

# In A Nutshell

If you're going to write a one-hit wonder you couldn't do much better than *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Winning the **Pulitzer Prize in 1961**, it's never been out of print, it leads at least one list of **top-whatever books**, and it's been a staple of middle- and high-school English classes for generations.

In fact, we're guessing that might be what brought you here.

The story of a young girl confronting deep-seated prejudice (assumption that is not based on reason), it pits a six-year-old Scout Finch and her (relatively) anti-racist family against the segregation of an American South in the grip of **Jim Crow**. Author **Harper Lee** drew on her own childhood experience for the events of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. More than one critic has noticed some similarities between Scout and Lee herself—and between Scout's friend Dill and Lee's own childhood friend, **Truman Capote**. Like Scout, Lee's father was an attorney who defended black men accused of crimes; like Scout, Lee had a brother four years older.

But Lee has said that the novel wasn't intended to be autobiography—she was just trying to write what she knew. Full of historical detail from the pre-**Civil Rights Movement** era, the novel may even have been influenced by the **Scottsboro Trials** of the 1930s, in which two poor white women accused nine young black men of rape. Makes sense: that's exactly the accusation Scout's father Atticus ends up defending.

It's hard to argue with *To Kill a Mockingbird's* message of standing up for what's right even when the costs are high. But not everyone agrees that the book holds the moral high ground. While the main reason it frequently appears on lists of banned books is its use of profanity, it's also been challenged for its one-dimensional representation of African-Americans as docile, simple folk who need whites to protect them. Some people see the novel as taking a powerful stand against racism. Others just see it as promoting a kinder, gentler form of racism.

So, which is it? You'll just have to read it and decide for yourself.

## Why Should I Care?

Stop us if you've heard this one before: Life isn't fair.

If you're like us, your eyes probably rolled back into your head so far that you hurt yourself. Yeah, we've heard this before, usually from some smug adult. And the reason it burns our britches so much isn't because it's not true, but because the unsaid, second part of the saying isn't, "... but it should be, so let's get working on that," but rather, "... and that's the way grown-ups roll, so man (or woman) up and deal, kid."

*To Kill a Mockingbird* portrays a society that is supremely, staggeringly unfair: the U.S. South in the 1930s in a small town where racism is part of the very fabric of society. Faced with this situation, an equality-minded person might be tempted to say, "Ugh, just wake me up when the **Civil Rights Movement** gets here," and keep his or her head down until then.

Some people in the novel do just that. But a few decide to take action on the side of justice and equality, even though they think it's mostly hopeless. *To Kill a Mockingbird* doesn't sugarcoat the results (minor spoiler: the book does not end with everyone holding hands and singing "**It's a Small World**"). It does, however, suggest that doing something to make life a little more fair, even if it seems like it's not having any effect, is still worthwhile, and what's more, admirable.

And that's worth caring about.

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