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Facts about Harper Lee and *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Did you know that:

Nelle's name is her grandmother Ellen's name spelled backwards?

She is a Taurus—her birthday is April 28, 1926. She is 88 years old and lived most of her life with her sister, Alice, in Monroeville, Alabama. Alice practiced law until 2011. She retired at age 99.

To Kill a Mockingbird won the Pulitzer Prize in 1961. She was 35 years old at the time. In 2007 she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President George W. Bush.

Growing up in the home of a lawyer, it is likely that Harper Lee heard a great deal about the trial of the Scottsboro Boys in 1931. Nine African-American men were accused of raping two white women on a train. The case caused a national uproar, and parallels to the case can be seen in the fictional case of Tom Robinson. You can learn more about the case in the documentary *Scottsboro: An American Tragedy*.

A.C. Lee, Nelle's father, was a lawyer. He lost a case in which a black father and son were accused of murdering a white store clerk. They were convicted by an all-white jury. He became a title attorney shortly thereafter.

Truman Capote, Lee's childhood friend, published an autobiographical novel called *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, which features a tomboyish character named Isabel who is based on Harper Lee. Dill from *To Kill a Mockingbird* is based on Truman.

Frustrated and furious with her novel's lack of progress, Lee opened a window in her New York apartment and hurled the draft of her manuscript out into the snow. She called her editor, Tay Hohoff of J.B. Lippincott Company, who ordered her to retrieve the materials immediately.

Truman Capote asked Harper Lee to accompany him on a trip to the small town of Holcomb, Kansas in 1959 to investigate the recent murder of a wealthy family under mysterious circumstances. It didn't take long for Capote to discover that his companion had a much easier time talking to the locals, an ability which proved invaluable to his efforts. Lee was so dedicated to the case that she not only wrote 150 pages of notes for Capote, but also took a weeklong vacation during the pre-production of *To Kill a Mockingbird's* film adaptation to rejoin him in Kansas so they might further examine the suspects. Truman's bestselling account of the incident, *In Cold Blood*, became an instant sensation.

In 1966, a Virginia school board banned *To Kill a Mockingbird* from their libraries, citing the book as "immoral." Outraged, Lee wrote a fiery letter to the *Richmond News Leader* condemning the group's actions. "Recently," she asserted, "I have received echoes down this way of the Hanover County School Board's activities, and what I've heard makes me wonder if any of its members can read." Lee went on to compare the officials in question to Orwellian dictators and capped off her epic condemnation providing "a small contribution ... that I hope will be used to enroll the Hanover County School Board in any first grade of its choice."

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