



# To Kill a Mockingbird: 50th anniversary

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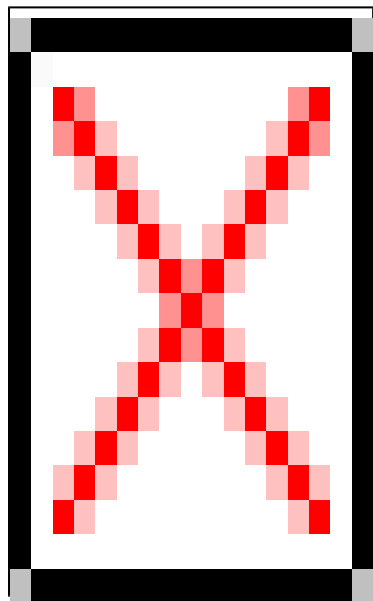
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**Geraldine Brennan** assesses its impact.



First published 50 years ago, Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize winning novel is a moving story of humanity and racism in Alabama. It has been credited with having an influence in the gathering momentum of the civil rights movement. But what is its relevance to young readers today? **Geraldine Brennan** discusses.

The story of small-town politics and prejudice in racially segregated rural Alabama in the 1930s, focused on the trial of a black man wrongfully accused of raping a white girl, has acquired iconic status in the 50 years since publication. The first and only book by Nelle Harper Lee, who still lives as a recluse in the town where it is set, it was published during the heyday of the civil rights movement, when the collective chickens of America's Deep South were coming home to roost. It evokes the atmosphere and issues of Lee's own childhood, with eight-year-old Scout Finch and her friend Dill based on her young self and her childhood friend, Truman Capote, and draws on a notorious local case for Scout's lawyer father's defence of the accused man.

While fascination and sales have been guaranteed since publication, **Mockingbird** has not always been in ideological fashion. It reflects the bigoted speech of its times and has been criticised for realising the white protagonists more fully than the black community (the affectionate study of Scout's family's black housekeeper has been condemned as a stereotypical portrait of a contented slave).

## Not only about racism

It is true that readers had to wait until the mid-1970s for **Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry** by Mildred D Taylor, an equally rich treatment of the 1930s Deep South from the point of view of a black child. However, **Mockingbird** is not simply a book about segregation or racism, but about childhood and its joys as well as troubles.

The citizens of Maycomb (modelled on Monroeville, Alabama) are often comic as well as tragic, even while constrained

by the weight of their neighbours' expectations depending on their gender and social class as well as colour. During Scout's first day at school we are introduced to the full range of Maycomb white society alongside the well-meaning but terrified new teacher, Miss Caroline, who has to learn how status as a notorious Ewell or an ignorant Cunningham determines a child's destiny from before birth.

Lee therefore insists on our empathy not only with Tom Robinson and his community, but with Mayella Ewell, Tom Robinson's accuser, whose life is a catalogue of abuse, and with the rest of the Ewells, and the Cunninghams, and all the poor white families feared and shunned by their neighbours. Not forgetting Dolphus Raymond, who finds it easier to pretend to be a drunkard than to defend his position as a white father of mixed-race children, Boo Radley, a middle-class white man wrongfully imprisoned by his family, and Miss Dubose, a courageous morphine addict.

In charting the stories of Maycomb residents, Scout is testing the limits of her world while trying to hang on to the coat-tails of her adored brother Jem, who leaves her behind in testing the limits of his world. As well as dramatic and painful scenes as the lawyer Atticus Finch and his family suffer for his stance against injustice, there are minor but, to tomboyish Scout, equally traumatic skirmishes as she is ejected from honorary brotherhood and hauled kicking and screaming into girl world, forced by her nemesis, Aunt Alexandra, to keep her dress clean and answer to 'Miss Jean Louise'.

Aunt Alexandra's missionary circle tea following Tom Robinson's trial is the most touching scene in the novel, as during this socially stifling afternoon, before and after the harrowing news that interrupts it, Scout learns not only that her intimidating aunt is as likely as her beloved Miss Maudie to believe and do the right thing, but the importance of nurturing potential converts to your cause rather than alienating them. In helping her aunt stoically serve tea despite the cataclysmic events beyond the front porch, Scout steps into adulthood without having to be dragged.

**To Kill a Mockingbird** has retained its status as a story about the loss of innocence. It is also a story about love, forgiveness and finding allies in unexpected quarters. It is celebrated for the clarity of its child's-eye view of extreme social conditions, and in this respect its successors include **Carrie's War** by Nina Bawden while Scout has all the feistiness of Philip Pullman's young Lyra at the opening of 'His Dark Materials'.

It is less successful as an introduction for UK children to another culture, which is how it is often presented on reading lists. The culture that it introduces (fully and resonantly) is that of white people in the American South 80 years ago: for insights into the present-day cultural mix of the UK and the present-day effects of racism it would be more useful to read Benjamin Zephaniah, Malorie Blackman and Bali Rai. Yet the final insight of **To Kill a Mockingbird** is universal and not historically limited: that even after a big step against injustice has been taken and failed, it is still worth continuing to take small steps.

**Geraldine Brennan** is the former Books Editor of **The Times Educational Supplement** and a freelance journalist.

A 50th anniversary edition of **To Kill a Mockingbird** (978 0 09 954948 2) is published by Arrow at £6.99.

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