

inviting Nelle to join him in investigating a murder case in the Midwest. Reunited, the pair headed out to Garden City, Kansas, where they gathered material for what would eventually become Capote's landmark book, *In Cold Blood*. Before long, Nelle would join her cousin as one of the most highly acclaimed new voices in American literature.

By the end of 1960 *To Kill a Mockingbird* was a fixture on the bestseller lists and was already being translated into a dozen languages. In 1961 Harper Lee was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Shortly thereafter Universal Studios adapted her book into an Academy Award-winning film, which in turn earned Lee an invitation to dine with President John F. Kennedy at the White House. Most pleased of all was 80-year-old Amasa Lee, who lauded his daughter for her fine book and the risks she had taken to produce it. He concluded a congratulatory telegram with the pithy review: "You'll have to go some to beat this one."

Typically, Amasa Lee's humility caused him to be surprised when many of his Monroeville neighbors began calling him Atticus, after the book's noble hero, whom he resembled so closely. Perhaps it was this similarity between fictional character and real man that made Nelle fret about Gregory Peck's ability to portray her father in the film version of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She worried that Peck's youthful good looks might hinder him in projecting Atticus's moral seriousness but changed her mind the instant she saw him in character. "It was the most amazing transforma-

tion I had ever seen," she said of Peck's uncanny performance. During filming Peck got to meet, know, and — like almost everyone else — respect Amasa Lee. When Lee died on April 15, 1962, Peck remembered him as "a beautiful man" and added, "I am very proud to have known him."

A few weeks later, while sitting nervously at the Academy Awards ceremony, Peck clutched a gold watch that was engraved "To Gregory from Harper." With characteristic generosity, Harper Lee had made a gift of her father's watch to the actor who had so subtly animated her artistic vision. Peck held on to the watch as he stood onstage and accepted the award for Best Actor. One of the first people he thanked was Harper Lee.

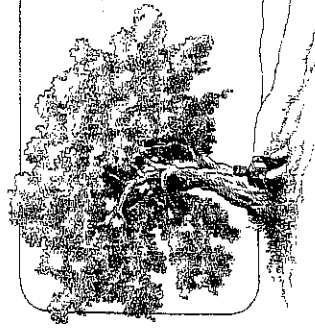
It is here, in the flush of fame and applause, that the story of Harper Lee's literary career comes to an abrupt and intriguing end. Whether she will ever surpass her enormously successful first novel remains an open question, for 30 years after her triumph she has yet to publish another work.

Meanwhile, *To Kill a Mockingbird* seems only to grow in stature with the passage of time. As dozens of editions have been published and tens of millions of copies have been sold, Lee's tale of quiet courage has taken its place on the shelf with America's literary classics. For many, that is quite enough. In a voice that Harper Lee would immediately warm to, a Monroeville man once summed up the feelings of himself and his neighbors: "We're proud of you, doggone it."

No critic ever offered higher praise.

READER'S DIGEST

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TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

Harper Lee

IN THE ONE-TAXI town of Monroeville, Alabama, where Harper Lee grew up, everyone told stories. Housewives told stories as they hung out the wash. Men told stories while they hunted and fished.

And lawyers like Amasa Lee, Harper's father, filled the venerable courthouse with stories of guilt or innocence. Stories fell like rain around the childhood of Harper Lee until her imagination brimmed like a dam about to burst. *To Kill a Mockingbird* overflows with those haunting, homey voices. They tell a story whose powerful theme many people were longing to be-

lieve back in 1960, as America wobbled on the brink of tumultuous social change: that love can overcome hatred, and that each person carries some inner beauty, some fragile mockingbird's song, that the rest of us need to hear.

Virtually overnight the book's popularity turned an obscure corner of Alabama into a celebrated piece of literary real estate, and it worked a similarly stunning transformation on the life of its young author, who was then living in a cold-water Manhattan apartment. If there was ever a remote, rural hamlet, it was Monroeville, Alabama, where Nelle Harper Lee was born on April 28, 1926. As in most of the South, the past was alive in Monroeville. Young boys and girls inherited a vivid pastiche of ghost stories, tall tales, and widespread rumors from a grass-roots oral tradition. Nelle (Ellen spelled backward) took up the local vocation at

Over a long, hot summer in the drowsy little town of Maycomb, Alabama, 10-year-old Scout Finch and her brother, Jem, learn a lifetime's worth of lessons: that the world is full of prejudice and injustice, but that there's goodness inside everyone. Such is the simple truth that lies at the heart of Harper Lee's modern masterpiece, To Kill a Mockingbird.



Harper Lee

"The trial was a composite of all trials in the world," Harper Lee once said of the climax of her novel. "But the courthouse was this one. I grew up in this room."

Nelle, Truman, and the Underwood became fast friends. Truman supplied a frayed Webster's dictionary and Nelle provided office space — her backyard treehouse.

Their second most important observation post was the balcony of the Monroeville courthouse, where they watched Amasa Lee toil for the respected local law firm of Barnett, Bugg, and Lee. With his deep voice and dignified bearing — no doubt inherited from his forebear General Robert E. Lee — he must have seemed to a child's eye the epitome of wise authority.

As Nelle grew, so did Amasa's quiet influence over her. After four years at the University of Alabama she decided to study law there, hoping to one day join her sister as a partner in their father's firm. But Nelle's love of storytelling continued to tug at her ambitions.

Six months before earning her law degree, Nelle packed up and moved to New York City. With distance came perspective. In the tradition of many Southern writers, Lee's relocation freed her to tell the truth about her hometown. Once she was far removed from Monroeville, choice pieces of regional speech began to ring clearly in her ears, and various youthful episodes stepped forward from memory.

age seven, when she began to write short "practice" narratives. An intellectual prodigy, she was bored with school and was 10 years old before she realized that not everyone could carry a full symphony around in her head.

But Nelle was also a combative, sunbaked tomboy. Her best friend and constant companion was her cousin, Truman Capote. The two were an inseparable if unlikely pair. He was a dainty, fair-haired child with an overstuffed vocabulary of adult words; she, an overall-clad urchin who would sooner knock a boy down than argue with him.

The two shared a passion for mischief, and one night they persuaded their aunt to take them spying on a Ku Klux Klan rally. For Nelle, the evening's foray presented a frightening first glimpse of her community's dark side. Perhaps the most fateful event in the duo's shared summers, however, occurred the day Nelle's father brought home a beat-up typewriter, thinking the machine might provide some amusement for the children.

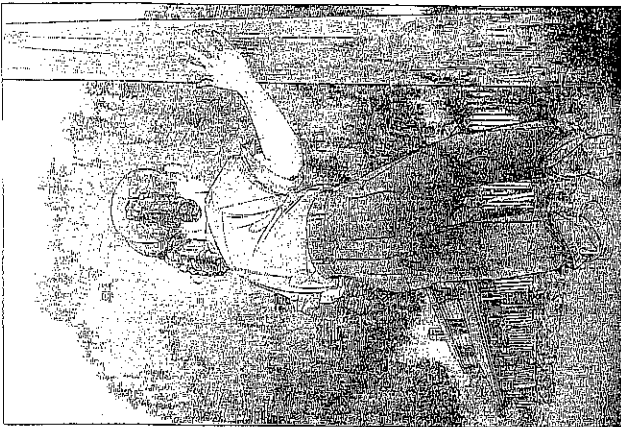
And the law, as it turned out, provided her with a deep well of dramatic story ideas.

To husband her creative energy for four hours of intense writing each evening, Nelle took a job as an airline reservations clerk. By day she avoided composing so much as a letter; at night she devoted herself to learning the craft of fiction. After seeing a set of her short stories, a literary agent encouraged her to expand them into a novel. Nelle was both delighted and disheartened. How, after all, could she take on so large a task while coping with a full-time job?

In 1956 some close friends who knew that Nelle missed her family during the holidays invited her over for Christmas. After a large pile of presents had been opened and scattered by the children, Nelle's hosts pointed to an envelope nestled within the boughs of the tree.

The note inside contained the terms of an extraordinary gift exchange: Nelle would receive from her friends a full year's financial support, and in return she would single-mindedly apply herself toward the goal of completing her novel. Nelle moved to the window with tears in her eyes. As she looked out on the snow-softened city, she struggled to grasp that she had actually been granted "a full, fair chance at a new life." She vowed that by making the most of it, she would reward her friends' wondrous act of faith.

Now a full-time writer, Nelle set herself to the business of commuting with her past and bringing it to life. While hammering out the novel, she let everything else lapse — her diet, her social life, even her beloved golf game. But a year later



The Illustrations

The artwork in this edition was created by David Johnson, one of America's most prominent pen-and-ink illustrators. Best known for his characterizations of authors and the subjects of their works, he is also a writer and illustrator of children's books. His work has been featured in numerous publications and exhibitions, including several shows at the prestigious Society of Illustrators in New York City.

she emerged from her creative cocoon with a first draft of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The publishing firm of J. B. Lippincott saw enough promise in Lee's manuscript to support her through three years of revisions, slowed by her periodic visits home to her ailing father.

In the fall of 1959 Nelle restlessly awaited publication of her book. Then came a phone call from Truman Capote, himself now a writer,