# Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman*: More of a moneymaking than a literary event?

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Go Set a Watchman *by Harper Lee, New York: HarperCollins, 2015, 278 pp.*

Harper Lee's novel, *Go Set a Watchman*, has sold over a million copies in the United States since its release two weeks ago. It is currently at the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list. The book, or what readers imagine or hope it to be, has clearly struck a chord.

Lee, now 89, is the author of one other novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, published in 1960. That book is set in 1930s Alabama during the Jim Crow segregation era. The novel tells the story of Atticus Finch, a white, small-town lawyer, who defends a black man against the charge of raping a white woman.

His daughter, Jean Louise, narrates a compelling tale about the life of the Finches and the inhabitants of the small town of Maycomb. What runs through Atticus, Jean Louise (known by her nickname, Scout) and her elder brother Jem is a feeling for equality and fair play and a generally democratic sensibility.

Throughout *To Kill a Mockingbird* Scout (who is eight when the books opens) and Jem learn from their father and their own experiences to treat people with a sense of empathy and justice. This includes the poor and illiterate, the mentally disabled and nonconformists, but especially the deeply oppressed African Americans in the town.

The novel was published at the height of the Civil Rights movement, and became an immediate bestseller. It won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1961. More significantly, the book was identified in the public's mind with the struggle by millions of African Americans for justice against segregation and racism in the South.

The fictional Atticus Finch demonstrated to a whole generation what it meant to be willing to endure, in defense of decency and fairness, threats to one's reputation, life and even the well-being of one's family.

Furthermore, *To Kill A Mockingbird* came as something of a moral release or revival to a society battered by the McCarthyite anticommunist witch-hunts and years of blacklisting, "naming names" and frame-ups such as that of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953. The informer and the capitulator had become American social types that were all too familiar.

Egalitarian sentiment had awakened with the mass struggle against Jim Crow in the South. Millions were ready by 1960 to read about those who stood up to prejudice and racism.

At the same time, Lee's novel, although no doubt written with complete sincerity, only went so far, or perhaps only could go so far. The political climate in America presumably had something to do with the fact that the hero of *To Kill a Mockingbird* was a middle class, or by the standards of the South at the time, an upper middle class lawyer.

Nevertheless, Lee's work expresses the genuine opposition to inequality that is a part of American life, including in the South. It is a deeply satisfying work that argues, through the eyes and experience of children, for more compassionate and humane behavior and attitudes. It still resonates as a simple, powerful novel that speaks in well-constructed images and appeals to the senses.

Over the last five and a half decades, the work has sold over 40 million copies. It has become part of many American middle-school and high-school curriculums and inspires countless youth to see the defense of equality as a moral principle and a human virtue. The story of Atticus Finch has even inspired many young people over the years to become lawyers and to fight for justice to prevail. For years many parents have named their sons after him.

The 1962 film adaptation of Lee's novel with Gregory Peck (for which he won an Academy Award), directed by Robert Mulligan, produced by Alan Pakula and with a screenplay by Horton Foote, is almost as popular as the novel and an honest work of art in its own right.

Harper Lee never published another novel after *To Kill a Mockingbird*, until now, and generally avoided the limelight. She stopped doing interviews in 1964, complaining that journalists asked the same questions over and over again. She also refused to write an introduction to the novel, observing, "*Mockingbird* still says what it has to say; it has managed to survive the years without preamble."

It is easy to see why a new novel about Atticus and his family was so eagerly anticipated. It brings back to the stage, or so readers hoped, the figure of the principled lawyer. And 2015, as a great many people would undoubtedly agree, is a time when such a figure is needed in both literature and life.

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Fifty-five years after Lee's first book was published American society is riven by a much deeper social inequality than was the case in 1960. While a layer of upper middle class African Americans has prospered and made its mark in politics, conditions for every section of the working class have deteriorated sharply. The gap between the super-rich and the mass of the population has never been greater. Where is the literary or film character who will address that question?

Unease and anger about social inequality are ubiquitous in every part of the United States, but find no recognition in official media or political life.

In many ways, the political or moral climate is worse today than at the height of the McCarthy period. Academics and "intellectuals" line up to serve the Pentagon, the CIA and other murderous government agencies. Revelations of massive NSA spying, an essential ingredient of a police state, fail to disturb the sleep of the ex-liberal middle class, scandalously wealthy and desirous of protecting every penny.

Fighters for justice and equality are maligned, imprisoned and hounded by the political establishment. However, the widespread popularity of figures such as Edward Snowden, Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning is an indication that millions of people are revolted by this climate. Atticus Finch could not return too soon.

The circumstances around the discovery of *Go Set a Watchman* are murky. Harper Lee is suffering from the after-effects of a stroke and is partially blind and deaf. She is wheelchair-bound and confined to an assisted living facility in her hometown of Monroeville, Alabama (on which Maycomb was modeled) and has limited access to her friends, much less journalists. The writer's life-long business agent, her older sister, Alice, died last year. It was soon after that the manuscript of *Go Set a Watchman* surfaced.

HarperCollins, owned by Rupert Murdoch, has spared no effort to publicize the book, with a massive public relations campaign, including a pre-release of the first chapter.

While nothing definitive can be said about the origins of the new book's manuscript, it seems clear that the prospect of making a good deal of money had something to do with the sudden appearance of the novel. HarperCollins has released almost no information on its provenance.

When Harper Lee submitted an early draft of *To Kill Mockingbird* in 1957 to the publishing house of J.B. Lippincott, it was considered unpublishable. Lee reworked the manuscript over the next three years with Tay Hohoff, an editor at the firm, apparently producing a number of drafts.

"After a couple of false starts, the story-line, interplay of characters, and fall of emphasis grew clearer, and with each revision—there were many minor changes as the story grew in strength and in her own vision of it—the true stature of the novel became evident," wrote Hohoff, who died in 1974. What other changes Lee made in the complex process of writing and rewriting are unknown.

The "new" novel—or early draft of an old novel—takes place when an adult Jean Louise returns to Maycomb from New York City. She must deal with a young man who wants her to marry him and settle down in Maycomb. Her brother is dead and we meet characters familiar from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In fact, some critics have noted that the new work seems to imply a familiarly with the first book.

She encounters a town in the throes of the Civil Rights struggle, and discovers that her fiancée and her father, Atticus, have lined up with the Citizens Council (a respectable version of the Ku Klux Klan). She is physically ill when she discovers all this. The climax of the novel takes place in a confrontation between father and daughter.

Atticus defends his presence at a meeting of the Maycomb County Citizens' Council as a way of gathering information, but, we learn, he holds racist views about blacks. "Do you want Negros by the carload in our schools and churches and theaters? Do you want them in our world?"

Phrases like this, and racial slurs, have caused consternation and disappointment among some readers and critics. Atticus Finch turns out to be a bigot after all. But Finch is a fictional character. Lee created him one way in this first draft, and thought better of it later on. The book is not genuinely a sequel, about the same Finch growing older and more reactionary; it is a distinct work, with a different, perhaps less mature approach and set of problems.

For her own artistic and ideological reasons, Lee shifted her own indignation at racism and injustice from the adult Jean Louise in *Go Set a Watchman* (whose response to the remark of Atticus above is, "They're people, aren't they? We were quite willing to import them when they made money for us") to the middle-aged Atticus, and through him, to his children, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. And her decision seems to have been the proper and more convincing one.

Lee's *Go Set A Watchman* is a much less compelling work than *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Jean Louise offers her defense of black people's rights in long, expository remarks and speeches. The book lacks spontaneity for the most part, and gets bogged down in the not so intriguing issue of her relationship with her boyfriend.

Flashbacks to childhood have some of the original impact of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but on the whole, the book is not a finished work of art. While literary researchers, critics and biographers will no doubt benefit, the novel has been marketed by a publishing conglomerate under false and opportunist pretenses and adds little to our understanding of the period, the place … or the individual who stands on principle.

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