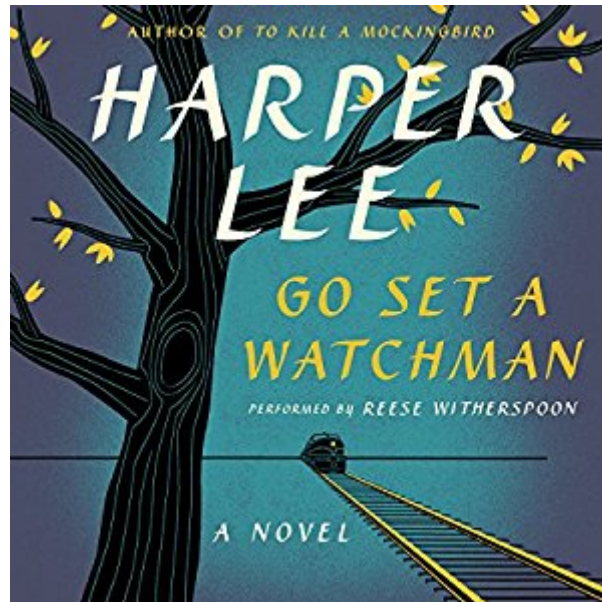




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Go Set A Watchman: A Novel



Synopsis

An historic literary event: the publication of a newly discovered novel, the earliest known work from Harper Lee, the beloved, best-selling author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Originally written in the mid-1950s, *Go Set a Watchman* was the novel Harper Lee first submitted to her publishers before *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Assumed to have been lost, the manuscript was discovered in late 2014. *Go Set a Watchman* features many of the characters from *To Kill a Mockingbird* some 20 years later. Returning home to Maycomb to visit her father, Jean Louise Finch - Scout - struggles with issues both personal and political, involving Atticus, society, and the small Alabama town that shaped her. Exploring how the characters from *To Kill a Mockingbird* are adjusting to the turbulent events transforming mid-1950s America, *Go Set a Watchman* casts a fascinating new light on Harper Lee's enduring classic. Moving, funny, and compelling, it stands as a magnificent novel in its own right.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

If "*Go Set a Watchman*" had been published before "*To Kill a Mockingbird*," it would have been meaningless. Tom Robinson's trial would be just a vague incident in the Jean Louise's memory instead of a culturally iconic scene. Atticus Finch would be his daughter's fallen hero, but not ours. If "*Watchman*" had been first, we would only know Atticus as a segregationist and we wouldn't care: he wouldn't have been an ethical role model and a hero. There would be references to Atticus's past and why Jean Louise's world is shaken when she finds out he is a segregationist, but we would not share them. Now, though, Jean Louise's (who I keep referring to as "Scout" out of habit) feelings of

betrayal are our own, as we can see by the collective Internet outrage. That's why "Watchman" works; that's why I have to give it four stars. "Watchman" is about fallen idols and disillusionment. Jean Louise tries to reconcile how moral paragon Atticus Finch could be racist, and that's what the readers have been trying to reconcile, as well. The press release for "Watchman" said, "[Jean Louise Finch] is forced to grapple with issues both personal and political as she tries to understand her father's attitude toward society, and her own feelings about the place where she was born and spent her childhood," which gave us a hint that the Atticus we knew--the infallible anti-racist crusader--would not be that way in "Watchman." The talk about "Watchman" tarnishing Lee's legacy contributed to that idea. Still, I dismissed this possibility until it was confirmed, and even then, I was in denial. When Scout finds out Atticus is attending segregationist citizens' council meetings, she thinks "[He was] pulling something, [he was] there merely to keep an eye on things," a thought that I hopefully and childishly had, as well. But the most painful thing is that this Atticus is still recognizably, unquestionably Atticus Finch. Some speculated that this first draft Atticus would be different enough as a character (beyond the obvious) that we could easily dismiss him as Not Atticus and the book as Not Canon. He is still a loving father, a good neighbor, endlessly reasonable, thoughtful, articulate, patient, wry, giving. Still, his portrayal in "Watchman" makes me uneasy. JK Rowling could, conceivably, write a Harry Potter sequel set twenty, thirty years in the future, where Harry, an Auror, gleefully casts the Cruciatus Curse against suspected magical wrong-doers on a regular basis. Could she explain how he became this way as he grew older while making it consistent with his character from the first seven books? I think so, but I wouldn't want to read that. On the bright side, Jean Louise Finch serves as a moral compass. Atticus taught her well. She challenges beliefs that she knows are wrong. Of course, by today's standards, some of the things she says are cringeworthy, but the point is, she is now the progressive heroine. She is not perfect, but she has potential to be better than her father and her hometown. We have hope that she will pick up where Atticus failed. She is also recognizably Scout Finch, the outspoken, precocious tomboy, but now she is twenty-six and still out of place in Maycomb. Jean Louise has been living in New York City, which contributes to the jarringness of her visit. She can't relate to the women of her town, their interests, or their views on race. And, of course, Aunt Alexandra is still on her case about her behavior and appearance. Other familiar faces include Aunt Alexandra, Uncle Jack (who takes a much more prominent role), and Calpurnia. Scout mentions that she still keeps in touch with Dill, who is exploring Italy, last she checked. Next to Atticus, the most disappointing news is that Jem died before "Watchman" begins. Henry Clinton is an important new character. He has been close to the Finches since, well, after the events of "Mockingbird." He became Atticus's

protege after Jem died. Jean Louise has a serious relationship with him at the beginning of the novel, but, like Atticus, he attends those awful citizens' council meetings, and her view of him is shaken. I wanted to hate this book, and I wanted to be angry at it. The controversy surrounding its release would be enough: the story behind its publication is shady, almost certainly achieved through underhanded means, and even buying the novel was a moral quandary. Unfortunately, the book is good, and its message--however painfully it hits--is important: heroes can fall and they should. Not only that, but it forces us to look at our own values and behaviors. Atticus Finch was a huge relief: a person, albeit fictional, that we could look up to. He embodied everything an ethical person should aspire to (at least, the memetic version of him did). Atticus became a literary saint. However, even "Mockingbird" shows cracks in the statue we've erected of Atticus Finch. He has always taken a paternalist stance towards black people, but the focus of "Mockingbird" was his fight for justice. His moving courtroom scene, his progressive parenting, and his countless other noble deeds overshadow small things like making Calpurnia enter through the back door. But this indicates that his conception of justice and equality is limited--not as limited as the rest of Maycomb, of course, but still limited--and that becomes the focal point of "Watchman." The hardest truth of "Watchman" is not that Atticus changed. It is that he was always like this. The question that Jean Louise/Scout and the readers have to answer is, What are we going to do to be better?

I came in skeptical, but I loved this novel for exactly what it is: a brilliantly written, beautiful southern novel about a young woman who discovers her father is not a god. And I'm angry that some pompous, patriarchal publisher squashed it and convinced her to write a brilliantly written, beautiful southern novel about a young woman who discovers her father is a god. WATCHMAN is about growing up, "killing the Buddha" and laying claim to one's own world view. I can certainly believe that this is Harper Lee's first novel. I totally understand why the editor buried it and encouraged her to bend her considerable talent to the concept of MOCKINGBIRD, latching onto a fairly insignificant anecdote and reframing it as the main plot thrust -- which also neatly swapped hero and heroine, making the star of the book a man instead of a young woman. Setting aside the suspicious circumstances of the magical appearance of WATCHMAN (and the buckets of money involved for the publisher and agent), I also totally get why Harper Lee might want us to have this novel now, at this point in her life. She is now where old Atticus is in WATCHMAN: an elderly person who is sick and tired of carrying the burden of our hero worship. So there. Take that. Eat your disillusionment and throw up behind the ice cream parlor that was once your childhood home. It hurts, and it infuriates, and it strips away your security blanket. Get over it. As an editor, I want to go back in time,

embrace this young author, force her to firmly look in my eyes, and tell her: "This is a wonderful book. And you must write another one and another and another, and every one of them should say exactly what you want to say." Yes, I love MOCKINGBIRD as much as the next book nerd, but it breaks my heart that -- no matter what we know/don't know about the publishing process -- the publisher took hold of a young woman who had astonishing lyrical skills, massive raw talent, insight that transcended her years, and literary chops that set her on a trajectory to eclipse Faulkner, and they turned her into a one-hit wonder recluse who was unwilling or unable to ever publish another book. I love both Harper Lee's beautiful novels. I'm mourning for the dozen or so she could have and should have written.

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