

FICTION IN

REVIEW



M O L L Y M c Q U A D E

Any book can be edited post-publication in ways it never was before. To name but one example, the critic in me objects, however fruitlessly, to the relentlessly slow pace of the opening chapters in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I cannot dwell naturally among those rhythms. If I am to read her, I will have to try too hard, and try I do. When I so desire, I may "correct" this "flaw" of initial laggardliness in Lee's first published novel, or even just consider correcting it, in late-coming retrospect, so as to give her iconic book about race a new and altered self. Lucky book. Fortunate Lee. Such blasphemies have crossed my mind as I go about reading and rereading *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and its new companion volume, *Go Set a Watchman* (2015), as well as comments published about each. Little of the commentary strikes me thus far as revelatory, or even as especially worth remembering. But let's save that for later. It seems better to read the novels gratefully and revise freely.

First, a confession. In what may have been a tactical misstep, I

Go Set a Watchman, by Harper Lee (Harper, 278 pp., \$27.99)

reread *Mockingbird* before reading *Watchman* for the first time. I wish I had reversed that procedure. For to me, *Watchman* reads rather like the ghost book hovering over *Mockingbird* and silkily romancing it. In an odd and unaccustomed, unexpected sense, it is dominant and determining. To put this in another way, *Mockingbird* needs *Watchman* and *Watchman* needs *Mockingbird*, though not equally. True, they're nearly married. But they toy with one another. This is because, thanks possibly to the labors involved in the experiment of writing the earlier *Watchman*, *Mockingbird* was to emerge completed. On either side, too much is owed, so it cannot be declared. That's why the haunting. Whether this is factually verifiable or factually deniable may not matter.

Tangling with a wraith or two, I must admit that although *Watchman*, narrated in the third person, concerns the brief, two-week return of Jean Louise Finch to her Alabama home of Maycomb during the 1950s, as a somewhat cynical young woman established for five years now in Manhattan as a would-be painter, and although *Mockingbird*, narrated in the first person by a serenely discreet and all-knowing Jean Louise entirely about her six- to nine-year-old self, known as Scout, during the 1930s, the sophistication brought to bear upon the childhood in *Mockingbird* seems of a higher order than the restlessly ambitious, intermittently impressive exploits of *Watchman*'s narrator. It can't be fair or true to say that Scout was actually the more intelligent adventurer. Still, only by traveling to childhood has Lee managed to come home to her own talent. Not even the literary virtuositities of *Watchman*, enticingly poised and intensely felt, seem able to dispute that.

Nevertheless, so much of Lee's accomplishment is identical, from book to book, that on occasion I have forgotten which volume I am reading. Is this page of ravishing characterization purely precocious, or is it a little more seasoned? Is it nascent or refined? Early, or earlier? Which must have preceded or prefigured the other? I flail and squint, blink and fail. Prejudicing me is this: in myself lives a wretch who prefers, if only slightly, the wild, honey-eyed, innocent attempt to the finished, cool artifact. I would rather be confounded than rewarded by a paragraph. Should anyone else harbor a wretch like mine, then I would recommend reading *Watchman* and *Mockingbird* in close tandem. For there is no better

way to kill a classic than by pondering the wayward exaltations and the defining, cheeky feints of an originary talent.

The fact that *Watchman*'s many critics have chosen mainly to naysay or deny its merits while extolling the classic tells me what I had suspected somewhat sooner: too often now we seem to lack a patiently sympathetic curiosity to ply as readers, or as mere sub-way observers. Instead, we want to know mostly what we knew already. Thus we shall likely never be known, to ourselves in particular – and so be it. I am, if nothing else, a disobedient reader.

All the same, it bothers me as the uninvited reviser of Harper Lee's works that I recall most vividly certain high-flying scenes in *Watchman* rather than the fine or finer verities of *Mockingbird*. I recognize full well that those verities were wrought carefully and for my benefit. Yet such an achievement, though exemplary, does not quite inflame the long, lonesome erstwhile of a random, zealous reader. Part of what I want – not all of it – is to feel the walloping impact of a scene that could not ever be other than it is and still remain authentic, or to feel the impact of a conversation so exactingly, excitingly true to life, as this was imagined, that my own small literal life wanes, sighs, expires from admiration. In *Watchman* such walloping scenes recur, untamed and sometimes perfect. Indeed, they occupy whole chapters. Even when bordered by far less remarkable writing, in their bright patches they sun my mind fiercely. *Mockingbird*'s more measured, guarded writing cannot. Of the two, it is the more conservatively northern-minded southern novel.

Chapter 14 of *Watchman*, to consider one example of Lee's dazzling effects, voices character with such an acuity that dialogue can take only part of the credit. The chapter, falling two-thirds into the novel, concerns a visit by Jean Louise to her uncle Jack Finch, an unpredictably erudite retired doctor. The chapter begins immediately after Jean Louise has been musing: "Blind, that's what I am. . . . I need a watchman to lead me around and declare what he seeth every hour on the hour. I need a watchman to tell me this is what a man says but this is what he means. . . . Here is this justice and there is that justice and make me understand the difference."

In these respects and in others, Jack Finch tries to help her; he both is and isn't such a watchman. Jean Louise bolts into his orbit

on the run from a gathering of genteel, merrily racist chattering women at her Aunt Alexandra Finch Hancock's morning coffee hour, where she has been playing the gracious yet critically mettle-some inquisitor to a swell of demurely ugly hate speech and a handful of minimally sweeter downhome tales. That Lee can conjure up the babbling evil bonhomie of a tattered small-town ladies' club for ten or so pages while also recording Jean Louise's mordant reaction to it in neatly balanced counterpoint shows conspicuous skill, as well as an unfashionably legislative temperance: the author seems not to blame anybody, or at least to tip her hand. With a judicious realism, her words live each life, banning from our reading the everyday cynicism that would forbid the enormity of unselective sympathy. The writer resembles the mockingbird, who "imitates the world," as Randall Jarrell once wrote, "so well that for a minute, in the moonlight, / Which one's the mockingbird? which one's the world?" Lee's moral stance excludes from no one the right to live, whether well or badly. Nitwitted ladies are rendered faithfully, and so I read them with a kind of faith, too.

For the writer to then exit from the ladies' ragged provincial circle and enter into the less cramped sagacity of Dr. Finch's adjacent brain displays more than a little literary aplomb. Again there is that legislative temperance, as Lee bounds calmly from one strange object of attention to another, even stranger. She creates significantly complex social scenes with a deceptive alacrity, as though it were a forgone fate. The narrative dispatch of the writing achieves an extraordinary equipoise among strongly disparate demands of style and character. Lee convinces me that she can inhabit any mind, elevated, peculiar, odious, or inane, without betraying it. Her sensitivity to tone marks the writing as a kind of music.

The doctor's character alone is a study in the small sublime, for the man persists as an uncomfortable paradox, neither corrected nor rejected in Lee's marvelous portrait. Uncle Jack is a bigot of a particular sort: keenly learned, witty, earnest, impish, unashamed. Stubborn and confident, he hopes to convert Jean Louise to his ruthlessly, rancorously definitive point of view on social justice, despite the obvious obstacles. To my chagrin, he nearly fooled and won me over with the charms of his idiosyncratic, bookish reasoning. Explaining how this calamity could have almost overtaken me

would entail an unproductively laborious effort, like trying to pin down the logic of a Dostoyevsky madman's monologue.

Steeped in his southern white man's irksome scruples, Dr. Finch declares himself unwilling to abandon them. And he claims great things for those scruples: honorable origins, purity of passage, a complicated integrity. He frets that his friends and neighbors will forfeit someday what he won't: the all but inextricable sense of identity that gave them all their tragic birth. Identity, and the liberty essential for pursuing it, are what count most to Uncle Jack. Ironically, the same is true for his niece, who needs more liberty at twenty-six than Maycomb could have offered her in *Mockingbird* at the age of nine or less. Identity and liberty, he insists, maintain and justify whatever life there could or should be. Race in this strikes him, unlike her, as an incidental quibble, vilely overplayed. At one point in his vaulting conversation with her, Jack describes contemporary southern whites as blacks, just with a different skin.

The damning subtleties of such arguments continue to vex and elude me, as perhaps they are meant to. Whether Jack's talk is all sophistry or a reeking wisdom, it is good talk, orchestrated fastidiously by Lee. He woos me as a clever enemy would. The bulk of his conversation confers a fettered cultural identity — most likely loathsome, but seized on here with unabashed glee — that lies beyond my grasp, and beyond my doubt, too. Jack himself darts beyond me as well. In truth the chapter proves, and brilliantly, what Jack has just professed: the South of southerners is fatefully distinct. I can and cannot understand it.

Whenever a writer is able to live precisely and completely on the page as someone she is not, with an improbable imaginative generosity, the critic may acclaim that success by calling on a term that sounds vaguely icky and unsportive: "negative capability." For me, at her best, Lee turns the phrase into a roseate, replete affirmative in *Watchman*. She makes it mean something that it never meant before to me. She makes it mean Uncle Jack, for instance.

Another critic has called *Watchman* "lumpy." I wouldn't disagree. One of many problems with the book is excessive exposition that comes late, and frequently, as though Lee, like an inexperienced lawyer endeavoring to organize "the facts" cogently, were intent,

weeks into the trial, upon defending a no-luck client long since caught in the cross-hairs. That Jean Louise does not in *Watchman* serve as her own narrator may have caused more trouble than it could have solved. Oh, Jean Louise certainly can speak – plenty. Her voice is everywhere voluble: shocked by hometown racism, mocking smug Manhattanites, groaning, shouting, vomiting. But can she speak fully, truly, or solely for herself? Indeed, *Watchman*'s third-person point of view feels a lot more like the first person to me, as narrated by none other than her attorney father. This startled me once I had realized it.

Perhaps there is a reason for *Watchman*'s weird narrative warp. This novel, after all, tells the story, only half-acknowledged, of a twenty-something daughter falling violently out of love with her father, who appropriately bears a classic Greek name: Atticus. For the first time, he seems to her like a racist, and she heartily rejects that. What the grown-up Scout, not quite grown up yet, still can't see, as her father can, is this: Scout is almost as much a bigot, in essence, as her Alabama neighbors, the same ones who now horrify her. How could this be, when Scout at twenty-six has worked hard to detach herself from homegrown southern racism, which truly turns her stomach? It's because Scout, in her own way, is guilty of intolerance: she can't imagine those other people as herself, not even though she comes from them; they are hers, and she is theirs. This she cannot see. Atticus does. He always could. The lumpiness of *Watchman* registers the captivity of the main character, struggling pointlessly to get out. Switching from her embattled present to search for answers in the past, Jean Louise, as guided by the author, attempts clumsily an indecisive series of faux resolutions because the answer she seeks is too simple and too basic, as simple and as basic as the problem: she cannot resolve to be herself alone, since one is not enough. It never was. She needs to learn. She needs to learn what the critic William T. Going cited perceptively as a main topic of *Mockingbird*: "true sympathy."

Like Jean Louise, *Watchman*'s writing now and then tries to say more than it knows. Description sometimes works too hard, as when Aunt Alexandra "was completely unaware that with one twist of the tongue she could plunge Jean Louise into a moral turmoil by making her niece doubt her own motives and best

intentions, by tweaking the protestant, philistine strings of Jean Louise's conscience until they vibrated like a spectral zither." Poor zither. Where's the banjo, Rufus? I prefer the following: "Two-Toed Tom lived wherever there was a river. He was a genius: he made tunnels beneath Maycomb and ate people's chickens at night; he was once tracked from Demopolis to Tensas. He was as old as Maycomb County."

Elsewhere Lee's prose can trip and fall: "A pang of tenderness swept over her." (In passing, we should note that the publisher of *Watchman* chose, high-mindedly, not to edit it. The decision was announced formally and officially.) The characterization of Jean Louise's longtime swain Henry Clinton cannot quite do right by him either as a good guy or a bad one. Henry is boring. We must say so. And he doesn't hold a candle to Dill, who in his extreme youth romances Scout in *Mockingbird* to such comic purpose. The absence from grownup Scout's present life and from her imaginative self of her brother Jem, who died young, and who did so much to populate *Mockingbird*, is a sad oversight in *Watchman*. A reader mourns it.

Yet even so, listing all these lumpy bits, why exactly do I long still to love this ghost book, and not another?

My bratty retort: to revise this novel feels easier and more natural than any overweening effort I might make to mess with the classic that is *Mockingbird*. To revise that one would lead me to argue with – which is to say, argue against – the very idea of a classic, and would lead me to argue with the very ideal of an agreed-upon achievement, meaning one that will satisfy a majority and define a consensus. I am a critic. I would almost always rather eavesdrop on disagreement. I would rather disagree, myself. I am like the six-year-old unreformed Scout. I would prefer to ponder an exception, to study a wild thing headed in, maybe, the right direction. I would prefer to hold out some hope for the strains and rigors of negative capability, rather than shelve it. I would rather, much rather, read something only half-formed, to see it in the light cast by this ghost itself, to observe a few interesting things not ever made available to me in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. What was made should remake me, I believe. If it was made already, made without

me, made too well, if the key locked the door – then how could it do that for me?

More specifically, I feel with greater, more invincible vitality the scathing impression left behind by the characters in *Watchman* than I do many of those in *Mockingbird*. I'm persuaded to believe in them, to acknowledge them as my uncomfortably canny cronies, *as those who I am not*. They drag me by the hand that I would rather not extend to them, and then they keep me. If and when I ever do become one of them, then I won't need again the phrase "negative capability." For that deed will have been done.

With a kind of well-bred rapacity this seduction of Lee's characters takes place, quite nakedly, in *Watchman*. Uncle Jack, for one, conducts it, wooing the reader brutally. So does a tawdry snob of a teacher called Mr. Tuffett, who comes "from the hills of Mississippi, which placed him at a disadvantage in Maycomb: hard-headed hill folk do not understand coastal-plain dreamers, and Mr. Tuffett was no exception." Contemptuous of nearly everyone, Mr. Tuffett is "tolerated at all times, but ignored most of the time" by his students.

Nonetheless, unusual circumstances breed unusual behaviors. In one of *Watchman's* most shrewdly feckless set-pieces, Jean Louise remembers a youthful misadventure. It was young Scout's idea to shop bravely for falsies, then wear them to a dance, where the falsies slip and slide, unbeknownst to her, until her boyfriend helpfully removes them, rescuing her from certain social scorn. Gallantly he hurls each one high, to banish them into darkest night. Unfortunately, they come to rest where they shouldn't, and in daylight are discovered by Mr. Tuffett. Furious, insulted, he calls an assembly on the school grounds. "Following Mr. Tuffett's finger, Jean Louise looked at the billboard. She read, IN THE SERVICE OF THEIR COUNTR. Blocking out the last letter and fluttering softly in the morning breeze were her falsies." Demanding justice, Tuffett gets the wrong kind when the kids outwit him. The main point: an author's ingenious zest for farce commands a dozen pages, flawlessly. I have nothing to add. I have nothing to revise. Really, I have nothing to say. I've only been pretending to say a little something for the sake of disagreeing with the nonstop comments of the many people – oh, so many, calling themselves critics,

or not – who claim loudly and in public not to like or to respect the writing or the writer of *Go Set a Watchman*.

The critics. The many. Yes, I am one, too. I braced myself to listen to the others, and even, sometimes, to myself. I couldn't help but hear them, well before I was able to read *Watchman* through and through. Weeks and months ahead of publication, the many had a lot to say about it. How dispiriting. Worse: because the murky story of *Watchman*'s discovery and release still dominates the book since it has become a book, there seems almost no true way to discuss what matters most – its writing.

Some consider *Watchman* to be an early draft of *Mockingbird*, rejected by Tay Hohoff, its first editor, with good reason, and now hustled into print by a cabal of publishers and lawyers without the genuine consent of its aged author. Others insist that *Watchman* is a sequel to the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Mockingbird*, worth noting (and buying) because, until this July, the lionized Harper Lee had published only one novel in her eighty-nine years.

Wrote Joe Nocera in *The New York Times*, “The publication of *Go Set a Watchman* constitutes one of the epic money-grabs in the modern history of American publishing.” Argued Sam Sacks in *The Wall Street Journal*, “Properly speaking, *Go Set a Watchman* is a practice run for *To Kill a Mockingbird*.” Maureen Corrigan of NPR complained, “*Go Set a Watchman* is a troubling confusion of a novel, politically and artistically.” In an uncommonly thoughtful review, *The Atlantic* noted of its heroine, “She can seem more naively blinkered than she realizes.” *The L.A. Times* faulted the novel for having “little sense of urgency,” and *The Boston Globe* agreed. Remarked a critic in *The Guardian*, “*Go Set a Watchman* was by no means a perfect read.” According to *The Irish Times*, “Had [*Watchman*] been published in the 1950s, it probably would have caused something of a stir, but today it feels lifeless.”

So here we are. And where is that?

I'm left in an unexpected little nook tucked into the pages of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a nook perhaps often overlooked, where I seek some kind of errant wisdom from fiction, rather than fact. This is chapter 8, during which a rare snowfall takes place in Maycomb, Alabama, and Scout and her brother Jem build a snowman together.

This is their first snowman. Maybe it will be the only snowman permitted by the southern climate during their lifetimes. Whatever the cause, this rare opportunity calls from Lee some of her very best writing. When that happens for a writer, I pay attention. If words arrange themselves as well as these, then they might convey something more than what they seem to mean. To me, anyway, the snowstorm story suggests an allegory.

Apart from even the manner of its writing, the chapter's actions beckon for a sympathy, for a patient reader's curiosity. Scout is first frightened by the snow, which she has never seen before, but Jem decides to harvest it. There isn't much available, so Jem builds the snowman's base out of earth. After he has dug it up, mounded it, and shaped it, he resorts to a basketful of snow, scooped and valued, some of it borrowed from a neighbor's yard. On goes the snow in a topmost layer.

The finished snowman closely resembles Mr. Avery, another neighbor. Atticus Finch asks his children to disguise the creature's provocative, all-too-familiar features. For this a sun hat comes in handy.

But before anyone can stoop to fully disfigure the festive truths of the snow, that night a fire breaks out in the neighborhood. As a result, the snowman loses all his snow. Now he's just a pile of sludge, unrecognizable. Mr. Avery, who inspired the snowman, barely survives the fire.

When I benefit from Lee's prose, I realize that realism can be ruined by reality, as here. Then Lee surprises me. She understands that, too. Because she does, the ruination of a realism revives it, in the end. Or it can.