

# CliffsNotes.com® At a Glance for TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, author Harper Lee uses memorable characters to explore Civil Rights and racism in the segregated southern United States of the 1930s.

Set in the fictional small town of Macomb, Alabama during the 1930's, Jean Louise Finch, known as Scout, lives with her older brother Jem and their father, the attorney Atticus Finch. An African-American housekeeper named Calpurnia cares for Scout and Jem, whose mother has died. One summer a boy nicknamed Dill visits Macomb to stay with his aunt. Scout, Jem, and Dill become obsessed with trying to catch a glimpse of a neighbor called Boo Radley, a grown man who hasn't left his parents' house in years.

Atticus agrees to defend Tom Robinson, an African-American accused of raping a young white woman named Mayella Ewell. As a result of Atticus' defending Tom, the Finch family becomes the object of scorn and insults. Tom is convicted by a local jury despite the fact that Atticus has demonstrated that Tom could not have committed the crimes he has been accused of. Even so, Bob Ewell, the lazy drunk whose daughter brought the charges, vows revenge on Atticus.

Soon word arrives that Tom Robinson has been killed while attempting to escape from prison. On Halloween night, Scout and Jem are returning from the holiday pageant at school when a scuffle occurs that Scout is unable to observe clearly because of her costume and the darkness. Jem's arm is badly broken, and a stranger carries him home. Afterward, Scout discovers that Bob Ewell was attacking Jem and her with a knife, and that the stranger who saved their lives by stabbing Bob Ewell to death was Boo Radley.

**Written by:** Harper Lee

**Type of Work:** novel

**Genres:** *bildungsroman* (coming of age novel); Civil Rights Movement

**First Published:** 1960 by J. B. Lippincott

**Setting:** 1930s; Maycomb, Alabama

**Main Characters:** Scout Finch; Atticus Finch; Jem Finch; Tom Robinson; Bob Ewell; Boo Radley

**Major Thematic Topics:** Jim Crow Laws; prejudice; civil rights; racism; defining bravery; maturity; feminine vs. masculine; women's roles in the South; effects of the mob mentality; perception; inconsistency of humanity; gender roles; integrity

**Motifs:** superstition; Boo Radley; weeds; education in the classroom versus small town education

**Major Symbols:** mockingbirds; snow; birds; re-birthing fire

**Movie Versions:** *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962)

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## The three most important aspects of *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

- The title of *To Kill a Mockingbird* refers to the local belief, introduced early in the novel and referred to again later, that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird. Harper Lee is subtly implying that the townspeople are responsible for killing Tom Robinson, and that doing so was not only unjust and immoral, but sinful.
- The events of *To Kill a Mockingbird* take place while Scout Finch, the novel's narrator, is a young child. But the sophisticated vocabulary and sentence structure of the story indicate that Scout tells the story many years after the events described, when she has grown to adulthood.
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* is unusual because it is both an examination of racism and a *bildungsroman*. Within the framework of a coming-of-age story, Lee examines a very serious social problem. Lee seamlessly blends these two very different kinds of stories.