

# How “To Kill a Mockingbird” Shaped Race Relations in America

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IN 1988 in Monroeville, Alabama, Ronda Morrison, the 18-year-old daughter of a respected local family, was found murdered in the town’s dry cleaning store. When the sheriff’s office failed to make an arrest after months of investigation, the community grew angry and started accusing the police of incompetence. Spurred by criticism, officials indicted Walter McMillian, a local black man whose affair with a white woman had become the subject of heated town discussion. In the absence of evidence, the State coerced witnesses into testifying against him. Their statements didn’t hold with the facts of the case, but that didn’t matter much. Neither did the testimony of three black witnesses who confirmed that Mr McMillian had been at a church fish fry at the time of the murder. He was convicted and sentenced to death; in fact, he had been held on death row before his trial had even begun.



Monroeville is best known as the hometown of Harper Lee and the setting of her 1960 novel, “To Kill a Mockingbird.” (It is renamed as “Maycomb” in her novel.) The town has claimed her for bragging rights ever since the book became a bestseller, which was almost instantly. Local leaders turned the courthouse into a “Mockingbird” museum. An acting troupe formed “The Mockingbird Players of Monroeville” to stage a theatre adaptation for tourists. More than just a marketing gimmick, the novel became a source of tremendous town pride. When Bryan Stevenson, a young Harvard Law graduate, visited Monroeville in 1989 to take up Mr McMillian’s appeal, he was struck by the “Mockingbird” fervour: “Have you read the book?” a clerk pressed him. “It’s a wonderful story. This is a famous place...When they made the movie, Gregory Peck came here”.

But for Mr Stevenson, Monroeville’s delight in its literary eminence had a sour taste. There were uncanny parallels between the McMillian case and the novel’s famous trial: white paranoia about interracial relations, the scapegoating of an innocent black man, a hasty conviction that flew in the face of evidence and common sense, and town authorities bent on execution. Had the town learned nothing from the novel it celebrated? In his memoir, “Just

Mercy,” Mr Stevenson writes, “Sentimentality about Lee’s story grew even as the harder truths of the book took no root.”

Walter McMillian met a better fate than the fictional Tom Robinson; after six years on death row, the Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals overturned his conviction. But the episode points to the strange barriers people sometimes erect between literature and real life. In writing Tom Robinson’s trial, Harper Lee actually drew on local Alabama cases in which black men were unjustly convicted and killed. Almost thirty years after the novel’s publication, however, Alabama and other states continued to condemn staggering numbers of black Americans in trials warped by racism and dishonesty.

Change has been slow to come to Monroeville, but this isn’t to say that Lee’s novel didn’t have a tremendous influence on race relations in America. It has been credited with fuelling the civil rights movement, much as “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” the anti-slavery novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe, fuelled the abolitionist movement of the 19th century. It brought the ugly realities of discrimination, especially in the South, to international attention. As a popular work of fiction by a white woman, it also invited readers to think about race in ways that political treatises or speeches could not.

Atticus Finch, the lawyer who defends Tom Robinson, became the inspiration for generations of justice crusaders. His model of peaceful but persistent resistance resonated with activists. In “Why We Can’t Wait,” Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, “To the Negro in 1963, as to Atticus Finch, it had become obvious that nonviolence could symbolize the gold badge of heroism rather than the white feather of cowardice.”

In many ways, America is still feeling the influence of Lee’s novel today—in the national conversation about criminal justice, the “Black Lives Matter” movement, even President Barack Obama’s recent prison reforms. Last year saw a media frenzy surrounding the publication of “Go Set a Watchman,” an early version of “Mockingbird,” which it seems Lee never intended to publish. This is unfortunate, but it shouldn’t obscure the legacy of “To Kill a Mockingbird”. The novel remains a testament to the ways fiction can expose a society’s sins, alter consciousness, and advance the gradual work of social change.