

Atticus and me

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I read *To Kill a Mockingbird* the summer between eighth and ninth grade. It was a hot southern summer and my mom and I went into a bookstore to look for some indoor reading. She bought me the book, and I took it home and devoured it.

I was transformed, both in a moral and literary sense. I would never forget the idea that standing up for the right thing, even when you know you are going to lose, is noble. And, in no small part due to that book, I became an English major. (I had entered college as a pre-law student, but once I realized that I couldn't be Atticus Finch, I gave that up.) Even today, when I'm asked to list my favorite novels, Harper Lee's book is on the shortlist.

We even have a cat named Atticus.

So when I heard about *Go Set a Watchman*, a sort of sequel to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, being released I was ecstatic. But last weekend, when the first chapter was released, my heart ached a bit. Because, as it turns out, Atticus Finch might not be such a good guy after all.

The *New York Times*, in reviewing the book, wrote, "Shockingly, in Ms. Lee's long-awaited novel . . . Atticus is a racist who once attended a Klan meeting, who says things like 'The Negroes down here are still in their childhood as a people.' Or asks his daughter: 'Do you want Negroes by the carload in our schools and churches and theaters? Do you want them in our world?'"

In other words, Atticus is more like the racist uncle no one likes to talk about than the crusader for civil rights that my 13 year-old self imagined.

"Honey, can we change the cat's name?" (The answer to that was "No.")

As I've sat with it, though, I wonder if a legion of Atticus Finch fans having to come to terms with his racism isn't the best possible thing for us all.

I'm wondering that during a season in which Americans are wrestling with what contemporary racism looks like. And I'm wrestling with that myself as a person who tries my best to be an ally in the fight against racism. Because the reality is that all of us, even the best intentioned of white allies, need to wrestle with the racism inside our ourselves.

In college I began to be involved in anti-discrimination work, and I learned an incredibly important but difficult truth: we all wrestle with unlearning our prejudices.

I may not have grown up in Atticus Finch's Alabama, but I did grow up in the South not so many decades after the Civil Rights Act. In the fourth grade I colored a Confederate flag handout in class, oblivious to how wrong that seemed until I got into my New Hampshire-native mother's station wagon waving it at the end of the school day.

In high school I watched as a classmate drew a large Confederate flag on the chalkboard, complete with "the South will rise again," and waited patiently for our African American math teacher to arrive so he could see his reaction. And in high school I realized that though it was exactly five miles from the end of my driveway to the place where Zora Neale Hurston wrote, no one had ever asked us to read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Like it or not, I am formed by that. That is what I learned. And that is what I have now tried for years to unlearn.

My guess is that Atticus Finch, fictional as he is, learned his racism too. I do not say that to excuse it; it is never acceptable. But I say that to say that racism is a social disease, one that spreads easily and infects us long before we realize we are sick. And one to which, sadly, many choose not to admit that they may have been exposed.

One that Atticus Finch carried. Even if he did the right thing sometimes. Even if, for so many of us, he was our adolescent hero.

But in the end, Atticus Finch was not Dr. King, or Bayard Rustin, or Rosa Parks, or Medgar Evers. That's okay because that's not the role of an ally anyway. An ally is not a hero. An ally is a supporter.

Instead, Atticus was the character who inspired many of us in our younger years to try to do what was right. He made us take a hard look at ourselves, and ask ourselves whether we could be courageous. Perhaps his greatest legacy as a character, with all that has now been revealed and with all that our country now faces, would be for all of us to be willing to take a good, hard, honest look at our hearts once again.

Atticus, I don't need you to be my hero anymore. But I still need to learn from you. I need to learn that even the allies we idolize are not without their flaws. And even the best allies have so much to learn, and so much to unlearn. Including me.

*Originally posted at [Heath's blog](#)*