To Kill a Mockingbird

By Christopher M. Bellitto
April 28, 2015

In our "Books Change" series, historians of religion consider books that have changed us or have themselves been changed.

> “Miss Jean Louise?”
>
> I looked around. They were standing. All around us and in the balcony on the opposite wall, the Negroes were getting to their feet. Reverend Sykes’s voice was as distant as Judge Taylor’s:
>
> “Miss Jean Louise, stand up. Your father’s passin’.”

Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* was the book of my youth. I didn’t grow up poor in Depression-era Alabama, but I identified with Scout as I read it several times in my teens. My childhood was a middle-class family in the integrated Bronx, but Scout and I shared a house full of books and a lawyer-father blessed with a firm, centering integrity. Later, studying journalism at NYU in the 1980s, I heard that if you wanted to learn what good writing was, read *Mockingbird* every year. Who can’t love a delicious line like the one describing Scout’s taut Aunt Alexandra as a person who “was born in the objective case”?

I read the novel every year for at least a decade after college and into grad school, when footnotes and comps intervened. I meant to get back to it but didn’t. I wish I could find my old copy with its time-capsule markings to introduce me back to my younger self. At several decision points in my life I recalled the novel as a touchstone, but I didn’t pick it up again (nor revisit the film) for about 20 years until this winter. I was spurred by the news that the manuscript of Harper Lee’s previously written sequel, *Go Set a Watchman,* had been discovered and would be published this summer. Afraid my feelings about *Mockingbird* would be changed forever, I wanted to read it again, likely for the 15th time or so, before the new novel

appeared.

Books don’t change; our experience of reading them does when we re-encounter those same books at different stages of our lives. Though a boy, I first identified with Scout and not Jem, but now I understand the source of his sullenness. He is a developing young person trying to negotiate the injustice of Tom Robinson’s clearly-contrived rape conviction. Jem is a child raised with a code of honor who must live with people without shame. That is a bitter lesson to learn in any place or time; teaching it spins the challenge as we raise our own kids. With a daughter about Scout’s age, I now identify with Atticus as a father. Like all parents, I wrestle as he did with hard choices guided by the knowledge that our children must have credible models to follow, especially when a hard choice has a cost. You can see Atticus wonder, “Am I who I say I am?” Scout and Jem idolize their father. He wants to equip them to live pragmatically against hate and prejudice; that’s why he keeps advising them to walk around in other people’s shoes. Atticus Finch knows that he can tell his children what to do, but it’s better to show them what that really means, which is why in the novel he takes the unwinnable case of defending Tom.

Reading the book of your youth as an adult, you smile indulgently at your own naiveté as played out by the child characters, but now you feel in your gut the parent’s frightening task of cultivating young people to love and serve in a sometimes selfish, ugly, and bigoted society. When a mob comes in the middle of the night to drag Tom from his jail cell, defended only by Atticus and his reading lamp, you know Atticus’ primal fear for his kids’ safety. In the same moment, you also sense his pride that Jem is willing to defy Atticus’ command to leave so he can stand with his father. You also feel Atticus’ wonder at how Scout innocently defuses what was sure to be a lynching by telling Mr. Cunningham to say “hey” to Walter, his son and her classmate. In that standoff, the common humanity Atticus has been preaching wins.

To read *To Kill a Mockingbird* is to learn how to stand up to injustice when that’s a dangerous thing to do. The novel challenges us to step across the canyon between words and actions in order to incarnate those hard choices that bring us closer to the Divine in a broken world.

Atticus Finch is an upstander. And so he stands up. And so must we all.

Our weekly feature Then and Now *harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by*

Edward J. Blum and John D. Wilsey.