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Title of reprinted book section

In Defense of *To Kill a Mockingbird*

If the readers are young, they may believe Scout when she says, "Nothin's real scary except in books." If the readers are older they will have learned that life is just as scary, and they will be prepared to meet some of its realities.

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To Kill a Mockingbird

Novel, 1960

American Novelist (1926 - 2016)

Other Names Used: Lee, Nelle Harper;


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In the following excerpt, May looks at the history of censorship attempts on To Kill a Mockingbird, which came in two onslaughs—the first from conservatives, the second from liberals.
Pages of the work in the anthology

Use the start and end pages of the essay.

Jill May

In the following excerpt, May looks at the history of censorship attempts on To Kill a Mockingbird, which came in two onslaughts—the first from conservatives, the second from liberals.

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To Kill a Mockingbird

Novel, 1960
American Novelist (1926 - 2016)
Other Names Used: Lee, Nelle Harper;

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**To Kill a Mockingbird**

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To Kill a Mockingbird

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- What is the main idea of the essay?
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In the following excerpt, May looks at the history of censorship attempts on To Kill a Mockingbird, which came in two onslaughts—the first from conservatives, the second from liberals.
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for ourselves, the encounter with the Gothic as readers is a moment in which the self defines its internal existence through the act of observing its fantasies." Not only are characters in the Gothic embarrassed, but the reader of the Gothic is as well. In the case of TKM, readers learn of the entanglements of Jem, Dill, and Scout. But the reader of their story is also embarrassed, not by the horror of racial mixing but by the Draconian Boo, but by the reminders of a lost innocence, of a time past, as unreal, in its way, as Transylvania. We, as readers, encounter the ghosts of ourselves, the children we once were, the simplicity of our lives in an earlier world. While the children's voyeurism is Gothic, our own as readers is romantic. In either case, the encounter is with the unreal. The children's encounter is in that underworld beneath reality, and ours is in a transcendent world above reality, which nostalgia and memory have altered. It is a world where children play in tree houses and swings and sip lemonade on hot summer days, and in the evenings, sit in their fathers' laps to read. Reality and illusion about the past is blurred. Within the novel's Gothicism and Romanticism, we as readers are enthralled with the past, and, like the responses elicited by the Gothic, we react with pain and pleasure to an involvement with our past world and our past selves.


Jill May

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The critical career of To Kill a Mockingbird is a late-twentieth-century case study of censorship. When Harper Lee's novel about a small southern town and its prejudices was published in 1960, the book received favorable reviews in professional journals and the popular press. Typical of that opinion, Booklist's reviewer called the book "melodramatic" and noted "traces of sermonizing," but the book was recommended for library purchase, commending its "rare blend of wit and compassion." Reviewers did not suggest that the book was young adult literature, or that it belonged in adolescent collections, perhaps that is why no one mentioned the book's language or violence. In any event, reviewers seemed inclined to agree that To Kill a Mockingbird was a worthwhile interpretation of the South's existing social structures during the 1930s.

In 1961 the book won the Pulitzer Prize Award, the Alabama Library Association Book Award, and the Brotherhood Award of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. It seemed that Harper Lee blend of family history, local custom, and her straining to humanize was important reading, as with a young girl with the ages of six and ni as the main character, To Kill a Mockingbird was read by junior high school libraries and curriculum. The book was not de tined to be studied by college students. South literature's critics rarely mentioned it; few university professors found it noteworthy enough "teach" as an exemplary southern novel.

By the mid-sixties To Kill a Mockingbird was a solid place in junior and senior high American literature studies. Once discovered by southern students, the book's solid place became shaky under Sporadic lawsuits arose. In most cases the coat against the book was by conservatives with disliked the portrayal of whites. Typically, t Hanover County School Board in Virginia fired the book "immoral," then withdrew their criticism and declared that the racists "was all a misunderstanding" (Newsletter for Intellectual Freedom). By 1968 the National Education Association listed the book among those which drew the most criticism from private groups. Ironically it was not directly behind Little Black Sambo (Newsletter 1968). And then the seventies arrived.

Things had changed in the South during the sixties. Two national leaders who had supported segregation and had espoused the ideals of racial equality were assassinated in southern regions. When John F. Kennedy was killed in Texas on November 22, 1963, many southerners were shocked. Populist attitudes of racism were declining, and the aftermath of the tragedy southern politics began to change. Lyndon Johnson gained the presidency; blacks began to seek and win political ac tives. Black leader Martin Luther King had stressed the importance of racial equality, always using Martin Luther King's strategy of nonviolent action a civil disobedience. A brilliant orator, King grew in the South; the leader of the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference], he lived in Atlanta, Geo rgia. In 1968, while working on a garbage strike in Memphis, King was killed. The death of this 1968 Nobel Peace Prize winner was further embarrassment for white southerners. This was also the time when blacks at public values anew, and gradually black found experiences in the South more toler able. In 1971 one Atlanta businessman observed "Ebony," the liberation thinking is here. Blacks in this time never to surface on the porch or in the yard during the daylight hours. The children are fascinated with Boo Radley legend. They act it out, and they work hard to make Boo come out. And always, they wonder what keeps him inside. After the trial, however, Jem says, "I think I'm beginning to understand something. I think I'm beginning to understand why Boo Radley's stayed shut up in the house ... it's because he wants to stay inside."

Throughout the book Boo is talked about and wondered over, but he does not appear in Scout's existence until the end when he is needed by the children. When no one is near to protect them from death, Boo comes out of hiding. In an act of violence he kills Bob Ewell, and with that act he becomes a part of southern honor. He might have been a hero. Had a jury heard the case, his trial would have entertained the entire region. The community was unsettled from the rape trial, and this avenged death in the name of southern justice would have set well in Maycomb, Alabama. Boo Radley has been outside of southern honor, however, and he is a shy man. Lee has the sheriff explain the pitfalls of southern justice when he says, "Know what'd happen then? All the ladies in Maycomb includin' my wife'd be knockin' on his door bringing angel food cakes. Took me a way of thinkin' ... that's a sin .... If it was any other man it'd be different." The reader discovers that southern justice through the court is not a blessing. It is a carnival.

When Boo Radley was five years old the Scottsboro trial began. In one of the most celebrated southern trials, nine blacks were accused of raping two white girls. The first trial took place in January, 1931, in Alabama. All nine were convicted. Monroeville, Lee's hometown, knew about the case. Retrials continued for six years, and with each new trial it became more obvious that southern justice for blacks was different from southern justice for whites. Harper Lee's father was a lawyer during that time. Her mother's maiden name was Finch. Harper Lee attended law school, a career possibility suggested to Scout by well-meaning adults in the novel. To Kill a Mockingbird is set in 1935, midpoint for the Scottsboro case.

Scout Finch faces the realities of southern society within the same age space that Harper Lee faced Scottsboro. The timeline is also the same. Although Lee's father was not the Scottsboro lawyer who handled that trial, he was a southern man of honor related to the famous gentleman soldier Robert E. Lee. It is likely that Harper Lee's father was the author's model for Atticus Finch and that the things Atticus told Scout were the kinds of things Anna Lee told his daughter. The attitudes depicted are ones Harper Lee grew up with, both in terms of family pride and small town prejudices.

The censors' reactions to To Kill a Mockingbird were reactions to issues of race and justice. Their moves to ban the book derive from their own perspectives of the book's theme. Their "reader's reactions" were criticized rapidly into junior high school libraries and curriculum. The book was personal and political. They needed to ban the book because it told them something about American society that they did not want to bear. That is precisely the problem facing any author of realistic fiction. Once the story becomes real, it can become grim. An author will use first-person flashback in story in order to let the reader live in another time, another place. Usually the storyteller is returning for a second view of the scene. The teller has experienced the events before and the story is being retold so the scene has left the storyteller uneasy. As the storyteller recalls the past both the listener and the teller see events in a new light. Both are working through troubled times in search of meaning. In the case of To Kill a Mockingbird the first-person retelling is not pleasant, but the underlying significance is with the narrative. The youthful personalities who are recalled are hopeful. Scout is the teller that people wouldlynch or convict a man because of the color of his skin. She also shows us three children who refuse to believe that the system is right, and she leaves us with the thought that most people will be nice if seen for what they are: humans with frailties. When discussing literary criticism, Theo D'Haen suggested [in Text to Reader] that the good literary work should be "informed" and "life within the world and be "part of the ongoing activities of that world." To Kill a Mockingbird continues to have life within the world; its ongoing activities in the realm of censorship show that it is a book which deals with regional moralism. The children in the story seem very human; they worry about their own identification, they defy parental rules, and they cry over injustices. They mature in Harper Lee's novel, and they lose their innocence. So does the reader.

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