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# Book Review: The Novel We Deserve

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# The Novel We Deserve

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Harper Lee, *Go Set a Watchman: A Novel* (HarperCollins, 2015).

At the moment I write this, Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman*, is sitting at number two on the *New York Times* Best Sellers List, a dip from the number-one spot it occupied since its publication in July. I write with some certainty that by the time this review comes to print anyone who has interest in reading *Watchman* will have done so—a relief, since I have no desire to ruin it for any would-be reader, particularly those for whom, out of a deep nostalgia for Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Watchman* is the reading event of the year.

I will confess, at the outset, I am not a true believer. The worth of *Mockingbird* is an argument I have over and over with my best friend, a woman who became a lawyer due, in part, to Atticus Finch. She sees it as a compelling story about good people doing right in the face of an ever-present evil. Many other readers believe some version of that as well. I, though, think the original story is bulky and saccharine. So read on knowing that fact.

I could barely stand to finish *Watchman*. There's not enough story for me and too many speeches. There is also a nearly useless, sort of love story that never really starts and never really ends. There are some early passages that remind me of the nostalgia and longing for something gone that *Mockingbird* managed, but that disappears as we move, as readers, to the matter at hand—Scout's, not even Scout anymore, but Jean Louise Finch's return to her home, Maycomb, Alabama, from her life in New York City. Once back in town, Jean Louise is confronted with the truth that her father, Atticus, her

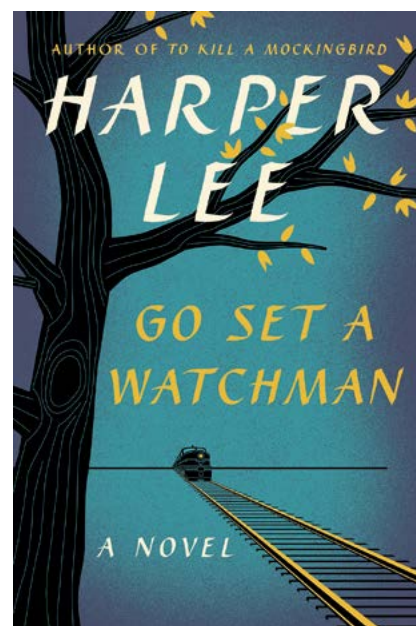
hero as well as ours, turns out to be a racist. Apparently, all those years ago, when, as Scout, Jean Louise watched her father defend an innocent black man against a rape charge (the central story of *Mockingbird* here rendered to a few lines), he wasn't doing it because he believed it was the right thing to do. Atticus defended the man out of respect for the law. Citing Thomas Jefferson, Atticus believes that the black citizens of Maycomb are not yet ready for the freedoms and duties of full citizenship.

The sense of betrayal Jean Louise feels in *Watchman* is nothing compared, it seems, to what readers of *Watchman* experience, but sequels sometimes betray our great hopes and desires for the characters we love. Jean Louise eventually determines that there is no longer any place for her in Maycomb, and she bundles herself back to New York City, reconciled to, if disillusioned with, Atticus. We might be meant to see the Atticus of *Watchman* as the old, dying guard (Atticus suffers from rheumatoid arthritis in the story), and that Jean Louise is the new, bright

guard—twice in the novel her character is described as “seeing no color.”

More compelling to me than the reveal of Atticus's true nature is the reveal of the true nature of the relationship between Jean Louise and the now retired Calpurnia—the black housekeeper who raised Scout. In the context of the very light story, one of Calpurnia's sons hits a drunk, white resident of Maycomb, killing him. Atticus intends to defend Cal's son but only in order to keep the NAACP from stepping in to do the job and, in the process, bring the civil rights movement to Maycomb. While no more comes of that plot, it serves to reunite Jean Louise with Cal. When Cal reacts to Jean Louise's overtures of sympathy and support with cool formality, the story feels most true. It's nonsense for Jean Louise to see no color in Maycomb, and Cal knows it. Reading *Watchman* in 2015, we do too.

In that way, the novel is also strangely and sadly of the moment—a year after Michael Brown and Ferguson, and in the face of the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, a list that grows too long. Here we are in the midst of #BlackLivesMatter. And there is old



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Atticus talking states' rights and some weird, screwed-up noblesse oblige that sounds like it could come out of the mouth of one of the people currently running for the presidency. The Jean Louises of the world seem not to have caught hold.

The promise of Atticus in *Mockingbird* came to a particularly ugly end this summer in *Watchman*, just as so many white readers are realizing that our America is not the America we imagined it to be for our fellow black and brown citizens. It's a time of disillusionment, a long time coming, all the way around.

I have read, and perhaps with more interest and greater attention, all the matter surrounding *Watchman*. I was unsurprised to read in *The New York Times*, upon the novel's publication, about the role Lee's editor, Therese von Hohoff Torrey, played in bringing *Mockingbird* into being. A great editor

can do quite a lot for a writer with the invisible, potent hand of good readership: they find the story the author meant to tell and generously help them to tell it. Embedded in the middle of *Watchman*, soon after Jean Louise has made her discovery of Atticus's betrayal, she slips into a daydream of Jem (who is dead before *Watchman* begins) and Dill (who has long since left Maycomb). In the novel itself, it's a bizarre and incongruous divergence, but any reader will see in it the seeds of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In the end, having finally, finally read the novel, the long-awaited, desperately anticipated novel, I can say that I believe that *Mockingbird* is the story Lee wanted to tell, but *Watchman* might be the novel we deserve.

I cannot recommend *Watchman* to anyone, most of all to those who know and love *Mockingbird*. But more than any sympathy for the reader I might have,

I feel badly for Harper Lee. We could not simply leave her and her legacy be. And now look what we've done: we'll never read or think about Lee as a writer in the same way again. Atticus once explained to Scout, "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy . . . they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." A lesson the reading public didn't learn. But, having read *Go Set A Watchman*, I find myself caught up by a different and more brutal truth: we are complicit in the landscape that gave us, in one criminally hot summer, *Go Set A Watchman* and a public unhappy to read it for the truths a dug-up draft of a novel from the past tells us about ourselves now.



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