

Meeting Harper Lee

People may be curious, but this elusive author continues to speak to fans only through her classic work.

The lights darken in The Alabama Theatre in downtown Birmingham, and the mighty Wurlitzer pipe organ rises from below stage level, playing a jaunty tune. Opening credits for *To Kill a Mockingbird* flicker on the screen, and the world of Atticus, Scout, Jem, Dill, Calpurnia, and Boo comes into focus.

"Wow!" my 7-year-old son, Joshua, whispers, fascinated by the monochromatic images. "Is it all in black and white?" When Boo's shadowy form looms over the trespassing Jem, he urgently inquires, "Is he the bad guy?" "No," I murmur. "Just watch."

His twin sister, Brennan, remains quiet—until Scout harrumphs her displeasure at having to wear a dress to school. A self-described tomboy, my daughter proclaims, "I like her!"

My children grasp only the bare outline of the tale that captures the nobility and ignominy of an era. Still, I can't resist this early introduction. After the film, I say, "You know, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was written by a woman in Alabama, just down the road." Their eyes widen, then they smile.

Contrast that with this oh-so-adult gathering weeks later at a Birmingham hotel, where it's harder to discern the same open-face delight. Dressed in business attire, each person in the packed ballroom smoothly makes polite talk about current events. However, the sophisticated air of nonchalance doesn't fool me. We're fans, pure and simple—as eager to be in the same room with the literary lioness on the program as that of any rock-band groupie hanging out backstage before a concert.

My suspicions are confirmed when I spy copies of the author's book peeking out of leather briefcases and spilling out of smart designer bags. Alas, the crowd's hopes are dashed—the program directs us to refrain from

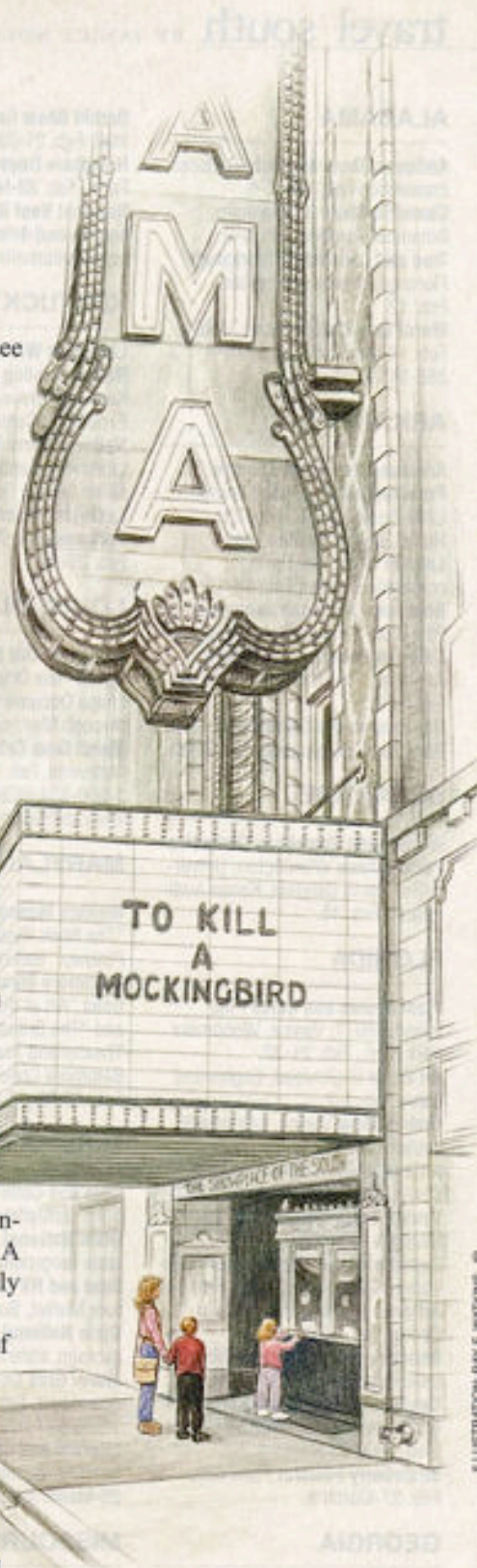
asking the author for autographs.

No matter. Today, Nelle Harper Lee comes out of self-imposed seclusion at her home in Monroeville, Alabama (or perhaps her New York apartment), to accept an award given annually by the Alabama Humanities Foundation. The citation honors the author for "exemplary contribution to the public understanding and appreciation of the humanities." Although Dr. Bruce Cole, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, gives a fine presentation, the enigmatic Harper Lee remains the ultimate lure for me and others here. Since the book's first publication in 1960, the author has stayed as far from the limelight as that of her frightfully shy character Arthur "Boo" Radley.

Now she's here before us in living color. After her introduction by longtime friend and author Wayne Greenhaw, the applause is thunderous. A poised Ms. Lee smiles and silently waits for the furor to die.

"Mr. Greenhaw has robbed me of all my words," the snow-white-haired author says quietly, smiling at him, "so I'll say thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Then...she sits down. You can almost hear a collective sigh ripple across the room. I'm disappointed, but then I recall the passage Ms. Lee penned more than 40 years ago. The scene: Sheriff Heck Tate refuses to expose Boo to the well-intentioned yet surely mortifying ministrations of the adoring townsfolk after the reclusive man saves Jem and Scout.



As the story plays out, Sheriff Tate says, "To my way of thinkin', Mr. Finch, taking the one man who's done you and this town a great service an' draggin' him with his shy ways into the limelight—to me, that's a sin."

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