

Dear Reader,

It was really my high school students who got me started thinking about the riddle of Harper Lee's life.

I was a young teacher and my English classes were reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. After providing some background for the novel—the setting is the Deep South during the Great Depression of the 1930s, and segregation was the law—my students began asking about the author. Was the writer a man or a woman? “She is a woman,” I told them. Is she alive or dead? “She’s very much alive.” Is Scout the author when she was a little girl? “Well, I think so. . .”

My uncertainty at these moments was embarrassing. I selected some reference books from the school library and began digging.

The United States census of 1930 has four-year-old Nelle Harper Lee living with her parents and three siblings on South Alabama Avenue in Monroeville, Alabama. Reliable sources agree that she attended public schools in her hometown. Later, she spent her freshman year of college at an all-women's Methodist College in Montgomery, and then she transferred to the University of Alabama.

And that's where the trail ends.

She reemerged in 1960 when J. P. Lippincott published *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which soared up the best seller lists and remained there for eighty-eight weeks. In May 1961, she won the Pulitzer Prize. The film version of the novel was nominated for eight Academy Awards and won three. She gave interviews regularly until 1964. And then, she dropped from sight.

During this cursory research, a simple question occurred to me: How could so little be known about one of the most popular novelists of the 20th century? *To Kill a Mockingbird* has sold thirty million copies; it continues to sell hundreds of thousands every year; and it's been translated into eighteen languages. And yet, a typical encyclopedia entry about her is only three paragraphs?

I was hooked on the mystery. And so began four years of research and writing that resulted in *I Am Scout: The Biography of Harper Lee*.

Charles J. Shields



Credit: Len Favello

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I AM SCOUT

THE BIOGRAPHY OF HARPER LEE



DISCUSSION GUIDE

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CHAPTER 1: “ELLEN” SPELLED BACKWARD

- In fiction, characters are created by what they say, what they do, and what others say about them. How is Nelle's character created using these three methods?
- Slavery was long over by the time of Nelle's childhood. But what can you say about the status of whites and blacks in 1930s Monroeville? Draw on examples from this chapter.

Chapter 2: “APART PEOPLE”

- Based on what you've read so far in *I Am Scout*, why might Nelle not have tried to become her mother's ideal daughter?
- Harper Lee says that because most folks had no money during the Great Depression, children were forced to live in their imaginations. Now, of course, there are video games, television, organized sports, and so on. Has this change made a difference in children's ability to imagine? What's your opinion?
- Harper Lee drew heavily on real people for her characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Was she wrong to do this? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 3: FIRST HINTS OF *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*

- How are Harper Lee's behavior and values consistent from the time she was a child until she became a young adult? Can you make a connection to Scout?
- One of Nelle's classmates at Huntingdon later said that she seemed determined to be different. In what ways did she defy expectations for female undergraduates?
- Sometimes photographs can give clues about the past and people. Look at the photograph on p. 50. Study it. What do you notice about Harper Lee compared with the two young women standing beside her? Look at the dress, body language, and expressions.

CHAPTER 4: *RAMMER JAMMER*

- Read Nelle's column on pp. 66–67. What is she attacking and how does this fit with her values?
- This chapter doesn't specify what it was about the nature of being a lawyer that repelled Harper Lee. Do you have any ideas based on what you've read about her so far?
- 1948 was both the year that Truman Capote published his first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, and that Harper Lee left home for New York. What argument might Harper Lee have used to convince her father that she needed to relocate to New York?

CHAPTER 5: “WILLING TO BE LUCKY”

- Harper Lee didn't show her creative writing to anyone when she was a child; then she didn't send out her stories for almost ten years while she was in New York. When the Browns gave her the money to write full time, she replied, “It's such a fantastic gamble. It's such a great risk.” Can you draw a conclusion about this pattern in her behavior?
- Alabama Governor B. M. Miller received a petition signed by citizens of Monroe County that persuaded him “there is much doubt as to the man [Walter Lett] being guilty.” He commuted Lett's sentence from death to life in prison. Think about the era. Why didn't the governor just pardon Walter Lett?

CHAPTER 6: “SEE NL'S NOTES”

- Why, in your opinion, was Capote failing at first to get the story in Garden City, Kansas?
- Some people might accuse Nelle and Truman of invading people's privacy, such as by visiting the Clutter's house. Others would argue they were fulfilling their jobs as writers. What do you think?
- What strengths did Nelle bring to getting the story in Kansas that Truman didn't have?

CHAPTER 7: *MOCKINGBIRD* TAKES OFF

- Think about what was happening in America in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Do you think social and political events in America influenced how *To Kill a Mockingbird* was received?
- What are the indications that fame will be difficult for Harper Lee?

CHAPTER 8: “OH, MR. PECK!”

- Even to this day, older residents of Monroeville fondly remember Gregory Peck's visit to their town. Why did Peck behave as he did?
- Point to indications in this chapter and earlier ones that Truman will not want to share credit for *In Cold Blood* with Nelle, and why.

CHAPTER 9: THE SECOND NOVEL

- Are there any clues in Harper Lee's interview with Roy Newquist (pp. 181–182) that she will be unable to publish a second novel? Support your reasons by interpreting what she says.
- What do you think of Alice's explanation that a burglar stole the manuscript of Harper Lee's second novel?

CHAPTER 10: QUIET TIME

- What are some reasons, either personal or artistic, Harper Lee might have stopped work on *The Reverend*.
- Should the biographer have brought up the rumor of the drowning incident? Why or why not?
- What does Harper Lee mean by, she “forgave herself”?

For even more discussion questions, some interesting stories that didn't make it into the final book, a timeline of Harper Lee's life and times, a map of Monroeville, Alabama, and more visit www.HenryHoltKids.com/teacherguide.