



Who Was Atticus Finch?

BY TALMAGE BOSTON

Fifty years ago, first-time author Harper Lee threw a 320-page stone into the ocean of literature, setting off a tidal wave that reverberates to this day. On July 11, 1960, Philadelphia-based publisher J.P. Lippincott released *To Kill a Mockingbird* to critical acclaim and a place atop the bestseller list, where it would stay for 80 weeks.

Lee's book won the Pulitzer Prize in 1961, became the subject of a successful movie that opened in December 1962 (with Gregory Peck in his only Academy Award-winning role), and sold more than 30 million copies in more than 40 languages, making it one of the 10 bestselling novels of all time.

In addition to the novel's commercial success, the character of Atticus Finch, through Lee's writing and Peck's acting, has pointed generations toward the goal of becoming lawyers — not just run-of-the-mill lawyers, but lawyers aspiring to serve the bar with Atticus-like integrity, professionalism, and courage.

Question: Was Atticus Finch purely a creature of Harper Lee's imagination or was he a real person thinly disguised under a fictional name?

Answer: The latter.

AMASA LEE AS ATTICUS; HARPER LEE AS SCOUT

Shortly after the publication of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee acknowledged that Atticus Finch was essentially a favorably fictionalized version of her father, Amasa Coleman Lee, who married Francis Cunningham Finch. In one of her inter-

views shortly after the publication of the novel, Lee said she portrayed Atticus exactly as she thought of her father — a man “who has genuine humility and a natural dignity. He has absolutely no ego drive, and so he is one of the most beloved men in this part of the state.”

Named by Lee after Cicero's friend, Titus Pomponius Atticus, who the author deemed “a wise, learned, and humane man,” Atticus and Amasa match up in the following respects:

- Both were small-town lawyers in Alabama who served in the state legislature.
- Both had children who called them by their first name.
- Both were effectively single-parent mentors to their children. Atticus' wife died when his children were young; Amasa's wife suffered from a mental illness that rendered her homebound and speechless when her children were young, disconnecting her from the family until her death in 1951.



- Both served as counsel to African-American defendants accused of committing felonies against white citizens in highly publicized small-town trials in Alabama. Despite their best efforts, their clients were found guilty by all-white juries, resulting in what proved to be death sentences.
- Both had the courage to stare down racist threats and stand up for the rights of African Americans in a segregated society.

If Amasa Lee became Atticus Finch, then Nelle Harper Lee¹ (born in 1926) portrayed herself as *Mockingbird*'s protagonist, Jean Louise "Scout" Finch — a pre-adolescent tomboy in the 1930s, raised by a father, without maternal affection, who learned to read while sitting on her dad's lap in a small Alabama town where wild dogs sometimes roamed the streets and a belligerent old woman sat on her front porch and screamed at children passing by. Like Scout, the author enjoyed the company of a peculiar summertime friend (Lee's childhood friend, Truman Capote, became *Mockingbird*'s Dill Harris), and was intrigued by a young man on her street mysteriously imprisoned in his own home (Lee's neighbor, Son Boleware, became *Mockingbird*'s Boo Radley).

The fictional characters of Maycomb, Ala., during the Great Depression became real to *Mockingbird*'s readers because the book was based on real people who lived in the real town of Monroeville, Ala., during the Great Depression. Bestselling author Pat Conroy says of the characters who inhabit his hometown of Charleston, S.C., in his new novel, *South of Broad* (Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2009), that "somewhere between 19-27 percent of what a storyteller says is true, and then you start adding things." *Mockingbird* seems to have increased these percentages substantially. The details of Harper and Amasa Lee's lives show that much of *Mockingbird* is essentially true, at least through the author's eyes. Writing a book 20 years after her childhood, she described what she had seen, felt, and remembered about the people and events in her small, racially segregated, economically depressed hometown.

ATTICUS' DEMONSTRATION OF WHAT TO DO IN AND OUT OF THE COURTROOM

The statements and accounts of what Atticus Finch said and did throughout *Mockingbird* establish a Lincolnesque persona in the midst of a volatile, racially torn, small-town society capable of giving only lip service to the concept of equal justice for all. Accused of raping a white adolescent in 1935, Finch's African-American client, Tom Robinson, was not lynched by an angry mob, as he might have been had the alleged crime taken place in the 19th century. Instead, Robinson received a jury trial in a courtroom aided by his court-appointed lawyer, Finch, who, perhaps uncharacteristically for the time, gave the case his best effort. Despite Robinson's attorney's stellar defense and evidence that established the defendant's innocence, the trial's outcome was determined before it began. Because Robinson was black, his alleged victim was white, and everyone on the jury was white, a "guilty" verdict was inevitably reached.

Atticus Finch has made a lasting impression on generations of readers and moviegoers. Embracing daily living with the highest integrity, and making the legal profession appear as a career calling of the highest order, Atticus caused many to join the profession, inspired by the following words and deeds:

- **He recognizes that a lawyer has a responsibility to serve those who can't afford to pay.** Early in the book, Scout observes her dad giving valuable counsel to Walter Cunningham, a man caught in an "entailment" at a time when he was barely able to scratch an existence off the land to support his family. When Cunningham ashamedly says, "Mr. Finch, I don't know when I'll ever be able to pay you," Atticus replies, "Let that be the least of your worries, Walter."
- **He pursues compromise as a means of resolving disputes.** When Scout's first-grade teacher orders her to stop reading at home because her father has "taught [her] all wrong," the upset young girl goes home and announces her intention to stop going to school. Atticus immediately comes up with a solution to address the problem: "Do you



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know what a compromise is, Scout? It's an agreement reached by mutual consensus. It works this way. If you'll concede the necessity of going to school, we'll go on reading every night just as we always have. Is it a bargain?"

- **He understands the importance of empathy.** After Scout complains about her teacher's draconian perspective on reading, Atticus consoles her by offering wisdom about a better way to deal with people: "If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view — until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

Later in the book, Atticus shows super-human empathy for Bob Ewell, father of Tom Robinson's alleged rape victim, who spits in Atticus' face after being humiliated throughout the trial by testimony suggesting it was Ewell (not Tom Robinson) who attacked his own daughter. Atticus explains to Scout how he managed not to retaliate after getting hit by Ewell's exhortation: "See if you can stand in Bob Ewell's shoes a minute. I destroyed his last shred of credibility at that trial, if he had any to begin with. The man had to have some kind of comeback. His kind always does. ... He had to take it out on somebody and I'd rather it be me than that houseful of children out there."

- **He stands for the proposition that the American legal system should be colorblind, and that a lawyer has a moral responsibility to work toward achieving that result.** When Scout questions her dad about why he agreed to represent Tom Robinson, Atticus replies, "I'm taking the case for a number of reasons, but the main one is, if I didn't, I couldn't hold up my head in town. I couldn't represent this county in the legislature. I couldn't even tell you not to do something. By the nature of the work, every lawyer gets at least one case in his lifetime that affects him personally. This one's mine, honey."
- **Though he knows the system of trial by jury isn't perfect, Atticus Finch reveres the jury's esteemed place in the American system.** In his closing argument at the trial of Tom Robinson, Finch gives his version of the Gettysburg Address about what our judicial system is supposed to be for everyone who goes to trial or appeals a matter in the United States:

But there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal — there is one human institution that makes a pauper the equal of a Rockefeller, the stupid man the equal of an Einstein, and the ignorant man the equal of any college president. That institution, gentlemen, is a court. It can be the Supreme Court of the United States or the humblest J.P. court in the land, or this honorable court which you serve. Our courts have their faults, as does any human institution, but in this country, our courts are the great levelers, and in our courts, all men are created equal.

I'm no idealist to believe firmly in the integrity of our courts and in the jury system — that is no ideal to me, it is a living, working reality. Gentlemen, a court is no better than each man of you sitting before me on this jury. A court is only as sound as its jury, and a jury is only as sound as the men who make it up. I am confident that you gentlemen will review without passion the evidence you have heard, come to a decision, and restore this defendant to his family. In the name of God, do your duty.

- **He acknowledges the fallout when the system fails to dispense colorblind justice.** After the jury returns a "guilty" verdict despite clear evidence of the defendant's innocence, Scout and her brother, Jem, can't begin to process the trial's outcome, which provides Atticus the opportunity to give his children a big-picture perspective on racism and how it infects society when the judicial system fails to achieve justice:

The one place where a man ought to get a square deal is in a courtroom, be he any color of the rainbow, but people have a way of carrying their resentments right into a jury box. As you grow older, you'll see white men cheat black men every day of your life, but let me tell you something and don't you forget it. ... Whenever a white man does that to a black man, no matter who he is, how rich he is, or how fine a family he comes from, that white man is trash. There's nothing more sickening to me than a low-grade white man who will take advantage of a Negro's ignorance. Don't fool yourselves — it's all adding up and one of these days we're going to pay the bill for it. I hope it's not in you children's time.



AMASA AS ATTICUS

Could Amasa Lee have done what Atticus Finch did? Absolutely. We know from Charles J. Shields' superb (though unauthorized) biography *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee* (Henry Holt & Co., 2006) that Mr. Lee performed the following Atticus-like feats in Monroeville, Ala., when the need arose for a lawyer to stand tall on high moral ground:

- In 1919, after he had practiced law for only four years, Amasa was appointed by the district judge in Monroeville to serve as the lawyer for two black men accused of murdering a white storekeeper. Amasa Lee gave the case his best effort, but the all-white jury returned a “guilty” verdict, and both defendants were hanged. Scout (i.e., Harper Lee) mentions this situation early in *Mockingbird*: “His first two clients were the last two persons hanged in the Maycomb County jail. ... Atticus was present at their departure, an occasion that was probably the beginning of my father’s profound distaste for the practice of criminal law.”
- Over a nine-month period, from November 1933 to July 1934, establishing a set of facts essentially identical to those of Tom Robinson, a black man named Walter Lett was arrested and later put on trial in the Monroeville County Courthouse and convicted by an all-white jury for allegedly raping a white woman, despite strong evidence of the accused’s innocence. Amasa Lee wasn’t appointed to represent Mr. Lett, but as the editor and publisher of the town’s newspaper, the *Monroe Journal*, he followed the case closely from the night of the reported rape through the trial’s end, which was the talk of the town at a time when Harper Lee was eight years old. Amasa likely spoke to his children about the Lett case. From his perspective, our fine American judicial system clearly had a notable flaw — it was no better than the judges and jurors who served it, many of whom had perspectives clouded by racial prejudice. Though the jury found Walter Lett “guilty,” and the judge sentenced him to death, the Alabama Board of Pardons reduced the sentence to life imprisonment, acting at the behest of a letter-writing campaign from “many leading citizens of Monroe County” (perhaps led by Amasa Lee), who felt the evidence had not established the defendant’s guilt.

Walter Lett’s reduced punishment is reminiscent of the moral victory in Tom Robinson’s trial, when Atticus’ closing argument caused the jury deliberations to last much longer than expected. The Finches’ neighbor down the street, Maudie Atkinson, explains to Scout why the Tom Robinson trial, despite the “guilty” verdict, gives hope to some in the Maycomb community: “We’re so rarely called on to be Christians, but when we are, we’ve got men like Atticus to go for us. ... As I waited I thought, Atticus

Finch won’t win, he can’t win, but he’s the only man in these parts who can keep a jury out so long in a case like that. And I thought to myself, well, we’re making a step — it’s just a baby-step, but it’s a step.” The reduction of Walter Lett’s sentence from the electric chair to life imprisonment was a similar “baby-step” for racial justice in Alabama.

- In August 1934, shortly after Walter Lett’s death sentence had been reduced to life imprisonment, Amasa came down off his front porch, confronted the Grand Dragon of the local Ku Klux Klan, and ultimately persuaded him to stop his 100 followers’ militant posturing as they walked down the street. Amasa’s act of courage surely inspired the scene in *Mockingbird* where Atticus faced down the racist mob who arrived at the Maycomb jailhouse the night before the start of Tom Robinson’s trial and sought unsuccessfully to impose their own punishment (and probable lynching) on the defendant. In both instances, one lawyer’s courage defused an angry, potentially murderous crowd.

THE AFTERMATH AND IMPACT OF *MOCKINGBIRD*

Harper Lee withdrew from public life in the mid-1960s. She wearied (understandably) of hearing the question asked again and again, “When will you write another book?” Though she intended to write another one, and worked hard to produce it, a second book never came to fruition. At the age of 74, Lee privately answered the public’s unrelenting question by saying that with *Mockingbird*’s execution and publication, “I said what I had to say.”

For the epigraph that precedes her book, Lee chose a quote from 19th century British writer Charles Lamb. In looking back from his adult vantage to his childhood past, Lamb said something that resonated with Lee, “Lawyers, I suppose, were children once.” *To Kill a Mockingbird* has caused generations of children to look forward and dream of becoming lawyers — not just average lawyers, but lawyers of unimpeachable integrity with an unrelenting focus on achieving true justice.

NOTES

1. Throughout her life in all social situations, the author has been called by her first name, and used her middle name only when she wrote for publication.

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is a shareholder in Winstead, P.C. in Dallas. He is a member of the State Bar of Texas Board of Directors and the 2010 Annual Meeting Committee, which helped to plan the “Atticus Finch and Ethics” program. Boston had his Atticus Finch moment in the third grade.