

CliffsNotes.com® About the Author for **TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD**

Harper Lee

The youngest daughter of Amasa Coleman Lee and Frances Cunningham Finch Lee, Nelle Harper Lee was born in Monroeville, Alabama (a small town in Monroe County between Montgomery and Mobile) on April 28, 1926. Lee was raised with two sisters, Alice and Louise, and a brother, Edwin Coleman Lee.

Amasa Lee grew up in Florida and came to Monroe County in the early 1900s. He worked as a bookkeeper until 1915, when he passed the bar and began practicing law. Mr. Lee also served on the Alabama State Legislature from 1926 to 1938, and as editor of *The Monroe Journal* from 1929 to 1947.

Frances Finch was from a Virginia family who settled in Monroe County, Alabama, and founded the town of Finchburg. Miss Finch met Mr. Lee while he was working at the Flat Creek Mill Company in Finchburg; they married in 1912. The couple lived briefly in Florida, returning to live in Monroe County in 1913.

By all accounts, Harper Lee is friendly and gregarious with those she knows, but has always been an extremely private person, disclosing little about her life to the public. Consequently, most of the information available about Lee's childhood comes from friends and is largely anecdotal. Because the character of Scout is somewhat autobiographical, readers gain their best access to Lee's childhood — or at least the flavor of her childhood — within the pages of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

In 1944, at the age of 18, Harper Lee enrolled in Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama. From 1945 to 1949 she studied law at the University of Alabama. She transferred to Oxford University in England as an exchange student for a year, but six months before completing her studies, Lee decided to go to New York to be a writer.

While pursuing the career that would ultimately produce *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lee worked briefly in the early 1950s as a reservations clerk for Eastern Airlines and BOAC (British Overseas Airways Corp.) in New York City. In 1957, she submitted a manuscript to the J. B. Lippincott Company, who felt that her attempt at a novel was actually more of a series of strung-together short stories. The publisher recommended a rewrite, so Lee spent the next two-and-a-half years working on the manuscript. Her efforts paid off, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, her first and only novel, was published in 1960.

Many aspects of *To Kill a Mockingbird* are autobiographical. Monroeville served as the model for Maycomb, and Lee was dubbed "Queen of the Tomboys" by at least one friend; Lee gave

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all three of her mother's names to various characters in the novel. There is at least anecdotal evidence that Boo Radley was based on an actual neighbor. Finally, Lee has stated that Atticus Finch was based largely on her own father.

To Kill a Mockingbird was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1961, and was made into a major motion picture starring Gregory Peck in 1962. Lee was so impressed with Peck's portrayal of Atticus Finch that she gave him her father's pocket watch at the end of the movie's filming.

In the early 1960s, shortly after publication of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee accompanied her childhood friend Truman Capote — the basis for the Dill Harris character — to Holcomb, Kansas, and served as a research assistant for Capote's 1966 novel, *In Cold Blood*.

Lee also published three articles in the '60s: "Love — In Other Words" in *Vogue* (1961), "Christmas to Me" in *McCalls* (1961), and "When Children Discover America" in *McCalls* (1965). President Lyndon Johnson named Lee to the National Council of Arts in 1966. She has received several honorary doctorates, including one from the University of Alabama and another from Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama. She attended both ceremonies, but spoke at neither and gave no interviews.

In 1998, the Harper Lee Award for a Distinguished Alabama Writer was unveiled by the executive committee of the Alabama Writers' Forum. This award recognizes an accomplished writer who was born in the state or who lived in Alabama during his or her formative years.

Never married, Lee continues to divide her time between New York and Monroeville, where she lives with her sister Alice. Known for her wit and charm, Lee has granted only a handful of interviews since *To Kill a Mockingbird's* publication. Her family and friends remain protective of her privacy.

Many wonder why a writer of such talent would choose to write only one novel. When Lee's cousin, Richard Williams, posed that question to the author, her answer was "When you have a hit like that, you can't go anywhere but down."