

Harper Lee and Words Left Behind

by ALLEN MENDENHALL

Nelle Harper Lee is in her eighties and spending her final years embroiled in lawsuits. For some time I've awaited the publication of a book she is rumored to have written about an Alabama salesman who got wealthy by marrying women and then murdering them to collect their life insurance proceeds. My sources—all reliable people—insist the book is complete, but I don't know whether it is or will be published.

One of my earliest memories is of a bookcase at my grandparents' beach house in Destin, Florida, that held the films my grandparents considered classics: *Dr. Zhivago*, *Patton*, *Gone With the Wind*, and, among others, *The Sound of Music*. I remember one film above all because it was set off from the others, as if on display: *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Few books have captivated me as has *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I first read it in elementary school. Too young to understand its complexities, I adored Atticus Finch and decided that I wanted to be a lawyer when I grew up. In high school, I named my dog Atticus. Then my sister got a cat. We named it Scout. Neither animal lived up to its namesake: Atticus was needy and pathetic, Scout skittish and foolish.

I was born into the book as others were born into money. My grandfather, Papa, was raised in Monroeville, Alabama, by way of Atmore, Alabama, where he was born in 1929. Because the Depression had hit Papa's family especially hard, a charitable doctor in Atmore delivered Papa for free.

Shortly after Papa was born, Great-Granddaddy moved his family to Monroeville and worked for various car businesses, never earning much money. Papa, tall, strong, and handsome, was also something of an athlete. He earned a basketball scholarship to Auburn, left Monroeville for college, graduated, and then served in the U.S. Air Force. In 1955, he married his college sweetheart, Barbara Glenn Farish, my grandmother, whom I call "Nina." Nina and Papa moved to Monroeville, where they lived until 1959. Their stay was short. Within a year, they left for Oklahoma and then returned to Alabama to live in Opelika until they made their final move to Atlanta. Papa's Monroeville days were over, save for his visits to relatives.

Great-Granddaddy, however, lived in Monroeville until his death in 1991, the year his beloved Atlanta Braves made it to the World Series just one season after finishing with the worst record in baseball. I often visited Great-Granddaddy in his small, white-wood house with the gravel driveway and a grass basketball court, which was littered with pecans that had dropped from the trees above. Papa's aunt, my Great Aunt Jewel, the only person I had known who was confined to a wheelchair—she had Polio—lived next door and owned one thousand cats. When I asked mom why Aunt Jewel lived next-door to her brother for so long, mom said, "Health, sweetie."

Monroeville was home to two of the 20th century's greatest authors: Lee, the reclusive author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a Pulitzer Prize winner, and a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, who was born in Monroeville in 1926, and Truman Capote, Lee's friend, schoolmate, and neighbor, who lived in Monroeville until the third grade, at which point he moved to New York City. He continued to summer in Monroeville with his aunts, whom Papa called "wild-haired" women. Lee was four years older than Papa. "She was," he would say whenever he was probed about the age difference, "in the 12th grade when I was in the eighth grade."

"Back then," he used to say, referring to his childhood in Monroeville, "there was nothing to do, so kids had to use their imaginations." He told me about how Lee and Capote had, despite their young ages and, in the case of Capote, lack of physical prowess, constructed a tree house with the assistance of Lee's brother, Edwin. "They formed a club up there," Papa said, "and to be in the club you had to do certain things." Papa never said what those things were, but he did say that he had been admitted into the tree house.

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I was in the third grade when I went to Great-Granddaddy's funeral in Monroeville. I recall a few things clearly from that weekend: Great-Granddaddy's open-casket, Swing-Low-Sweet-Chariot, and the endless pecans, which I gathered from the yard and placed into an old potato sack. Nina bought the pecans from me for one dollar. I thought I was rich, and in some ways, I was.

I also remember Papa telling stories about Lee and Capote that weekend. I delighted in these and shared them with my teachers, who seemed both impressed and skeptical. Papa said that Lee was a tomboy who wouldn't wear dresses and was always in trouble. She



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would show up at the grass basketball court in his backyard and play with the boys. His descriptions of the girlhood Lee resemble her own portrayal of Scout Finch, whom the character Aunt Alexandra chastised for tomboyishness. The narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird* says that Aunt Alexandra was “fanatical on the subject of [Scout’s] attire” and insisted that Scout “could not possibly hope to be a lady if [she] wore britches.” Whenever Scout declared that she “could do nothing in a dress,” especially not play, Aunt Alexandra would inform her that girls weren’t “supposed to be doing things that required pants.”

Papa’s attitude toward Capote was mixed. He took pride in him, but didn’t want to glorify him, either. If I asked Papa to describe the boyhood Truman, he would answer, flatly, “Capote was a weird boy.” I had to press him for details, perhaps because he did not want to admit that he and his friends had, as one might expect of seven and eight year old boys, teased Capote.

Capote was not like the other kids and did not fit in. He frequented the drug store with a satchel full of papers and pencils, wearing knickers, stockings, and a funny cap and talking with flute-like intonations. He would sit in the drug store for hours, drinking Coca-Cola and producing paper after paper from his satchel, scribbling lines of prose and stacking the finished pages until he’d made a paper tower stretching from the table to his chin.

“What are you doing in there, boy?” Papa and the other boys would ask.

To which Capote would say, “I’m writing a book.” Then Papa and the other boys would laugh because the notion that someone in Monroeville, Alabama, could write a whole book was, they thought, silly, if not downright preposterous.

Capote proved my grandfather wrong and wrote many books; Papa came to admire him.

Papa was not especially vocal about his relationship to Lee or Capote until he retired, but once he retired, it was hard to keep him quiet about it. When I went away for college, he made a name for himself at the local high school by lecturing in my cousins’ classrooms. He drawled on about Monroeville and Lee and *To Kill a Mockingbird* and specified the residents on whom Lee had based her characters. “Bubba,” Nina objected more than once—Papa didn’t like the nickname *Bubba*, and only Nina could call him that—“you best not tell all about the Monroeville folks. You’re likely to get sued.”

Papa laughed, kept giving lectures, and never got sued.

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Open to the first few pages of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and you’ll see a disclaimer: “This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, persons, living or dead, is coincidental.” If you had asked Papa about this disclaimer, he would have told you it was hogwash.

When I graduated from college, having earned a degree in literature, I moved to Japan to teach English. Before leaving the States, I arranged to have supper with Papa so we could talk about Harper Lee.

He and I sat at his kitchen table, in Sandy Springs, Georgia, eating boiled shrimp and drinking Nina’s sweet tea, a bowl of cocktail sauce, a copy of *The Monroe Journal* (dated July 25, 2002, and headlined “A.C. Lee, the perfect ‘Atticus Finch’”), and three stacks of papers between us. On one piece of paper, Papa drew a map. On another, he listed Monroevillians and their corresponding characters from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The list looked like this:

Scout Finch.....	Harper Lee
Jem Finch.....	Edwin Lee
Dill Harris.....	Truman Capote
Atticus.....	A.C. Lee
Boo Radley.....	Son Boulware
Aunts.....	Faulk sisters
Mr. Ewell.....	Mr. Ezell
Tom Robinson.....	(Fiction)
Maudie.....	Grandmother Mosey Neighbor
Mr. Tate, Sheriff.....	Sheriff Sawyer
Calpurnia.....	Georgianna
Mr. Radley.....	Mr. Boulware
Maycomb.....	Monroeville
Macon County.....	Monroe County

“This,” he said, indicating a sloppy square on his map, “is the courthouse, and this is the post office.” He also indicated the jail, the drug store, the elementary school; Selma Street, Montgomery Street, and Mobile Street; and some homes labeled “my home,” “Grandmother (Maudie),” “Faulk,” “Harper Lee,” “Radley, Boo,” and “Dill.”

And so it went. Papa specified who lived where, why, and for how long. He explained how Amasa Coleman Lee, Harper's father, served as the model for Atticus and how Edwin Lee, Harper's brother, served as the model for Jem. He also explained how the "real" Boo Radley was Son Boulware.

The narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird* introduces Boo as "a malevolent phantom" she had never seen but whose very breath caused azaleas to freeze "in a cold snap." She describes the Radley house as adjoining the schoolyard and declares that a "baseball hit into the Radley yard was a lost ball and no questions asked." Papa testified to the truth underlying this legend, saying that he and his friends would play baseball in the schoolyard and occasionally hit or throw a ball into Son Boulware's yard. They would run up to the fence to see if Son would come out of the house to get the ball. He never did. But the ball would be back in the schoolyard the next morning. Papa swore that this was how Lee got the idea for the knothole in which Boo deposited gifts for Scout and Jem.

One day, when Papa was working for a Mr. Gardner, who ran a grocery store, Papa was called on to deliver a basket of groceries to Mrs. Boulware. He had told Mr. Gardner that he'd deliver groceries to anybody but the Boulwares, but Mr. Gardner would have none of it and ordered Papa to make the delivery. Papa, who had a bike with a big basket for carrying things to and from school, collected the groceries and set out for the Boulware home.

He rode up to the Boulware's yard—which, he said, was tidy to the point of exhibitionism—and chanced his way through the gate of the picket fence, tottering up the steps to the front porch: the very porch, perhaps, that Jem had conquered to impress Scout and Dill. For some reason, Papa decided to go around to the back door; the porch, you see, stretched the length of the house. The groceries were heavy and slipping from his hands. When he turned the corner, he saw Son, or Boo, who hopped out of the porch swing and ran inside just as quickly as Papa could drop the groceries and jolt the other way. Papa always maintained that Son was "white as a sheet" that day. He rode his bike back to the grocery store and announced to Mr. Gardner that he would never deliver another thing to *that* house.

Papa used to describe the particularities and peculiarities of Mr. Boulware, Son's father, a man who never worked a steady job and who raised chickens and cultivated a beautiful vegetable garden. "He swapped chickens for groceries," Papa explained. "He'd leave his house every day, about 11:00, walking right by grandmother's, and I'd watch him sometimes from behind grandmother's shades, and he'd go three places: the post office, the courthouse, and the Jitney Jungle. He'd always return by noon."

Papa claimed that Lee modeled the character Miss Maudie on his grandmother, who would scold him and his friends when she caught them spying on the Boulwares: "Y'all leave that family alone! They've never done anything to you!"

Papa alleged, as well, that Lee modeled her characters on the following people:

Edwin Lee as Jem. Known simply as "Ed." Ed went to Auburn. That he, or anyone for that matter, went to Auburn is of tremendous significance to my family: all my grandparents—save for my paternal grandmother, who never attended college—attended Auburn; both my parents attended Auburn; my uncles attended Auburn; my sister attended Auburn; and a plethora of first, second, third, fourth, and fifth cousins attended Auburn; now I'm a doctoral candidate at Auburn. Nina's family, the Glens, have a dorm at Auburn named for them; and Glenn Street runs through the edges of Auburn's campus.

Amasa Coleman Lee as Atticus. Harper Lee's father. A lawyer who never actually attended law school. He handled mostly wills and estates. He raised his family as Methodists and served on the board of the church. Papa heard him speak on several occasions and characterized him as a dry speaker who rattled change in his pockets while he talked.

Georgianna as Calpurnia. In the book, Calpurnia looked after Scout and Jem, but Papa claimed that was Mrs. Lee's job and that Harper Lee had chosen not to include Mrs. Lee in the book. Georgianna was a cook who lived in a small residence behind the Lees' house. A.C. Lee did not drive her home after work, the way Atticus did for Calpurnia. Papa described Georgianna as a hefty woman who wore bright red lipstick and played the accordion in the afternoons. She was, apparently, an atrocious accordion player.

Mr. Ezell as Mr. Ewell. Ezell, like Ewell, was, in Papa's words, "poor white trash." He was an alcoholic who never worked. He and his family lived outside of town and were supported by Mrs. Ezell, who ironed, washed clothes, and undertook other odds-and-ends to make a living. Ezell's family lived in a house that someone else abandoned, and the Ezell children started school each year but always dropped out within three weeks on account of the other children laughing at them. The Ezell children never had proper clothes. Papa claimed that their family lived in that once-abandoned house until about the year he left for college. Then they disappeared, and nobody in Monroeville, at least to Papa's knowledge,

knew where they went.

“Harper Lee used fake names to refer to real Monroeville people,” Papa insisted. “She did it, I suspect, to avoid lawsuits.” He would follow up by saying that Lee couldn’t fool those who had lived in Monroeville, who had spent their days with the actual people so easily identifiable in Lee’s fiction. Papa didn’t know what to make of the fact that Lee had omitted some of her closest friends and relatives from the book—her sisters Alice and Marie, for example. He set aside the question by saying, “I suspect she wanted to make the book seem more like fiction.”

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When I was eight years old, I made a discovery much like the one Scout and Jem made about Atticus’s sharpshooting skills. Nina and Papa had a Siamese cat named Susie who would sneak into the attic through unknown passageways. One afternoon, she snuck away, and I went looking for her in the upstairs bedroom. I looked under the bed, behind the shower curtain, on top of the bookcase. No Susie.

Then I saw the closet door was cracked open. I pulled it all the way open and saw a long, coffin-like case on the shelf above the clothes. I pulled it down and examined it. It was about five feet long, tapering hexagonal at the tips; it had a locked, split lid. There was nothing particularly ornamental about it, so I supposed that there was no harm in opening it. Although it was locked, its lid gave way without resistance. When that happened, I gasped, horrified, and dropped the case to the floor. My heart fluttered. Inside was a shotgun. The first I’d ever seen.

I hadn’t known Papa to be a hunter or a rifleman, but when I summoned forth the courage to pick up the case and reinstate to its proper place, I saw two or three trophies, on the shelf, that were shaped like riflemen. Apparently, Papa was a good shot.

Just as I knew nothing of Papa’s marksmanship, Scout and Jem knew nothing of Atticus’s marksmanship—until, that is, old Tim Johnson, a neighbor’s dog struck mad with rabies, materialized in the street one afternoon, “walking dazedly in the inner rim of the curve parallel to the Radley house” and “advancing at a snail’s pace.” The narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird* describes Tim Johnson as “dedicated to one course and motivated by an invisible force that was inching him toward us.”

Heck Tate, the sheriff of Maycomb, surrenders his gun to Atticus, insisting that Atticus take the shot at the canine (“this is a one-shot job,” Tate says). Scout and Jem watch skeptically as their father fumbles with the rifle. The reluctant Atticus—moving “like an underwater swimmer”—takes aim, pausing to adjust his glasses, which, eventually, he lets fall to the street. “With movements so swift they seemed simultaneous,” the narrator says, “Atticus’s hand yanked a ball-tipped lever as he brought the gun to his shoulder.” Then, suddenly, Atticus eliminates the dog with a single shot, leaving Jem “paralyzed” with wonder and confused as Miss Maudie refers to Atticus as “One-Shot Finch.”

“Don’t you go near that dog, you understand? Don’t go near him, he’s just as dangerous dead as alive,” Atticus tells Jem, who says, “yes, sir,” and then stammers, “Atticus?—”

To which Atticus says, “Yes?”

Jem, still stunned, says, “Nothin.”

Minutes later, Jem remains in “numb confusion” and only “vaguely articulate.” Seeing this, Miss Maudie enlightens him by saying that Atticus was the best shot in Maycomb. When Jem protests that no one had told him this before, Miss Maudie muses aloud in words that, I believe, could have described my Papa:

If your father’s anything, he’s civilized in his heart. Marksmanship’s a gift of God, a talent—oh, you have to practice to make it perfect, but shootin’s different from playing the piano or the like. I think maybe he put his gun down when he realized that God had given him an unfair advantage over most living things. I guess he decided he wouldn’t shoot till he had to, and he had to today.

I never did see Papa shoot a gun, but Nina said that one time he had shot a squirrel off the bird feeder with a BB gun because he thought birds were disadvantaged when it came to competition with the squirrels. When he went to collect the squirrel’s body, the little thing came to, shook its head wildly as if snapping from a trance, and bounded away into the woods. Papa shelved the BB gun that day and never used it again.

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As all grandfathers must, Papa passed on stories about his childhood, often while sitting in his reading chair with his grandkids gathered on the floor around him. “When I was a boy,” he would say, “there was no swimming pool. And there was only one movie theater, and it had only one screen. They had to change the picture every day to keep business. On

Saturdays, there was a double-feature: two westerns. Admission cost five cents for children, and for another five cents, you could have some popcorn.” This was the world of Lee and Capote, too: the charming yet dangerous world that Lee illuminated for masses of readers.

With Lee’s final, tumultuous years comes the passing of a part of me that I shared with my grandfather through stories. It has been said that pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones. I know my grandfather to have been a good and honest man, and come what may, I’ll tell his stories about Harper Lee and Truman Capote and Monroeville to my children and, perhaps one day, my grandchildren, that they, too, might tell theirs. Good folks like Harper Lee and my grandfather can’t be kept alive forever—Papa died in May of this year—but this isn’t true for the stories they leave behind. Those live. They must, for the sake of soul and bone, and for the wisdom of our posterity.



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