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**MASTERS**



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***American Masters***  
***Harper Lee: Hey, Boo***

**Premieres nationally Monday, April 2 at 10 p.m. (ET) on PBS  
(check local listings)**

***Biography***

Harper Lee, age 85, is best known as the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a beloved classic and a touchstone in American literary and social history. Published on July 11, 1960 and awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1961, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is Lee's first and only novel. Half a century later, it continues to sell nearly one million copies a year and is a staple of high school English class curriculums.

Lee's full name is Nelle Harper Lee. She is from Monroeville, Alabama and still spends much of her time there. Lee is the youngest of four children born to Amasa Coleman Lee and Francis Finch, the name the novelist would later give her fictional family. Her father, called AC, was a lawyer, a legislator and a newspaper publisher; her mother, a talented pianist.

In an extraordinary literary coincidence, Lee grew up right next door to relatives of Truman Capote. Capote, who would later write *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *In Cold Blood*, spent his early childhood living with his Monroeville family and the two became close friends. Lee has

acknowledged that Capote is the model for the fictional Dill Harris, the boy who lives next door to Scout, Atticus and Jem Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Lee attended high school in Monroeville and went on to study law at University of Alabama. By 1949, she had quit school and moved to New York to pursue writing. Lee supported herself as an airline ticket reservations agent until close friends, Michael and Joy Brown, gave her a remarkable gift on Christmas Day 1956: the money to quit her job and write full time for one year.

In quick order, Lee got a literary agent, finished a manuscript and by June 1957, had a publisher: J. B. Lippincott Company. Two more years of work was still to be done on the novel. Lee embarked on what she later described to *The New York Times* as “a period of writing the novel over and over again.” Her Lippincott editor Tay Hohoff wrote in 1967, “It’s no secret that she was living on next to nothing and in considerable physical discomfort while she was writing *Mockingbird*. I don’t think anyone, certainly not I, ever heard one small mutter of discontent throughout all those months of writing and tearing up, writing and tearing up.”

When her first novel was published, Lee was 34. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, set in a small Southern town during the Depression, told the story of a young girl who refuses to see things in black and white while her father, a lawyer, defends a black man accused of raping a white woman. It was immediately popular with readers and quickly climbed the bestseller list, where it stayed for the next two and a half years.

Though the biggest explosions of the civil rights movement were still years away and most forms of segregation were not yet against the law when *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published, the novel is credited with having a social impact – as is the film version, released on Christmas Day 1962 and starring Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch. The movie, written by Horton Foote and directed by Robert Mulligan, is considered one of the single greatest screen adaptations ever and won three Academy Awards.

Lee declined an offer to write the screenplay to her novel saying she wanted to work on new fiction but a second novel was not forthcoming. In 1959, she accompanied her childhood friend Truman Capote to Kansas and helped him report on the murder of the Clutter family. This became *In Cold Blood*, published in 1966. Lee published two essays in 1961: “Love – In Other Words” in *Vogue* magazine and “Christmas to Me” for *McCall’s*. A second essay for *McCall’s* magazine, “When Children Discover America,” appeared in 1965. In 1966, President Lyndon Johnson appointed the novelist to the National Council on the Arts. By then, Lee had stopped speaking to the press. In her last full interview, done by Roy Newquist in 1964 for the New York radio station WQXR, Lee said: “I simply want to do the best I can with the talent that God gave me, I suppose. I would like to be the chronicler of something that I think is going down the drain very swiftly. And that is small town middle-class southern life. There is something universal in it.

There's something decent to be said for it and there's something to lament when it goes, in its passing. In other words, all I want to be is the Jane Austen of Southern Alabama."

One more essay, "Romance and High Adventure," was published in an anthology in 1985, and Lee wrote a letter to Oprah Winfrey about reading that appeared in *O, The Oprah magazine* in July 2006.

Lee has made public appearances, mainly to pick up awards. In 2007 she went to the White House to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom. She enjoys the company of family and friends but has not spoken publicly about her life or her work in more than 45 years. As she said in a letter to her agent published 20 years ago, "I am alive although very quiet."

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