

Harper Lee

Nelle Harper Lee was born on April 28, 1926, in Monroeville, Alabama. Her father, Amasa Coleman Lee, was a lawyer, newspaper editor, and state senator during her formative years. Harper Lee's childhood in a small Southern town decades before the triumph of the Civil Rights Movement provided all the material she needed for her celebrated, and only, novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Though narrated by a child, *Mockingbird* was not a story Lee could have written without experience in the larger adult world. She studied at Huntingdon College, the University of Alabama (where she never finished a law degree), and at Oxford University in England. In 1950, she moved to New York City, where she worked as an airline reservation clerk. Convinced she had a story to tell about her own magical childhood, she moved to a cold-water apartment and, in earnest, took up the life of a struggling writer.

In 1957, her attempt to publish the novel failed. On the advice of an editor, she decided to turn what was a manuscript of short stories into a longer, more coherent narrative about the Depression-era South. She gained valuable

inspiration when, in 1959, she traveled to Kansas with childhood friend Truman Capote (the inspiration for Dill in *Mockingbird*). There she helped Capote research *In Cold Blood*, a work of creative non-fiction published to wide acclaim in 1966.

To Kill a Mockingbird, finally published in 1960, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1961. The following year the book was adapted as a movie with an Academy Award-winning screenplay by Horton Foote. Virtually overnight Lee became a literary sensation. A resolution was passed in her honor by the Alabama Legislature in 1961, and in 1966 she was named to the National Council of the Arts by President Lyndon Johnson.

In the last forty years, Lee has received numerous honors, including several honorary university degrees. Most recently she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in November 2007.

Expectations notwithstanding, Lee has never published another book. Her entire published oeuvre consists of a brilliant novel and miscellaneous articles, mostly from the 1960s.