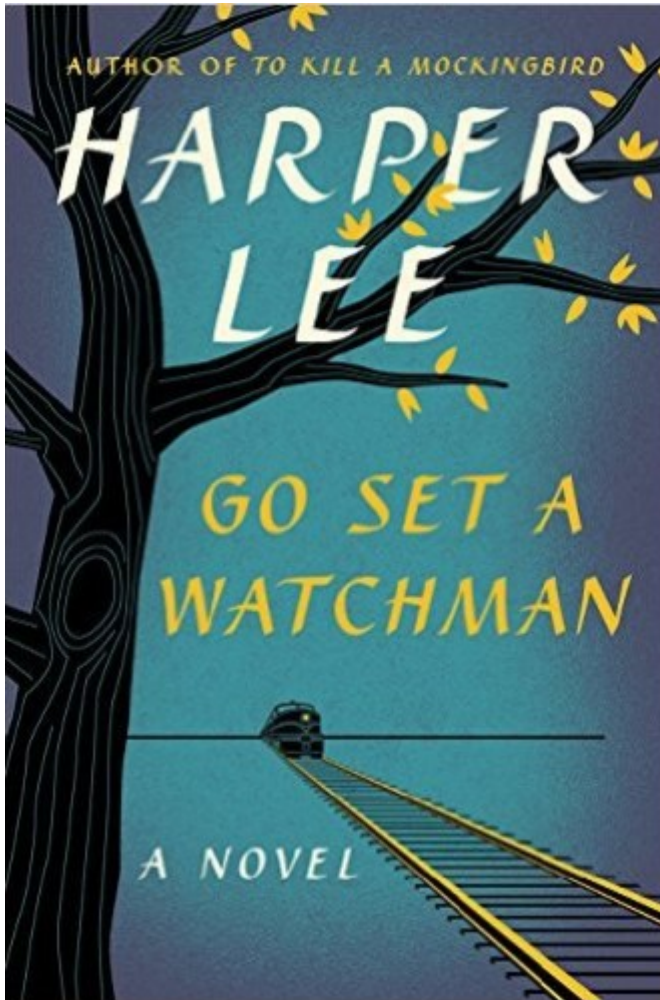


Harper Lee, then and now

by [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [October 14, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Go Set a Watchman

By Harper Lee
Harper

As an editorial writer for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Cynthia Tucker became the second person from Monroeville, Alabama, to win a Pulitzer Prize. But growing up in Monroeville as an African American, she had to avoid the parts of town where

Monroeville's first Pulitzer winner grew up. Nelle Harper Lee's exploration of racism, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, was published in 1960, but Tucker, born in 1955, didn't attend an integrated school until she was 16. Schools and churches in Monroeville remain effectively segregated today.

Yet Monroeville has made its peace with its portrayal in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. No small part of the local economy derives from the book. Tens of thousands of literary tourists come every year, and each May a stage production of the novel draws crowds to the old courthouse. The Monroeville United Methodist Church owes much to Lee's quiet generosity.

Until this year, Nelle Lee had said she never intended to publish another book, which was just fine with Monroeville—one had been more than enough, thank you. But early this year, when so much of Alabama was hearing echoes from bygone times, word came that an old manuscript had been discovered and that Lee, or someone acting in her name, had consented to publish it.

Townpeople had their doubts. Miss Nelle (locally pronounced "Nail") had steadfastly fended off talk of another novel. "I gave my life for one book and the lives of my family members," she said. "Why would I do it for another?" Friends knew not to bring up the subject.

Chief among those who protected her silence was her sister Alice, the oldest lawyer in Alabama, who practiced to the age of 100. Just after Miss Alice died last fall, Miss Nelle's present lawyer claimed to have found a long-lost manuscript and to have gotten her approval to publish it. To Miss Nelle's longtime minister at the United Methodist Church, that sounded fishy.

"Nelle Lee had a stroke, she doesn't remember anything, she's essentially blind, profoundly deaf, and confined to a wheelchair," said the minister, Thomas Lane Butts. "You can draw your own conclusions. They'd probably be the same as mine. I was certainly very surprised by the announcement. I've known Miss Nelle since the 1980s and her sister since 1965, and no suggestion of another book had come to light before. It makes you wonder."

Some unease might have come from concern about what the new book would reveal about Monroeville. For while Miss Nelle is intensely private—she has not granted an interview in more than 50 years—she has disclosed a great deal in her fiction.

Just about every page of *Mockingbird*, every familiar character, is drawn from her life. The tomboy Jean Louise Finch, “Scout,” is Nelle herself. (Finch was her mother’s maiden name.) Atticus Finch resembles Nelle’s father, the lawyer Amasa Coleman Lee, but his fair-mindedness about race might be attributed to her sister Alice, whom she called “Atticus in a skirt.” Scout’s older brother Jem is Nelle’s older brother Ed, with a dash of Jennings Carter, a playmate who lived next door. Jennings’s cousin Truman Faulk, the writer later known as Truman Capote, appears as Dill.

Nelle and the boys played in a tree house between two giant chinaberry trees, the kind of tree featured on *Mockingbird*’s original cover. Just up the street was a pale-skinned, reclusive neighbor, the original Boo Radley, who left presents for the children in the knot of a tree. The Halloween night when Scout and Jem are attacked? In actuality, the original Boo Radley was accosted on Halloween by members of the Ku Klux Klan, who were looking for a black child whom the children had dared to invite to a party. The trial of Tom Robinson? Nelle’s father once defended two black men in a capital case and lost.

Capote vouched for Nelle’s veracity in every detail. Of Boo Radley, he said, “He was a real man, and he lived just down the road from us. We used to go and get those things out of the trees. Everything she wrote about it is absolutely true.”

It turns out that *Go Set a Watchman*, a first draft of *Mockingbird*, is even more autobiographical, and it is much less flattering to Nelle and to those close to her. In it, Scout could be Nelle Lee around 1957—a young woman living in New York City who has come back to Alabama for a visit.

Out of place in her own hometown, Scout wants some things to be exactly as they were in her childhood, and other things to be much more modern, and she takes out her frustrations on those nearest to her—for example, her aging father, the aunt who lives with him, and a childhood friend who wants to marry her. She identifies a streak of mental illness in her family (“We’re just all crazy,” Scout says). She finds hypocrisy in her suitor, a tall man like Nelle’s friend “Big Boy” Jennings Carter. Loss is everywhere. Scout’s childhood home has been torn down and replaced by an ice cream stand; Jem has died in young adulthood, like Nelle’s brother, Ed; Atticus suffers rheumatoid arthritis, like her father. Most striking of all—and most notorious now—is the racism she finds in her own home.

The story is very much of its time, both in the sense that it is a young writer's first attempt and also in the sense that in 1957 Nelle shared some of the unevolved racial attitudes of Monroeville.

That second revelation has been hard to take, for Nelle Harper Lee has long been held up as a woman ahead of her time, a herald of civil rights. And her example matters all the more in Alabama because while much has changed, racism is far from dead. In March, the town of Selma, just up the road from Monroeville, marked the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday at the Edmund Pettus Bridge by welcoming the nation's first African-American president. To the deep embarrassment of many, he was greeted with a billboard honoring Nathan Bedford Forrest, founder of the Ku Klux Klan.

Before *Go Set a Watchman* was published, one of Miss Nelle's longtime friends, a Baptist preacher and scholar named Wayne Flynt, offered a prediction based on its title, which comes from Isaiah 21: "For thus hath the Lord said unto me, Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth." Flynt was sure that it would honor her father. "It's clear she thinks her father was a watchman for the town. He was a righteous and decent man who took a stand because it was the righteous and morally correct thing to do."

Actually, as the novel indicates, Amasa Coleman Lee, the model for Atticus, was a segregationist. He did not believe that blacks were ready for full equality. When his Methodist pastor, Ray Whatley, dared to raise the subject, A. C. Lee sternly ordered him, "Get off the 'social justice' and get back on the gospel." And when Whatley preached on civil rights one year later, Lee saw to his dismissal. (Whatley moved to Montgomery, where he became active in the bus boycott with Martin Luther King Jr.) A great crisis in *Watchman* comes when Jean Louise discovers that Atticus and her childhood friend belong to the White Citizens' Council. Vile things are said while Atticus stands placidly by, and he voices things only slightly less vile.

The chief advocate for civil rights in Miss Nelle's family was her sister, the lawyer Miss Alice, who has no direct counterpart in the fiction except perhaps as the nobler version of Atticus in *Mockingbird*. It was Alice who campaigned quietly for years to integrate her conference of the Methodist Church, who won people over with good manners and a gentle nature. Townspeople felt about her as readers felt about Atticus: Miss Nelle they respected, and Miss Alice they loved.

At the time *Watchman* was written, Nelle's sensibility was blinkered. Apparently she, like Jean Louise, thought herself color-blind, which today we consider a delusion of well-meaning whites who cannot recognize their own prejudices. Jean Louise clearly is horrified at the racial strife she sees and wonders if it has always been so. "Did you hate us?" she asks Calpurnia, her family's former cook. But she also expresses fury at the Supreme Court for "telling us what to do again," scorns the NAACP, and says that blacks are "backward, illiterate, they're dirty and comical and shiftless and no good, they're infants and they're stupid, some of them." Her uncle terms her a bigot, "not a big one, just an ordinary turnip-sized bigot," because she is uncharitable to those less liberal.

We may not appreciate how brave she was, this young woman from Alabama, to tackle such matters. Back then she evinced far more of a social conscience than, say, Flannery O'Connor, and she had the courage to draw on her own experience, even her family's private arguments, as well as to lay bare her own contradictions.

She was writing a religious novel with a social gospel message that would have pleased Whatley. All around, Jean Louise sees dreadful perversions of justice and the Christian faith—the White Citizens' Council, for example, meets in the courtroom on Sunday. Jem, pretending to be a preacher, declares that "the devil is right here in Macomb"—fictional Monroeville—but the actual preachers in Macomb shy away from prophetic messages. When one takes up the verse, "Go, set a watchman," he leaves unspoken the critical next verse ("Babylon is fallen, is fallen"), lest it bring to mind a fallen South. Who is the watchman in contemporary life? Not Atticus but, much to her surprise, Jean Louise herself—just as Nelle once realized that she could see "the whole world in a chinaberry tree."

As *Watchman* was rewritten to become *Mockingbird* over two and a half years, it gained much in literary and political sophistication, thanks to an editor's patient coaxing. The states' rights arguments disappeared. So did patronizing remarks about blacks being "still in their childhood as a people." The editor astutely recognized that one minor flashback to the 1930s could become the central story, and that Tom Robinson's trial for rape should end in an unjust conviction. Nelle also sharpened several aphorisms, such as, "Shoot all the blue jays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."

No editor from Harper worked with the elderly Miss Nelle the way an editor from Lippincott worked with the young Miss Nelle in 1957. By all accounts, the elderly

Miss Nelle was in no condition to edit, proof, or even reread *Go Set a Watchman*. For over 50 years it was judged unfit for publication.

How curious, therefore, that it should be brought out at the initiative of Tonja Carter, the lawyer charged with protecting Miss Nelle's interests. Ms. Carter, Jennings Carter's daughter-in-law, joined the family practice as a legal secretary when Miss Alice neared the age of 100. Alice encouraged her to pursue a law degree and welcomed her as a partner. Almost immediately Ms. Carter set about replacing Miss Alice as Miss Nelle's advocate. Just after Miss Alice died last fall, Ms. Carter claimed to have found the manuscript and to have gotten Miss Nelle's blessing to publish it. She stands to receive a hefty sum of money for her trouble. Ironically, in *Watchman* a character modeled after Jennings Carter insinuates himself into the family law firm.

The old-fashioned cover of *Watchman* puts us again in the branches of a chinaberry tree, but now it is losing its leaves. There is no introduction, nothing to give context to the manuscript or its curious history. Nelle Harper Lee once said she loathed introductions to books; how fortunate for the present publisher.

She also once said, "All I want to be is the Jane Austen of South Alabama." The first 100 pages fit that ambition, featuring an independent woman who resists her family's desire to see her married. There's a good deal of stagey dialogue. Characters we loved in *Mockingbird* are prickly, angular, uncomfortable with each other here. Early on this seems to be a novel about a failure of love, written without enough love.

Then the book takes a curious turn. Once Jean Louise discovers her father's activities and secretly attends a meeting of the White Citizens' Council, the book becomes as absorbing as *Mockingbird*—perhaps even more so, because the racism she has found is in her own home. And the love that was missing earlier comes back now with a fury, expressed in a deep need to reconnect with those who have disappointed her.

Calpurnia, not Atticus, is the most vivid character, with the most lifelike dialogue. In a deeply moving scene, Jean Louise goes to Calpurnia's home on the black side of town. This is not a home we recognize from *Mockingbird*, even though in that book Calpurnia takes the white children to a black church. Jean Louise bursts into Calpurnia's domain out of love and privilege, and she finds herself not entirely welcome. The black family, deep in grief, regards her warily, and Jean Louise can't

take Calpurnia's emotional distance. "Talk to me, Cal. For God's sake talk to me right. Don't sit there like that!"

Yes, *Watchman* needed an editor. Yes, it has problems with point of view, and far too many speeches. But one can see why the editors at Lippincott in the 1950s saw promise in this material. The book has spiky observations and tart jokes. Most of all, one senses that this fiction has grown out of a life lived.

Read in this context, as the first draft of a first-time author that reflects prejudices she might outgrow, *Watchman* has a great deal to say about our country's maturation. Casual readers, though, may not read it so kindly. That's why bringing it out now, in an edition without context, putting the words of Miss Nelle's youth in her mouth, seems morally dubious. It's a sin to kill a mockingbird, indeed.