1819 NEWS

Allen Mendenhall: Learning Harper Lee anew

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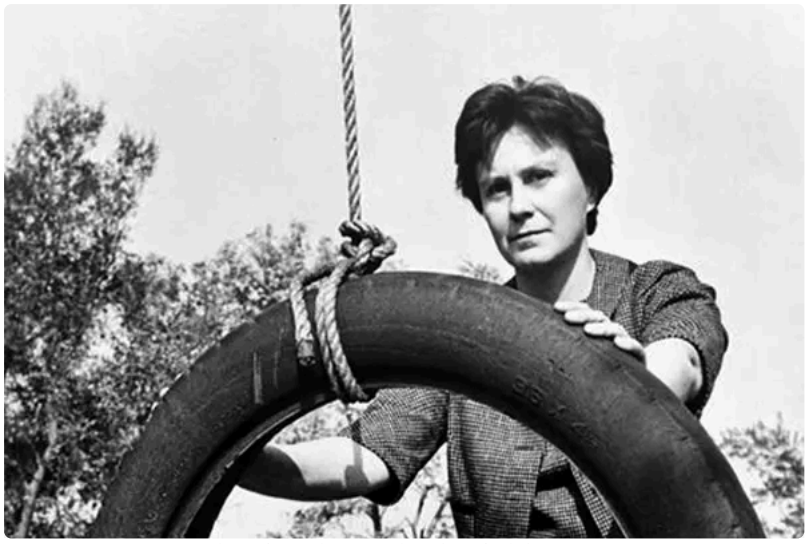

Harper Lee in 1961. Photo from the Encyclopedia of Alabama.

The American reading public, which waited decades for crumbs from Harper Lee's table, has reason to celebrate. "The Land of Sweet Forever," produced posthumously amid concerns about her consent, arrives not as the cynical exploitation I feared but as a genuine literary milestone: eight short stories and eight essays that illuminate the corners of a singular American sensibility.

The essays, previously published separately, are now assembled, including a warm tribute to Truman Capote that first appeared in 1966. The stories, discovered in Lee's New York apartment, appear in print for the first time and prove that even Lee's apprentice work bears the mark of genuine talent.

"To Kill a Mockingbird" exploded onto the scene in 1960 with the force of revelation, becoming one of those rare novels that actually deserved its canonical status. Scout Finch entered our national consciousness as a fully realized character whose moral education reflected that of many readers. The

novel succeeded because Lee understood what other writers do not: that childhood perception and adult reality exist in productive tension, and that the South was neither cartoon villainy nor magnolia-scented nostalgia but something more complex.

When "Go Set a Watchman" appeared in 2015, the pearl-clutchers went into paroxysms of dismay. How dare Lee complicate Atticus Finch! How dare she suggest that our saint had Citizens' Council sympathies! But anyone who thought Maycomb was paradise had been reading carelessly. This was a town where lynch mobs materialized on courthouse steps, where the Klan paid social calls, where a black man's word meant nothing against white testimony, where women couldn't serve on juries, where an innocent man could be shot "escaping" and everyone knew it was murder.

Lee wasn't betraying her creation with "Watchman"; she was showing us what had been there all along, visible to anyone willing to see beyond Scout's child-eyes to the ugly machinery beneath.

I've written (http://storysouth.com/stories/harper-lee-and-words-left-behind/) before about my grandfather's Monroeville ties and how Lee transformed Alabama's reality into the fictional Maycomb (referred to as "Maiben County" in one story here). Lee was never a fantasist; she was a realist working in a tradition that extends from Mark Twain through Eudora Welty, writers who understood that, in the American South, violence and gentility, beauty and brutality, existed not in opposition but in intimate embrace.

Casey Cep provides the introduction. Anyone familiar with her superb "Furious Hours" knows we're in capable hands. She's now at work on the authorized biography of Lee, a project that promises to be definitive. Based on my interactions with her at the Mississippi Book Festival some years ago, I sense she recognizes what many biographers overlook: that living quietly and privately, as Lee did, doesn't mean lacking personality; rather, it can be a unique expression of eloquence.

These stories merit consideration precisely because they show Lee learning her craft, finding her voice, and testing material that would eventually crystallize into her masterwork. These narratives should not be regarded as juvenilia in a pejorative sense because, on the contrary, they represent the considered experimentation of a dedicated artist exploring the possibilities of fiction.

Lee had that rarest of gifts: an ear for authentic Southern idioms and an eye for telling details. Even in these earlier efforts, she wrestles with how to render a setting that was simultaneously her home and her subject of critique. She loved the South – one cannot read her work and doubt that – but she loved it clear-eyed, without the sentimentality that has ruined lesser fiction.

The literary establishment has often been suspicious of success, as if popularity necessarily implies compromise. But Lee's achievement was to write what could be read by high school students and sophisticated critics alike, serving as both moral instruction and literary art.

"The Land of Sweet Forever" does what posthumous collections should: it deepens our appreciation without diminishing the original accomplishment. We behold Lee more fully now, as a writer engaged in a lifetime's work of understanding her region and country. That much of her lifestyle remained private, that she refused to perform the role of Great American Author, makes these glimpses all the more valuable.

Lee earned her place in American letters not through quantity but through the unwavering quality of her timely and timeless vision. This compilation suggests she had more to say than we knew, and that what she had to say remains worth our attention.

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