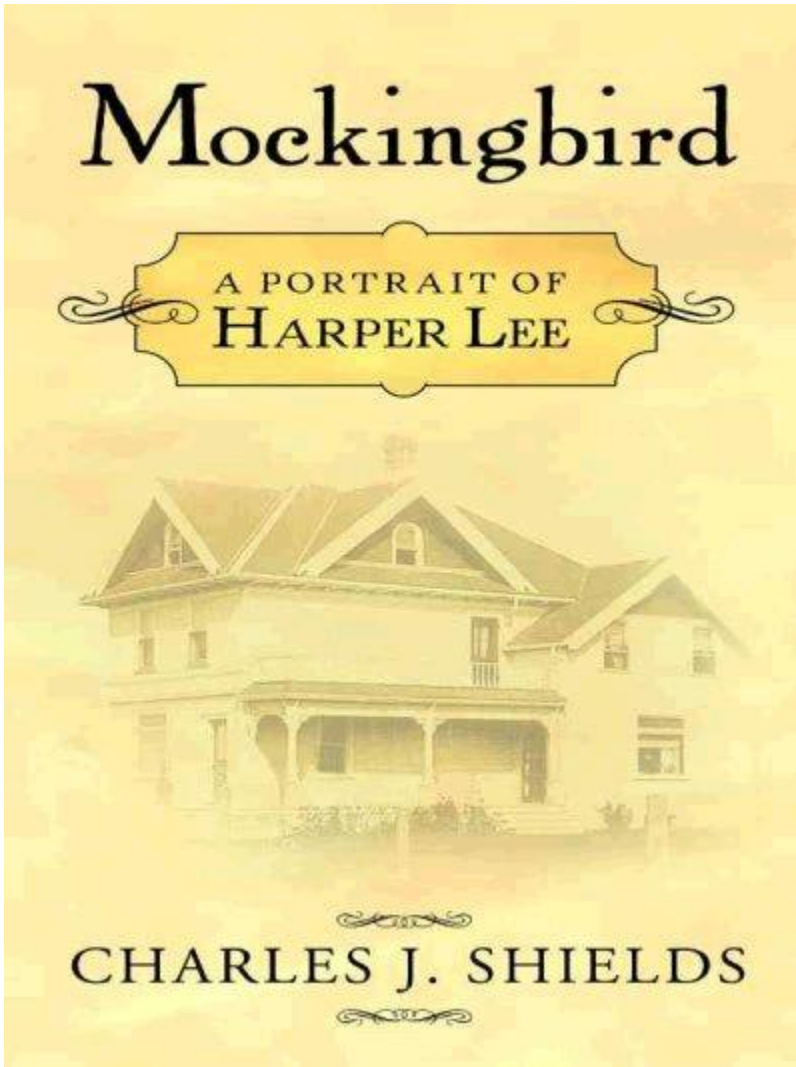


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

About the Book



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

Charles J. Shields has brought to life the warmhearted, high-spirited, and occasionally hardheaded woman who gave us two of American literature's most unforgettable characters—Atticus Finch and his daughter, Scout. Drawing on six hundred interviews, this is an insightful portrait of the Pulitzer prize-winning author, who stopped giving interviews in 1964. *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee* is the first book ever written about Harper Lee.

About the Author Source: <http://charlesjshields.com/>

Charles J. Shields spent four years researching and writing *Mockingbird*. A former English teacher who taught Harper Lee's novel for a number of years, he later became a writer of nonfiction books for young people.

Shields has a B.A. in English and an M.A. in American history from the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, where he was a James Scholar. He lives in central Virginia with his wife, Guadalupe.

Awards

Mockingbird was a Quill Award nominee.

Reviews

Publishers Weekly

Few novels are as beloved and acclaimed as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and even fewer authors have shunned the spotlight as successfully as its author. Although journalist Shields interviewed 600 of Harper Lee's acquaintances and researched the papers of her childhood friend Truman Capote, he is no match for the elusive Lee, who stopped granting interviews in 1965 and wouldn't talk to him. Much of this first full-length biography of Lee is filled with inconsequential anecdotes focusing on the people around her, while the subject remains stubbornly out of focus. Shields enlivens Lee's childhood by pointing out people who were later fictionalized in her novel. The book percolates during her banner year of 1960, when she won the Pulitzer Prize and helped Capote research *In Cold Blood*. Capote's papers yield some of Lee's fascinating first-person insights on the emotionally troubled Clutter family that were tempered in his book. Shields believes Lee abandoned her second novel when her agents and her editor—her surrogate family in publishing—died or left the business, leaving her with no support system. There's a tantalizing anecdote about a true-crime project Lee was researching in the mid-'80s that faded away. Sputtering to a close, the final chapter covers the last 35 years in 24 pages. It's also baffling that this affectionate biography ends with three paragraphs devoted to someone slamming her classic work.

School Library Journal

Shields takes on the elusive writer in this first-ever biography of her. Without direct input from his subject, the author's extensive research combines sources in local-history collections, interviews and correspondence with Lee's acquaintances, and Internet resources to piece together the details of the writer's life. Starting with Lee's childhood in Monroeville, AL, Shields depicts the people and events that inspired *To Kill a Mockingbird's* characters. A picture develops of a girl who would face down any bully, a nonconformist whose sorority roommates kicked her out after one semester but who made an impact on the campus with her presence, a woman with a wicked sense of humor and a writer with a voice and themes of prejudice and justice that resonate. Students and curious fans alike will find material here to further their understanding of her work and life. Extensive source notes and a student-friendly bibliography are included.

Booklist

Harper Lee is famous not only for her perennially best-selling first novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), but also for never having published a second one and for being

relatively reclusive, not having granted interviews since the mid-1960s. Born in Monroeville, Alabama, Lee was a childhood friend of another famous writer, Truman Capote, and their friendship lasted until his death. In fact, Lee accompanied Capote to Kansas and contributed considerable time assisting him in researching the murders that were the basis of his masterpiece, *In Cold Blood* (1966). Lee was always unconventional, never adhering to rules established by, first, her mother, and, then, society. She attended college because she was supposed to, but dropped out and moved to New York to write. Without having heard the words directly from Lee (this book was written without her cooperation), Shields cannot explain exactly why there has never been a second novel, but his estimation of the situation is credible. An informative and genial biography that literary fiction lovers will flock to.

Literary Criticism

Good Scout

Here is a book about a woman who knew when to get off the train. A tomboy from Monroeville, Ala., editor of her college humor magazine, *The Rammer Jammer*, and law school dropout, she took it on the lam to New York, got a job, made friends and managed to write a novel that hit the best-seller lists and stayed there, won a Pulitzer, got made into a major movie and became a staple of high school English along with "*Romeo and Juliet*" and "*The Great Gatsby*." Total sales are somewhere around 30 million, and it continues to sell hundreds of thousands of copies a year. As her father, A. C. Lee, said, "it's very rare indeed when a thing like this happens to a country girl going to New York."

She worked for years on a second novel, and then, in the mid-1980's, on a book of nonfiction about a serial murder in Alabama, neither of which worked out to her satisfaction and so she squashed them. She made her peace with being a one-book author. Unlike her friend Truman Capote, she didn't enjoy the limelight. So she backed away from celebrity, declined to be interviewed or be honorifically degreed and simply lived her life, sometimes in Manhattan, riding city buses, visiting museums and bookstores in her running suit and sneakers, seeing old friends, and most of the time in Monroeville, in a ranch house with her older sister Alice, a house full of books. Built-in bookshelves, floor to ceiling.

Every summer, Monroeville draws crowds of tourists to see a staged version of "*To Kill a Mockingbird*" at the old county courthouse that was the model for the one in which Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch strode before the all-white jury to argue for Tom Robinson's acquittal, as little Scout and her brother Jem and friend Dill looked on from the gallery. Everyone would surely love it if Miss Lee would consent to walk out on stage and wave and take a bow, or even say a few words, but she will not do it. She

has been known to show up at the high school and speak to English classes, but this is rare.

She is 80 years old and wears a hearing aid and eats out at the diner or the country club and to strangers who seek her out, she can be frosty. A reporter and photographer from Birmingham banged on her door 10 years ago and Miss Lee opened it and said, "What is it?" They asked her to autograph a copy of her book. She wasn't happy about it but she fetched a pen. "I hope you're more polite to other people," she said. She signed it: "Best wishes, Harper Lee." She said, "Next time try to be more thoughtful." They thanked her. She gave them a big warm smile and said, "You're quite welcome."

Charles Shields is a former English teacher who taught Harper Lee's book, and a scrupulous journalist who respects the lady's privacy even as he opens up her life. This biography will not disappoint those who loved the novel and the feisty, independent, fiercely loyal Scout, in whom Harper Lee put so much of herself.

If you were going to draw a movie from this book, you'd start on York Avenue in Manhattan on a cold winter night in the late 1950's. Pages of manuscript fluttering out of an apartment window and then a young woman, weeping, picking them up out of the snow. She is an airline ticket clerk and she has been working at her typewriter late at night ever since she came to the city over her parents' objections in 1949. She is on her own. Her childhood pal, Truman, an effeminate boy befriended by the boyish girl, is nearby but out of range, flying high, a heralded young novelist ("*Other Voices, Other Rooms*") with a Broadway musical in the works. In his wake, she strikes people as dumpy and distant. She perseveres. In November 1956, she walks into an agent's office at 18 East 41st Street with five short stories in hand, and is encouraged. On Christmas Day, at her friends Michael and Joy Brown's town house on East 50th, they present her with a gift, a note -- "You have one year off from your job to write whatever you please. Merry Christmas." She is bowled over by their generosity. A year later, she has the beginnings of a novel, "*Go Set a Watchman*," which becomes "*Atticus*," which, under the tutelage of a patient editor at Lippincott named Tay Hohoff ("dressed in a business suit with her steel gray hair pulled tightly behind her, . . . short and rail-thin with an aristocratic profile and a voice raspy from cigarettes"), after the cold winter night breakdown, she finishes in the summer of 1959.

One evening in mid-December, she meets Truman at Grand Central and they board the 20th Century Limited for Chicago. He has reserved a pair of roomettes. He's on his way to Garden City, Kan., on assignment for *The New Yorker*, to write about the murders of four members of a prominent farm family, the Clutters, and he's asked her to help him do the research. They spend a month in Kansas, an odd couple. A short man in a sheepskin coat and moccasins and a long scarf, a rather pushy self-centered

New York queer, and a tall gracious Southern woman with a knack for saying the right thing. Their big breakthrough comes on Christmas Day. They're invited for dinner at the home of Cliff Hope, the attorney of the murdered farmer, Herb Clutter. Also present are the detective Alvin Dewey and his wife, Marie. Dewey is coordinating the murder investigation and he had been put off by Truman at first, but he and his wife and the Hopes are literate people with a high regard for writers and there is a bottle of J&B Scotch and Harper Lee is a steady woman in whose presence Truman shines. And thus Dewey becomes their key source, the man who makes "*In Cold Blood*" possible.

It's the beginning of the time of her life. Her book is done, a big relief, and she is getting intimations of the success to come. A lawyer's daughter, she is on a big murder case. She works hard, takes 150 typewritten pages of careful notes, puts her writerly intelligence at the service of her friend (who will never acknowledge the extent of her help), gets engrossed in the story, feels the thrill of collaboration. She goes back to New York to correct her own galleys, returns to Kansas with Truman for the trial of the killers, then back to New York for the publication of the book on July 11, 1960. She is 34 and in six months she has had her hands on two American classics. Ahead of her is a deluge of success, a potful of money and some sort of vindication in the eyes of Monroeville. Truman will disintegrate and die at 59 and she will persist. The lady looks around at a room full of books, closes the door, and drives off with her sister to an early supper at Dave's Catfish Cabin, a plate of fish and hush puppies and a glass of tea. Everybody at Dave's knows who she is and nobody asks her made-up questions about writing or fame or how she explains the long run her novel has enjoyed. She is apparently in good humor and enjoying her food and not planning to go on *Oprah* or *Charlie Rose*. And so there, dear reader, you will just have to leave her.

Source: Keillor, Garrison. "Good Scout." *The New York Times Book Review* 11 June 2006: 11(L). Literature Resource Center. <http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions Source: <http://charlesjshields.com/>

1. Hypothesize: in light of Nelle Harper Lee's relationship to her mother, why is there no mother in *To Kill a Mockingbird*?
2. On the surface, Truman Capote and Nelle Harper Lee appeared to be so opposite as children. What was it about their lives and circumstances that led them to become close friends?
3. Today, social services address many of the problems that were taken for granted about life in Monroeville, Alabama in the 1930s. If Nelle Harper Lee was growing up in Monroeville now, how might her upbringing and experiences be different?

4. In his *New Yorker* magazine review of *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee*, Thomas Mallon writes about Harper Lee's father, "Mr. Lee was a 'fond and indulgent father,' who, in addition to practicing law, edited Monroeville's local paper and served in the state legislature. He believed in segregation, low taxes, and noblesse oblige, and, as an elder of the First United Methodist Church, was prepared to scold the pastor for too much sermonizing about racial prejudice and unfair labor conditions Ambivalent and stretchable, he seems, all in all, a more interesting figure than Atticus Finch, the plaster saint for whom he provided the mold." How does Atticus Finch compare to Mallon's description of A.C. Lee?
5. When *In Cold Blood* was nearly ready for publication, Capote told one of the detectives on the Clutter case that Nelle wouldn't be given any special credit in the book- "she was just there." How would you describe Nelle's contribution to *In Cold Blood*?
6. Gregory Peck insisted that the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* be reedited several times to make the character of Atticus more prominent at the expense of the children's scenes. If you've seen the film, is the film better or worse for Peck getting his way?
7. What do you think was the Lee family's reaction to Nelle's success and why?
8. What are some of the reasons you think that Harper Lee never published another novel?
9. Would you characterize Miss Lee as a "recluse" the way many reporters have?
10. In his introduction to *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee*, Shields writes, "Despite her desire for privacy, I believe it is important to record Lee's story while there are still a few people alive who were part of it and can remember. I have tried to balance her desire for privacy with the desire of her millions of readers who have long hoped for a respectful, informative view of this rarely seen writer." Do you agree with his reason for writing the book while Lee was alive, and do you think he accomplished his goal?

Multimedia

Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee @ St. Bonaventure University (Video Clip)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNjXa49AycQ>

An excerpt from a presentation given by Charles Shields.

Further Reading

Truman Capote by Plimpton, George

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1130889>

(Call number: 921 Capote)

Plimpton (founder and editor of "*The Paris Review*") interweaves interviews with over 100 people who knew Capote to create a multifaceted picture of the author of "*In Cold Blood*" and "*Breakfast at Tiffany's*", from his childhood in Monroeville, Alabama to his last days in California. Interviewees include Lauren Bacall, Gore Vidal, Joan Didion, William Styron, Kurt Vonnegut, William F. Buckley, Jr., John Huston, and Norman Mailer.

Too Brief a Treat: The Letters of Truman Capote by Gerald Clarke

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1228460>

(Call number: 921 Capote)

Truman Capote was hailed as one of the most meticulous writers in American letters—a part of the Capote mystique is that his precise writing seemed to exist apart from his chaotic life. While the measure of Capote as a writer is best taken through his work, Capote the person is best understood in his personal correspondence with friends, colleagues, lovers, and rivals. In *Too Brief a Treat*, the acclaimed biographer Gerald Clarke brings together for the first time the private letters of Truman Capote. Encompassing more than four decades, these letters reveal the inner life of one of the twentieth century's most intriguing personalities.

Book Club To Go!* *To Kill A Mockingbird by Harper Lee

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1308896>

(Call number: Fiction Lee)

Harper Lee's classic novel of a lawyer in the Deep South defending a black man charged with the rape of a white girl. One of the best-loved stories of all time, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has earned many distinctions since its original publication in 1960. It won the Pulitzer Prize, has been translated into more than forty languages, sold more than thirty million copies worldwide, and been made into an enormously popular movie.

Harper Lee website

<http://www.harperlee.com/>

Information and resources.

Author's official website

<http://charlesjshields.com/>

News, information, and further resources.

Read-Alikes

Margaret Mitchell's "*Gone With the Wind*" Letters by Margaret Mitchell

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1048159>

(Call number: 921 Mitchell)

Collected letters spanning from 1936 to 1949.

Ralph Ellison: A Biography by Bob Burke

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1285432>

(Call number: 921 Ellison)

The definitive biography of one of the most important American writers and cultural intellectuals of the twentieth century--Ralph Ellison, author of the masterpiece *Invisible Man*. In 1953, Ellison's explosive story of an innocent young black man's often surreal search for truth and his identity won him the National Book Award for fiction and catapulted him to national prominence. Ellison went on to earn many other honors, including two presidential medals and election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, but his failure to publish a second novel, despite years of striving, haunted him for the rest of his life. Now, as the first scholar given complete access to Ellison's papers, Arnold Rampersad has written not only a reliable account of the main events of Ellison's life but also a complex, authoritative portrait of an unusual artist and human being.

Salinger, a Biography by Paul Alexander

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1161818>

(Call number: 921 Salinger)

In *Salinger, A Biography*, Alexander tells the story of a man whose fictional creations became as real to him as friends, family, and lovers - a man who chose, in adolescence, to stop his life in a freeze frame and who has lingered in that fantasy world for a half century.

In Search of J.D. Salinger by Ian Hamilton

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1030860>

(Call number: 921 Salinger)

This work, scheduled for release in August 1986, was abandoned after Salinger successfully sued to enjoin publication on the grounds of copyright violation. This book is an attempt to salvage the biography and, at the same time, to describe the problems Hamilton faced in writing the life of an author who prefers to remain hidden.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog



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