ATTICUS REVISITED

In Search of Atticus Finch

BY CHIP BABCOCK

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Atticus Finch, who sometimes went by the name of Gregory Peck, was not a litigator. In fact, “he had a profound distaste for the practice of criminal law” and made a living mostly on people’s “entailments” and making “somebody’s will so airtight can’t anybody mess with it.” HARPER LEE, TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD at 22, 104 (35th Anniversary ed., Harper Collins 1995) (1960).

But in a small town like Maycomb, Alabama, in the early 1930s, a lawyer handled what there was. And one day Judge Taylor came calling with a request familiar to most trial lawyers. “I know you’re busy and the children need your time but . . .” Would Atticus consider an appointment to defend an African American man, Tom Robinson, who was accused of raping a white woman?

The movie version of the book To Kill a Mockingbird captures in Atticus’s face the conflict we all feel about doing one’s duty measured against the toll such a case will take on us and our families. After a few seconds’ hesitation Finch tells the judge, “I’ll take the case.”

As he explained later to his young daughter Jean Louise, Scout as she was known, he accepted the representation for a number of reasons. “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 (or your brother) not to do something again,” he said. Id. at 86.

Litigators are aware that “simply by the nature of the work, every lawyer gets at least one case in his lifetime that affects him personally,” Atticus, a single parent, told his young daughter. “This one’s mine I guess.”

Most of us know the rest of the To Kill a Mockingbird story. Atticus and his children battle racial slurs and physical assault, Tom Robinson is convicted but the jury is, remarkably, out several hours because Atticus has tried a great case. The author, Harper Lee, wins a Pulitzer Prize, Gregory Peck receives an Academy Award as best actor. People name their babies Atticus.

And then this summer Mockingbird’s sequel, Go Set a Watchman, was published. The book follows Scout 20 years later, after she has moved to New York but returns home to visit Atticus. Watchman was met with outrage; not the literary sort (although there was that) but violent reaction to the critics’ perception that Atticus is revealed as a “white supremacist” (Literary Review), “a bigot” (New York Times), and “a reactionary extremist . . . who joined the Ku Klux Klan” (NPR). It is as if the vast readership of Mockingbird, or at least the critics, felt that they have been fooled and betrayed.

Atticus Finch is not who they thought he was. Quick, let’s rename the babies!

Not so fast. The Atticus Finch of Mockingbird, for me anyway, is the same man in both books—worthy of admiration despite his flaws. In measuring the true character of Atticus Finch, one should start with the premise that, as the song from the Broadway musical Avenue Q says, “Everybody’s a Little Bit Racist.” What separates right thinking people from their opposites is an effort to overcome their prejudices.

One of my heroes growing up in the Deep South was Reuben Askew, a member of the Florida legislature and later one of its most admired and respected governors. Askew grew up in Pensacola, Florida, less than 200 miles south of Harper Lee’s home of Monroeville, Alabama, which served as the inspiration for the fictional Maycomb. Lee was born in 1926; the governor two years later. Askew’s wife’s maiden name was Harper.

While running for the Florida legislature in 1958, the year when Harper Lee was purportedly writing Watchman and, in fact, composing Mockingbird, Askew was confronted by a heckler who yelled out “You’re a n***** lover,” to which the candidate replied, “Yes I hope so . . . the trouble is that I don’t love them enough. The difference between you and me is that you’re satisfied with your prejudices and I am trying to overcome mine.” Steve Bousquet, Former Florida Gov. Reuben Askew Dies at 85, MIAMI HERALD, March 13, 2014, www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/article1961313.html.

Atticus held to the same creed.

After Scout was taunted at school about her father being a n***** lover, she asked him, “you aren’t really a n*****-lover, then, are you?” to which he replied, “I certainly am. I do my best to love everybody[…]” MOCKINGBIRD, supra, at 124. Atticus tried to overcome his prejudices, as all right-thinking people do. By Governor Askew’s standards, he may have fallen short. By today’s
standards, he certainly did. But measured against his times, his actions in both *Mockingbird* and *Watchman* speak louder than the words of white supremacy he spoke to Scout near the end of the second book, set in the early 1950s.

The people who put Atticus on a pedestal after *Mockingbird* raised him too high, and those who attack his character after *Watchman* set him too low. As one reviewer noted, “*Watchman* tells the painful but necessary truth about white racism in 1950s Alabama and in white America generally today, and it offers a bitter but timely dose of disillusion about racial progress and comforting fiction.” Elaine Showalter, *Death of a Mockingbird*, *Literary Review* (August 23, 2015), https://literaryreview.co.uk/death-of-a-mockingbird.

The Atticus Finch of most people’s mind’s eye after *Mockingbird* was fiction. *Watchman* administers a healthy dose of reality, but we should not discount the book because it tarnishes our idea of this American icon. And we should not be surprised that the man who raised his children to be unbiased, who was respectful to all people no matter their race, who opposed (not joined) the KKK, and who defended an innocent black man with all his considerable skill and passion did not completely escape the conventional social mores of his time. As one reviewer wrote: “Maybe *Watchman* really was a sequel—a follow-up by an author who learned more about the prospects of post-racial progress than she’d hoped to. If readers several decades ago weren’t ready for such honesty, perhaps they are now.” Sophie Gilbert, *Go Set A Watchman: What About Scout?*, *Atlantic* (July 17, 2015), www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/07/go-set-a-watchman-what-about-scout/398825./●