married three times and had been tried for the murder of one of her husbands in the black town of Eaton, Florida.

**The Girl Who Fell from the Sky**  
By *Durrrow, Heidi W.*  
2010-02 - Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill  
9781565126800  

This debut novel tells the story of Rachel, the daughter of a Danish mother and a black G.I., who becomes the sole survivor of a family tragedy. Growing up in the 1980s, she confronts her identity as a biracial young woman in a world that wants to see her as either black or white.

**The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration**  
By *Wilkerson, Isabel*  
2010-09 - Random House  
9780679444329  

**Awards:**  

With stunning historical detail, Wilkerson tells the story of the decades-long migration of black citizens who fled the South for northern and western cities, from 1915 to 1970, through the lives of three unique individuals.