



# Harper Lee biography

## SYNOPSIS

Writer Harper Lee was born on April 28, 1926, in Monroeville, Alabama. In 1959 she finished the manuscript her Pulitzer Prize-winning best-seller *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Soon after, she helped fellow-writer and friend [Truman Capote](#) write an article for *The New Yorker* which would later evolve into his nonfiction masterpiece, *In Cold Blood*. Lee's second novel was never published.

## EARLY LIFE

Writer. Born Nelle Harper Lee on April 28, 1926, in Monroeville, Alabama. Lee Harper is best known for writing the Pulitzer Prize-winning best-seller *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960)—her one and only novel. The youngest of four children, she grew up as a tomboy in a small town. Her father was a lawyer, a member of the Alabama state legislature, and also owned part of the local newspaper. For most of Lee's life, her mother suffered from mental illness, rarely leaving the house. It is believed that she may have had bipolar disorder.

One of her closest childhood friends was another writer-to-be, [Truman Capote](#) (then known as Truman Persons). Tougher than many of the boys, Lee often stepped up to serve as Truman's protector. Truman, who shared few interests with boys his age, was picked on for being a sissy and for the fancy clothes he wore. While the two friends were very different, they both shared in having difficult home lives. Truman was living with his mother's relatives in town after largely being abandoned by his own parents.

In high school, Lee developed an interest in English literature. After graduating in 1944, she went to the all-female Huntingdon College in Montgomery. Lee stood apart from the other students—she could have cared less about fashion, makeup, or dating. Instead, she focused on her studies and on her writing. Lee was a member of the literary honor society and the glee club.

## ASPIRING WRITER

Transferring to the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, Lee was known for being a loner and an individualist. She did make a greater attempt at a social life there, joining a sorority for a while. Pursuing her interest in writing, Lee contributed to the school's newspaper and its humor magazine, the *Rammer Jammer*. She eventually became the editor of the *Rammer Jammer*.

In her junior year, Lee was accepted into the university's law school, which allowed students to work on law degrees while still undergraduates. The demands of her law studies forced her to leave her post as editor of the *Rammer Jammer*. After her first year in the law program, Lee began expressing to her family that writing—not the law—was her true calling. She went to Oxford University in England that summer as an exchange student. Returning to her law studies that fall, Lee dropped out after the first semester. She soon moved to New York City to follow her dreams to become a writer.

In 1949, a 23-year-old Lee arrived in New York City. She struggled for several years, working as a ticket agent for Eastern Airlines and for the British Overseas Air Corp (BOAC). While in the city, Lee was reunited with old friend [Truman Capote](#), one of the literary rising stars of the time.

She also befriended Broadway composer and lyricist Michael Martin Brown and his wife Joy.

In 1956, the Browns gave Lee an impressive Christmas present—to support her for a year so that she could write full time. She quit her job and devoted herself to her craft. The Browns also helped her find an agent, Maurice Crain. He, in turn, was able to get the publishing firm interested in her first novel, which was first titled *Go Set a Watchman*, then *Atticus*, and later *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Working with editor Tay Hohoff, Lee finished the manuscript in 1959.

## WORK WITH TRUMAN CAPOTE

Later that year, Lee joined forces with old friend Truman Capote to assist him with an article he was writing for *The New Yorker*. Capote was writing about the impact of the murder of four members of the Clutter family on their small Kansas farming community. The two traveled to Kansas to interview townspeople, friends and family of the deceased, and the investigators working to solve the crime. Serving as his research assistant, Lee helped with the interviews, eventually winning over some of the locals with her easy-going, unpretentious manner. Truman, with his flamboyant personality and style, also had a hard time initially getting himself into his subjects' good graces.

During their time in Kansas, the Clutters's suspected killers, Richard Hickock and Perry Smith, were caught in Las Vegas and brought back for questioning. Lee and Capote got a chance to interview the suspects not long after their arraignment in January 1960. Soon after, Lee and Capote returned to New York. She worked on the galley for her forthcoming first novel while he started working on his article, which would evolve into the nonfiction masterpiece, *In Cold Blood*. The pair returned to Kansas in March for the murder trial.

## QUICK FACTS

**NAME:** Harper [Lee](#)

**OCCUPATION:** [Author](#)

**BIRTH DATE:** [April 28, 1926](#) (Age: 87)

**EDUCATION:** [Huntington College](#), [University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa](#), [Oxford University](#)

**PLACE OF BIRTH:** [Monroeville, Alabama](#)

**FULL NAME:** Nelle Harper Lee

**ZODIAC SIGN:** [Taurus](#)

## BEST KNOWN FOR

Harper Lee is best known for writing the Pulitzer Prize-winning best-seller *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960)—her one and only published novel.

Later that spring, Lee gave Capote all of her notes on the crime, the victims, the killers, the local communities, and much more.

## TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

Soon Lee was engrossed in her literary success story. In July 1960, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published and picked up by the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Literary Guild. A condensed version of the story appeared in *Reader's Digest* magazine. The work's central character, a young girl nicknamed Scout, was not unlike Lee in her youth. In one of the book's major plotlines, Scout and her brother Jem and their friend Dill explore their fascination with a mysterious and somewhat infamous neighborhood character named Boo Radley. But the work was more than a coming-of-age story, however. Another part of the novel reflected racial prejudices in the South. Their attorney father, Atticus Finch, tries to help a black man who has been charged with raping a white woman to get a fair trial and to prevent him from being lynched by angry whites in a small town.

The following year, *To Kill a Mockingbird* won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize and several other literary awards. Horton Foote wrote a screenplay based on the book and used the same title for the 1962 film adaptation.

Lee visited the set during filming and did a lot of interviews to support the film. Earning eight Academy Award nominations, the movie version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* won four awards, including Best Actor for Gregory Peck's portrayal of Atticus Finch. The character of Atticus is said to have been based on Lee's father.

## LATER YEARS

By the mid-1960s, Lee was reportedly working on a second novel, but it was never published. Continuing to help Capote, Lee worked with him on and off on *In Cold Blood*. She had been invited by Smith and Hickock to witness their execution in 1965, but she declined. When Capote's book was finally published in 1966, a rift developed between the two friends and collaborators. Capote dedicated the book to Lee and to his longtime lover Jack Dunphy, but he failed to acknowledge her contributions to the work. While Lee was very angry and hurt by this betrayal, she remained friends with Truman for the rest of his life.

That same year, Lee had an operation on her hand to repair damage done by a bad burn. She also accepted a post on the National Council of the Arts at the request of President Lyndon B. Johnson. During the 1970s and 1980s, Lee largely retreated from public life.

She spent some of her time on a nonfiction book project about an Alabama serial killer, which had the working title *The Reverend*. But the work was never published.

Lee continues to live a quiet, private life in New York City and Monroeville. Active in her church and community, she usually avoids anything to do with her still popular novel.

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### How to Cite this Page:

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##### MLA Style

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##### MHRA Style

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##### Chicago Style

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