

SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

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"THE MOCKINGBIRD NEXT DOOR," BY MARJA MILLS

 SEPTEMBER 2, 2014 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)  [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



Marja Mills

Reviewed by Allen Mendenhall

Nelle Harper Lee has been embroiled in lawsuits over the last couple of years and making headlines for her alleged litigiousness. Marja Mills's *The Mockingbird Next Door* is a welcome and timely look at Nelle (as her friends and family call her) from another angle, one that offers us a fuller and more complex portrait of the woman from Monroeville, Alabama, who gave the world arguably the most important if not the most read novel of the second half of the twentieth century.

[My grandfather grew up with Nelle and Truman Capote](#), who has also become the popular subject of films and biographies. I like many others have staked an unofficial claim on Nelle without her consent or permission. I'm jealous of those who write about her, concerned that she will be misrepresented or treated with that patronizing condescension that characterizes writing about the South by people who aren't from here.

Never mind that Nelle wouldn't know me from Adam or that I never had an opportunity, through my grandfather, to meet her in person. I still assert a delusional right of possession, an undignified and defensive prerogative to write about her as if I knew her and understood her better than others, especially outsiders. Transport me to Monroeville, however, and *I'm* the outsider, a young opportunist who wouldn't be brave enough to knock on Nelle's door and probably wouldn't be received there even if I showed up bearing flowers and chocolates.

There's a certain territoriality that comes with Nelle: If you have a connection to her, you feel that no one else should. A psychologist might diagnose this as neurosis. It's a Southern thing: Let's say you're a Yankee who has moved down here—we might invite you into our homes and churches and to our cookouts and political rallies; we'll include you in our customs and traditions and celebrations; we'll compliment you and let you poke fun at our accents and fixations; but we will, some of us, to our own shame and in violation of our own high standards of decency and decorum, eye you with suspicion and silently question your motives and place the burden of proof on you to demonstrate that you appreciate the South and all its colorful idiosyncrasies. We'll assume you think you're better than us, and we'll want you to prove that you don't.

So I was skeptical, I admit, when I heard that some journalist from Chicago had written a book about Nelle. Let's face it: recent polls and vote tallies suggest that even the most popular statesmen from Chicago just don't click around here. It's a bold move for someone who wasn't raised on grits and who undoubtedly supposes the Big 12 or the Big 10 to be comparable to the SEC (we're talking football, of course, not academics) to undertake to write about one of our most cherished pen-wielders.

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Nor was I surprised to see Nelle disclaim Mills's book and more or less refer to Mills as a liar: someone from a faraway place who thought she could just swoop in and within 18 months gain Nelle's good graces while writing a book that purports to represent Nelle's personality and character.

But then I started into Mills's book—and I enjoyed it. Well, some of it. It was, for the most part, agreeable. At least it *sought* to be respectful, honest, and genuine. I told myself I would approach it with an open mind, but deep down I didn't want to like it. I wanted it to offend me. I wanted to laugh at the stereotypes and caricatures. But I couldn't. Mills didn't give me a chance to. She was careful and considerate, but in a way that highlighted her very otherness: *she whudn't from around here*.

Despite her giddy ambition, I began to like and to trust Mills as a narrator. She was no ordinary Yankee. Sure, she had considered Monroeville to be just another "unusual part of the country" before she visited there, and sure, she didn't even know that Monroeville was Nelle's hometown until her editor had told her so, but she had made a concerted effort to write about Monroeville on its own terms, as a real place with real people, and to approach Alabama as one person should another person's grandmother: tactfully, and conscientious about the way you'd want someone to behave around your own grandmother.

That doesn't mean Mills does everything right in her book or that her prose is anything special. She supplies interesting details—for instance, Alice Lee, Nelle's sister, lies flat on her back to read at night, holding the book directly over her face, and instead of counting sheep she runs through the names of Alabama counties or American vice presidents, in reverse order—but at times the reader feels he's looking over a record of random details packaged in short paragraphs. One gets the impression that Mills has converted a bullet-point inventory of memories into a list-like narrative. There's just enough storyline to overcome the presumption that the book is nothing but ornamented note-taking.

A writer can be forgiven for dispensing with manners in favor of verisimilitude; it's okay, for example, for Mills to refer to Alice as "ancient" or to say her house smells "musty." Mills constantly walks this fine line between accuracy and insult; she needs to tell the truth without offending the very people who were kind enough to admit her into their company—to trust her *not* to portray them in a bad light. Hence Nelle's preacher is "what used to be called a natty dresser," outfitted as he was in "Italian leather loafers, a crisp shirt and designer tie, [and a] navy blazer pressed just so," but he is also open and candid and charming and willing to share his private notebooks with Mills. Nelle herself is admired and glorified, but her seeming masculinity and decision not to marry do not escape the predictable insinuations.

A chapter about Julia Munnerlyn, "a tall black woman with wisps of graying hair" who was Nelle's "live-in help," makes an appearance that is so short and contrived that it seems like an obligatory gesture to the cynical readers who will comb through the text for evidence of continuing racial injustices among backwards Alabamans, perhaps even among the Lee sisters themselves. The effect backfires, revealing an ironic form of racism common to those who pity people before relating to them: Julia looks like an afterthought, a caricature intended to alleviate the author's nagging sense that she's got to say something about African-Americans, this being, after all, a book about the author of a book that did more than any other to reverse the course of race relations in the United States.

Mills cultivates for herself a fawning persona that is both charming and hokey in its overanxiousness to be awed. When she first meets Alice, she hears noises in another room and wonders, "Could that be Harper Lee in the kitchen? The possibility was electrifying. Was she listening to our conversation? Would she make an appearance?" To say this suspense is manufactured would be an understatement. When Nelle finally does make contact with Mills, stating over the phone that "I wonder if we might meet," Mills purportedly feels as if "I had answered the phone and heard 'Hello. This is the Wizard of Oz.'" The Wizard of Oz? Really? Mills had to "collect herself" after she hung up the phone. I had to collect myself after reading this passage, but not for reasons Mills would take kindly to.

If you can get beyond Mills—whose book is as much about *her* as it is about Nelle—and focus on the real subjects, you'll find much in *The Mockingbird Next Door* worth discussing and pondering. Nelle and her sister Alice are so interesting and colorful that they can't be covered up by an imposing narrator. This won't be the last book about them. Nor, despite its claims, is it the first one to receive Nelle's blessing. That's both a shame and a comfort.

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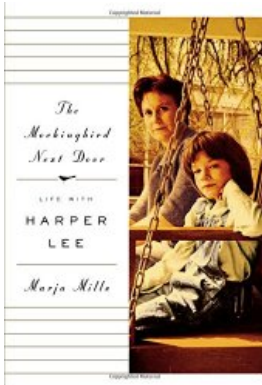
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About Allen Mendenhall

Allen Mendenhall is a writer, attorney, and educator. He he blogs at The Literary Lawyer. Visit his website at [AllenMendenhall.com](#).

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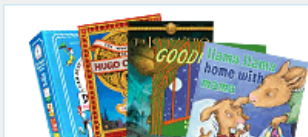


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