

# Mysteries of the Mockingbird

by Mark Tooley

**Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee**

by Charles J. Shields

New York: Henry Holt & Company;

324 pp., \$25.00



Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* has sold over 30 million copies since its publication in 1960. Hardly a high-school student in America over the last 40 years has graduated without having read the 1930's-era drama of a small-town Southern lawyer who defends an innocent black man accused of rape by a white woman. And many nonreaders have seen the 1962 film version, starring Gregory Peck as the reassuringly patriarchal Atticus Finch, the novel's irrepressibly venerable widower, whose story is narrated through the voice of his adoring young daughter.

The book was Lee's first—and her last. Fame exploded upon her, as millions of copies sold within the first year, culminating in a Pulitzer Prize. After an avalanche of media interviews, book tours, and speeches, and an invitation to provide on-site assistance for Gregory Peck's movie, after 1964, the introverted Lee largely retreated from public life. Now 81 years old, and still living mostly in her hometown of Monroeville, Alabama, Lee has surprisingly appeared at a few public events over the past year and even wrote a short letter to Oprah Winfrey's magazine, *O*. However, Lee still avoids commenting on her novel and shuns almost all interviews.

Thus, in writing *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee*, biographer Charles Shields was unable to talk with Lee or her immediate family. Nor was he granted access to any of her papers. Still, his book is an entertaining attempt to examine the mysteries of *Mockingbird* and its author. Shields does not fully explain Lee's preoccupation with privacy or her failure to write another book. But he does offer plausible theories, backed up by four years of research and 600 interviews with people connected to Lee or her novel.

Lee is wealthy, of course, but lives unpretentiously, sharing a house with her 95-year-old sister, Alice Lee, who is Alabama's oldest practicing female attorney

and who still functions as Harper's unofficial spokesman. The two sisters seem to enjoy the normal social life of two elderly Southern spinsters. They eat out frequently, carefully taking turns in picking up the check. They mingle routinely with their friends and neighbors of many decades. And they have both remained active in the First United Methodist Church of Monroeville, in which they grew up, and to which their father, Amasa Coleman Lee, devoted much of his life.

Old Mr. Lee, upon whom the fictional Atticus Finch was based, was a rock-hard Methodist and a lay leader of the congregation. He eschewed liquor, led prayer meetings, preached sermons, listened wearily to ministers who strayed from orthodox teachings, and was a proponent of 19th-century-style Methodist civic righteousness in his community. A successful businessman, newspaper owner, state legislator, and attorney, Mr. Lee wore three-piece suits and carried a gold pocket watch, just as Gregory Peck would portray him.

Amasa Lee was no liberal. He did not lend his voice to the cause of civil rights for blacks until late in his life, during the 1950's. In the 40's, Lee confronted and ultimately helped to force out of his Methodist church a pastor who preached racial equality and labor-union rights from the pulpit. Such sermons were political and (therefore) inappropriate, he believed. Respected by both blacks and whites, Mr. Lee opposed cruelty and any overt injustice. In 1919, he unsuccessfully defended two black men accused of murder. A jury found them guilty, they were hanged, and their bodies were mutilated; Amasa Lee never accepted another criminal case.

Devoted to his son and three daughters, Mr. Lee was married to Frances Cunningham Lee, who suffered from a "nervous disorder" and was obese, moody, and difficult. Mr. Lee stoically endured, outliving his younger wife by 15 years and never remarrying. Harper Lee attached herself to her beloved father. In her novel, the family's mother goes completely unmentioned. The filmmakers felt obliged at least to reference her death.

Mr. Lee wanted Harper to follow him into the profession of law, as her older sister had done. A tomboy and an affectionate rebel, Harper resisted, opting instead to move to New York, work at odd jobs, and make literary contacts. Well-heeled friends financed a one-year sabbatical for her, during which she wrote her book. Its

immediate success shocked and amused old Mr. Lee, who had thought his daughter's literary ambitions highly esoteric.

In preparation for the movie, Gregory Peck journeyed to Monroeville to meet the elderly but still courtly Mr. Lee. Both the actor and the small-town lawyer were charmed by the encounter. Amasa Lee died before the movie was finished. Other Monroeville residents believed that Peck had captured many of Mr. Lee's eccentric ways, including the manner in which he often caressed his pocket watch. Harper Lee wept when she first saw Peck in costume on the movie set; he even had her father's "little paunch."

An important feature of the Harper Lee story is the long friendship she cultivated with the flamboyant and self-destructive Truman Capote, who had spent part of his childhood as a neighbor to the Lee family. Already an established author in New York in the 1950's, Capote helped Lee make literary contacts. Lee, in turn, served as Capote's research assistant while he was writing *In Cold Blood*, the sordid tale of the murder of the Clutter family in Garden City, Kansas. Small-town Kansas would not likely have opened up to the dwarfish and effeminate Capote without the reassuring presence of a very normal and unpretentious Harper Lee.

During her research, which included a tour of the Clutters' home (the site of the murders), Lee found the victims to be a parody of her own family. They were devout Methodists, led by a strong and successful father. Mr. Clutter was as much a force in his local church as Mr. Lee had been at First Methodist. But where Amasa Lee had been humble and warm, the evidence persuaded Harper that Mr. Clutter had been cold and controlling—and his family, consequently, emotionally dysfunctional. The depictions of Jesus neatly framed in each room of the Clutter house struck her as sanctimonious. However, these observations were withheld from *In Cold Blood*, as Capote was hesitant to cast aspersions on the victims of a terrible crime.

Predictably, Capote was ungrateful for Lee's help, resented her subsequent success, and devoted years to fostering their estrangement. In response, Harper declined to attend Capote's celebrity-studded Black and White Ball, New York's premier social event of the 1960's. But she stubbornly maintained contact with Capote until his various addictions finally destroyed him in 1984. Capote never published another book after his own

triumph with the mesmerizing *In Cold Blood*, which also became a movie. But whereas Capote's inability to achieve further success only fueled his self-destructive spiral, Lee seems to have handled her own literary silence with equanimity.

Mostly, Harper Lee seems to have remained an introverted but charming Southern lady, a bit of a maverick who has never been terribly concerned about what the world thought of her. Except in her choice of a profession, and despite her attempts at rebelliousness, she never really strayed from her father's path. She still lives in his house and attends and supports the church to which he devoted himself. She even contributed toward the construction of a new education wing and chapel for the church, which includes a statue of John Wesley. Old Mr. Lee would have been pleased.

Unlike her teetotaling father, Lee does imbibe. At least one of Shields' sources speculates that Lee's drinking helped prevent the completion of another book, but Shields does not attempt to prove this. Rather, he concludes that Harper Lee surmised she could never equal the achievements of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, so she never really tried. Her own emotional serenity did not require any further public acclaim.

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## An American Life

by Catharine Savage Brosman

**Thirteen Moons**  
by Charles Frazier  
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It is not impossible, merely difficult, for the author of a highly praised first novel to produce a second worthy of its predecessor. Perhaps paucity of imagination is responsible for the failure of many second novels; the writer emptied his quiver the first time or got lucky with a flash-in-the-pan and should not have tried again. In *Thirteen Moons*, Charles Frazier shows that he had at least one more novel in him after *Cold Mountain*, which won the National Book Award in

1997 and an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, was on the *New York Times* best-seller list, and was the basis for a film. Readers who liked *Cold Mountain* may admire this new work equally; those less pleased are unlikely to be won over.

*Thirteen Moons*, a first-person retrospective account, relates the life of a Southern white man, Will Cooper, from his adolescence early in the 19th century until very old age in the 20th. The main historical framework is consonant with factual accounts. Frazier lists sources in a brief note, acknowledging that, though the work is fiction, the narrator bears some resemblance to one William Holland Thomas, and a figure called Charley, to the historical Tsali. Like Cooper, the novel is tough and sinewy. As such, it is a man's novel but will appeal also to women who like men's novels. The setting is the southern Appalachians, chiefly North Carolina (recognizable but named rarely); occasionally, the action moves to Charleston, Washington City, and westward. The story is not Cooper's alone; he is connected to the Cherokee Indians, both inside the Nation and on its fringes, and to the mixed-bloods living near them.

An orphan, Will Cooper is bound over legally at age 12 by his uncle and aunt (who also steal his land) to an old tradesman needing an assistant to run his trade post on the edge of Cherokee territory. Will's choice is to accept his indenture, not escape. The learning he acquired in school stands him in good stead, and his hard work and talents enable him to do well for his master. At the latter's death, Will buys his freedom and the store from the heir, then acquires other stores and considerable land. He teaches himself the law, argues cases, and becomes particularly adept in matters of land titles. He also acquires an adoptive father, Bear, a Cherokee living outside Indian territory. Bear's considerable knowledge of the world beyond, acquired through the Cherokee syllabary and with Cooper's assistance and encouragement, might be considered unusual, but, contrary to some critics' implications, neither it nor his superior practical skills and sage advice make him an unconvincing cardboard character. Cooper's loyalty to Bear and his clan is strong. His devotion goes also to a woman named Claire, whom he meets first when, a mere girl, she is thrust into his life bizarrely by the wealthy mixed-blood Featherstone. Her story runs close to his without joining it

permanently. Featherstone is a negative father figure, a rival whom Will both respects and resents. Will's life journey is bound up with all three of these figures and with the entire tribe, whose spokesman he becomes in their vain struggle to avoid the Removal and what would be called the Trail of Tears.

Thus, the book touches squarely on the awful topics appropriated and distorted by the multiculturalists. Frazier's approach does not, however, involve tropistic obeisance to contemporary dogmas of white guilt, native superiority, and so on. His is an historical novel, directed toward presenting the 19th century as lived experience and eschewing today's commonplaces as inadequate for interpreting the past. Identity, moreover, is not a simple thing, as Cooper observes. When Cooper assesses blame, it is judicious, and, if his view is that the Indians are generally victims of the whites who decide their fate, the judgment is founded on his observations and experiences and made dispassionately. Violence has been exerted on many peoples, he notes; Cherokees and Creeks fought brutally long before Europeans arrived, and Appalachian Scots still lament Culloden. Will acknowledges that he, too, has failed his fellow men—by owning black slaves, for instance. The choice is often between two wrongs: To prevent a worse outcome, Bear and Cooper help hunt down some fugitive Indians, whose story ends very badly. Frazier views the question of Yankees through the lens of the unreconstructed. Will scorns Northerners before the war—and even more afterward—for their single-minded greed, exploitation of the hapless, and oppression of the defeated. Though his censure of Reconstruction will be viewed by some as tendentious, the cruelty and moral depravity of so many who decided the fate of the region and profited unduly from it are demonstrable.

As a consequence of his position in Bear's clan, Cooper goes to Washington as a lobbyist, later as a senator. The federal city, where the principal forces are money and power (each begetting the other), honesty is almost unknown, and corruption is everywhere, is not without resemblance (minus the mud in the streets) to today's capital. Andrew Jackson's campaign to deport the Cherokees from the Nation rivals recent federal manipulations as a piece of strong arming. Despite well-founded arguments made by Cooper and others, Jackson's will prevails, and even a Supreme Court decision