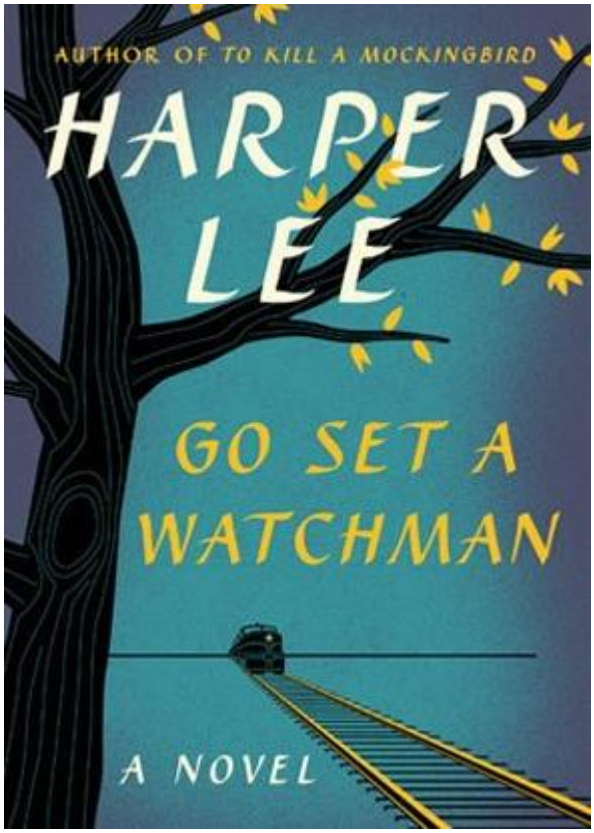
Go Set a Watchman

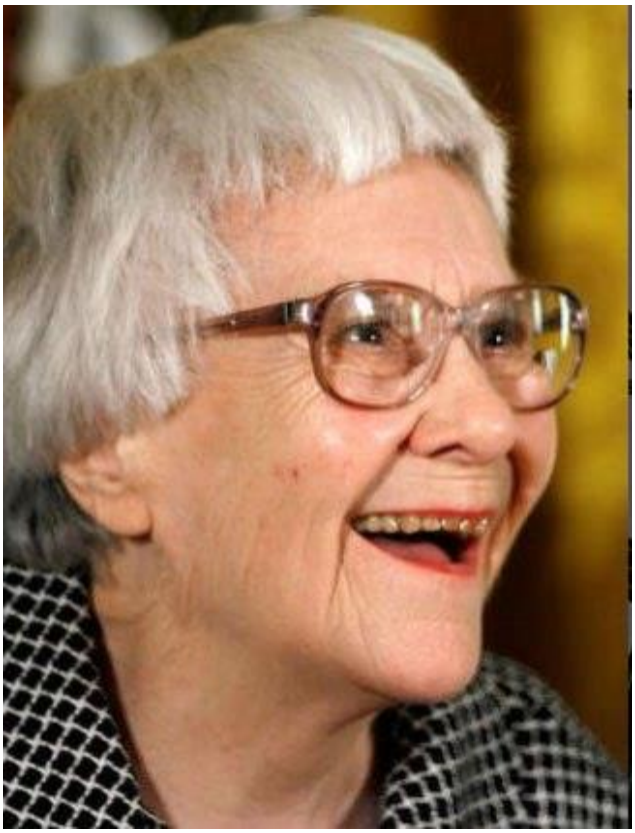


Review by Garry Victor Hill

Harper Lee, *Go Set A Watchman*. London; Penguin/Random House, 2015.

278 pages.

Few novels have been anticipated for so long by so many readers as *Go Set a Watchman*. Many rightly considered that Harper Lee's first novel *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960) as one of the twentieth century's greatest novels. Until 2015 it was her only published novel. Chronologically *Go Set a Watchman* is a sequel, being set in the middle 1950s, while *To Kill A Mockingbird* is set in the 1930s. However *Go Set a Watchman* was written first, but an editor suggested that Harper Lee should write of Jean Louise Finch's earlier years. She did and in 1960 *To Kill A Mockingbird* became a massive popular hit across the globe and a critical success, while *Go Set a Watchman* was almost forgotten - until now.



Harper Lee 1926-2016

Already the negative comments are starting. They usually boil down to "It is not as good." But how could it be? The use of "good" here seems to be a synonym for "not the same." The two novels cannot be the same or even a continuation, even if parts of *Go Set a Watchman* were lifted and put in *To Kill A Mockingbird.* Even if the characters and the locale are the same, the middle 1930s can only be a world away from the novel's setting of the middle 1950s. A schoolgirl's vision must be different to that of a grown woman. Readers in 2015 have very different views

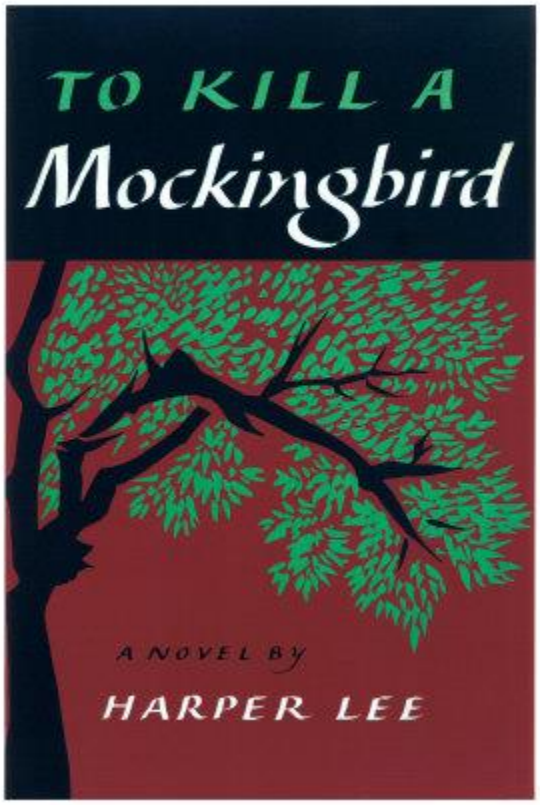
1960, when her novel arrived with almost perfect precision timing, when America was questioning its racial ideas and wanting heroes in the fight for equality and justice. Atticus Finch, in both the book and in Gregory Peck's Oscar winning 1962 performance, embodied those ideals. For an America heading into a society dominated by high rises, roaring freeways, television, ubiquitous levels of advertising, the Cold War, the threat of nuclear holocaust and the saturation of society by worrying global news, Harper Lee presented 1930s Maycomb County. She did not sentimentalise or ignore what was wrong with small town southern society, far from it, but she did present a world different to the one emerging. In some ways it was welcomingly different.

In Maycomb the pace of life was slow and quiet. Maycomb was a spacious town, where people could walk down the main street and smell the wisteria combing from vine laden verandas of houses built to last. Advertising consisted of posters on shop windows. What was both positive and negative in her depicted world was a society that if it was gossipy was also caring, where if privacy was minimal, individual foibles, eccentricities and individuality were tolerated. Everyone had caring family, people valued integrity, not the fast dollar.

Jean Louise, her older brother Jem and their friend Dill form a trio through which we see this world of their childhood. For the generations alive in 1960, memories of small town life were brought back. Flannery O'Connor, Ralph Ellison, Lisa Alther, William Faulkner, Donald McCaig, Larry McMurtry, Truman Capote, Lillian Hellman, Tennessee Williams and other modern southern regionalists could write with as much power as Harper Lee. Few however could match her sense of balance. Margaret Mitchell, Carson McCullers Eudora Welty and Hamilton Basso were the main writers who could do so. Like Lee, these writers brought out what was desirable about southern society. By doing that they created optimism without being sentimental or ignoring the darker side of southern life.

Now in the twenty-first century fewer people are alive who can recall the world that she recalled in 1960. Many 2015 readers resemble Jean Louise Finch in that they have drifted to the big cities and can recall small town and rural life as part of their childhood or adolescence. They return there occasionally due to family ties. This is the situation in *Go Set a Watchman.* This development appears evident in the way Lee describes returning to Maycomb in the middle of the 1950s for a family visit. References to Maycomb residents recently seeing *The Pyjama Game* on Broadway put the story between May 1954 and November 1956, when that show had its run. 1954 would see the start of the Civil Rights battles that would transform the south and in Maycomb the process starts in a town already changing in other ways. By the middle 1950s returning WW2 veterans and disaffected forest dwellers have swollen Maycomb's population, building ugly, garish modern houses. The old Finch house has been replaced with an ice cream parlour and the old Finch mansion now survives as a hunting lodge for the wealthy. In the scene set at Finch's Landing outside the mansion, the writing stays as strong, clear and evocative as in any of the descriptive passages in *To Kill A Mockingbird.* Although Jean and her romantic interest and high school sweetheart Henry Clinton share an

idyllic moment there with a night swim in the river and talk of a future together, the atmosphere conjures up a slowly imploding past, many other scenes do the same.



Where the old customs do survive, they are often stale and predictable to the extent that Jean Louise lists the conversational clichés and clichéd ideas before they are expressed. However change comes to Maycomb and Maycomb does not like it. Hostile references to the Supreme Court's decisions seem to be about the 1954 ruling which desegregated schools. Dislike goes beyond comments. Most of the town's white men hold a meeting in the same courthouse where in the 1930s Atticus Finch defended the black farmworker Tom Robinson against charges of rape in a trial permeated with racism.

The meeting has been called to organise one of the localised citizen's councils that will oppose desegregation. The leading speaker, an out of town guest. spouts forth simplistic, ugly racist clichés – and Atticus and Henry Clinton sit flanking their guest.

Jean watches and reacts with stunned amazement, then becomes puzzled and alienated and she is not the only one. This reviewer and millions of the new book's readers also follow Scout into disbelief. Imagine a sequel to *Gone With The Wind* where Scarlett O'Hara freed the slaves and going with them, ran off North to aid the Union by being a munitions factory worker. Or Huckleberry Finn becoming a sheriff so that he can hunt down escaped slaves with bloodhounds? What of Captain Ahab joining Greenpeace to stop the commercial killing of whales? How would we react if Tennessee Williams rewrote *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, repopulating it with his characters as cheery well-adjusted altruists? Perhaps Yossarian should become a true blue American patriot in love with the air force, marching around the air base, singing 'To the Halls of Montezuma' to new recruits to raise their enthusiasm.

Like these examples, Atticus as an active segregationist just does not jell, not with this reviewer and apparently not with other reviewers or with many among those millions who have already read *Go Set a Watchman.* There are two reasons for this. The first must be that like the above examples, Atticus Finch exists more as a fixed icon rather than he exists as a literary character. Like these examples (excepting Ahab, who did not have a sequel) Atticus Finch does not work well as a greatly changed character in a sequel. A second reason why this revelation does not work well emerges as Jean Louise searches for a revelation about why Atticus behaves in this way – and the answers from three sources disappoint because they are inadequate, unconvincing and muddled.

First she sees Atticus's brother Uncle Jack for an explanation and when he rambles about everything from Bishop Colenso and the Zulus to Harriet Martineau to local residents, all without apparent connection. After some pages of this (which would be better condensed into a paragraph) we can share Jean Finch's exasperation and wish for the point. When it comes Jack makes it clear that not since the Civil War has there been such a tangle of personal reasons for opposing the government. He recalls that their father was a Confederate soldier, that they are southerners with a concern for justice and order and desegregation will bring disorder – and injustice for some. Henry points out that Atticus initially supported the revived Ku Klux Klan forty years before to defend southern interests, but gave up on it when it became violent. Atticus himself points out to Jean Louise that he found the guest speaker's comments objectionable, but if the NAACP has its way Blacks would rule and control everything. Three quarters of the electorate will be Blacks, and he states that they vote in blocs. In his viewpoint they do not yet have the experience

to govern or run businesses. He believes that a democracy leading to Black control will be disastrous on a practical day to day level. He also resents the interference with states' rights by the federal government and the NAACP. While not a full blast white supremacist, some of his ideas he expounds here, (such as that Blacks, while developing, are basically still in their childhood) are patronising, paternalistic and offensive.

It could be argued that these are the views of a nineteenth century southern liberal and that Harper Lee was right to present them – and his daughter's disillusionment with Atticus and her opposition to those views. The admiring, totally positive view of a child for her father in *To Kill A Mockingbird* was still possible in the literature of 1960, but in the generations since then such heroes have become unsustainable in serious literature. The stream of consciousness style, when presented with plausibility, makes purely villainous or purely heroic characters untenable.

Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch and Brock Peters as Tom Robinson in the 1962 film version

These trial scenes came to embody the battle for racial justice for many Americans.

An increasingly secular Western society has made god-favoured good heroes and evil villains archaic. Where their literary home (which is the world of mythology)

still exists in the Western world it does so as something to study. Mythological narratives do not function to educate inspire or warn society anymore. Where they do exist heroes are linked to tabloid journalism, the entertainment industry and the mass media. Although some aspects of the old mythology survive there, this can only be an echo or perhaps a parody, but it cannot be a creditable continuation. Instead the hero now exists as a product for entertainment. The media find or create heroes for popular culture, but that only starts off the process. Usually the reverse process starts after public interest peaks, or their market value as a hero declines, often because they age or go out of fashion. Disillusionment, disgrace and being discarded loom. The exposé then begins and the public enjoy finding that their heroes have feet of clay - but that does not stop them looking for new heroes. The replacement begins anew, preferably with young figures and preferably the new figures are a little different to the discarded ones that a new generation does not want to know of.

This process has led many of the more aware to reject the idea of heroism, seeing such beliefs as part of adolescence and disillusion as maturity, when in fact disillusion is only another part of the process. Jean Louise seems to be going through this process, but has stopped at disillusionment. Uncle Jack soon appears to be not the fool he initially seemed. He functions as the initiator of a common literary process that has developed beyond modernist exposés of the hero. This focuses on the audience and why they have a set perception. He places her as the analysing viewer who believes she represents goodness by opposing racial views. He puts her into the position where she has to question why she sees herself as good and why she believed in Atticus as a hero. She must go beyond disillusionment and see her father as a person – and she does, even if ideologically he will be an enemy

As both Uncle Jack and Atticus make clear, from childhood onwards they were concerned with her over reliance on Atticus, her rosy image of him and the way he dominated her personality and her worldview. For this reason he insisted she go to college in Georgia and get a career job away from Maycomb. Now they see her disillusionment as going too far. Atticus disliked the bigotry of the guest speaker and the local crooked big man of the county, but he also dislikes extremists. He does not believe that the NAACP (unseen in the novel) really know the best interests of the local Black people and Harper Lee leaves this as an open question.

The novel's ending also seems rather open, Jean Louise realises that Maycomb has taught her a lot; there is a need for balance. She reconciles with Atticus, sort of. Her words are about love, while thinking of him as an enemy she must grind into the dust.

This disillusionment with Maycomb's people works as a very different ending to *To Kill A Mockingbird*. In the last scenes the reclusive Boo Radley was revealed to be not the suspected monster, but a shy, protective, mistreated man. Scout says that after meeting him he was "real nice" and Atticus responds with 'Most people are Scout, when you finally see them." Like Atticus's statement that we should not judge people till we walk a mile in their shoes, these ideas have gone into common liberal currency. They make Harper Lee's first published novel one of the very few ultimately optimistic serious novels of the twentieth century. The final sentence has Atticus tending to Jem, and Jean Louise says that he will stay there to morning. By being there Atticus epitomises reliability and care. This typifies the compassion that permeates *To Kill A Mockingbird.*

Jem does not appear in the new novel. We are told flatly and in passing that years before Jem collapsed and died of heart failure in the street. In *Go Set a Watchman* he also appears in the last sentences. When Jean Louise has a moment when she feels that somebody has walked on her grave she thinks that it is "probably Jem on some idiotic errand." Nothing clarifies the differences between the two books more than that comparison.

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