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Is To Kill a Mockingbird a must-read?

ON THE LIST

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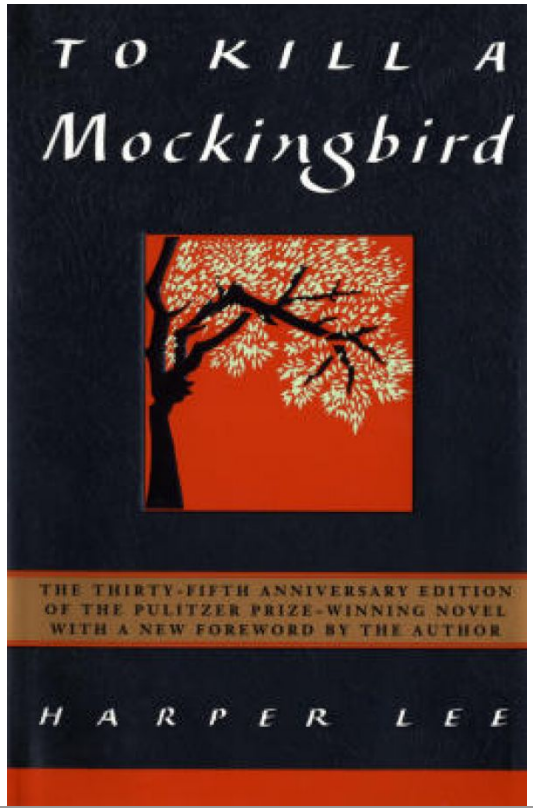

Published in 1960, the book was an immediate best-seller. It won the 1961 Pulitzer Prize. It has never been out of print, said a publicist for HarperCollins, who could not provide a number for total sales beyond "millions and millions." less

If there's one book you should read before you die, it's *To Kill a Mockingbird.* That's not my opinion. Apparently I was sick back in ninth grade when every other American kid read **Harper Lee**'s novel of racism, moral courage and coming of age in 1930s Alabama. I read it for the first time only this week and have my misgivings.

But according to the Guardian newspaper's Web site, a 2006 poll of librarians — *British* librarians — put *To Kill a Mockingbird* atop the list of books every adult should read before

they shuffle off. Ahead of the Bible. Ahead of **Huckleberry Finn** and *Pride and Prejudice* and even *Harry* "the Franchise" *Potter.*

According to a 1989 study in this country, 69 percent of public schools, 67 percent of Catholic schools and 47 percent of other private schools teach the book, most often in the ninth grade. And it's still assigned regularly, three Houston-area educators say.

For many young people, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, more than 45 years after its publication, looms like that first tattoo as a milestone on the road to adulthood. It has become, as Slate's **Stephen Metcalf** writes,"an inescapable fact of America's civic religion."

So what's its appeal? Why a fixture on school reading lists? And what's its status in the canon of American literature? Is it really a book for grown-ups?

For those who somehow missed the book and can't remember the 1962 movie starring **Gregory Peck**, a little background. The novel is narrated by feisty, tomboyish **Jean Louise Finch**, aka Scout, who's 6 when the book opens. She and older brother Jem live with their widowed lawyer father, Atticus, and the family's black maid, Calpurnia, in the small town of Maycomb.

The book borrows from autobiography — Maycomb is a stand-in for Monroeville, Ala., where Lee grew up and where, at age 80, she lives today, making few public appearances, giving no interviews and having never published another book. Like Atticus, Lee's father was a lawyer. Dill, a relatively minor character in the novel, is apparently based on Lee's childhood friend **Truman Capote**.

Two narrative strands weave together to form the plot: the kids' fascination with a mysterious, unseen neighbor, Boo Radley, who may be crazy or sick or both. And a court case in which the high-minded Atticus defends a black man accused of raping a white woman.

Published in 1960, the book was an immediate best-seller, going through 14 printings and selling more than 2.5 million copies in the first year. It won the 1961 Pulitzer Prize and by the second anniversary of its appearance had been on the best-seller list for 100 weeks. The novel has never been out of print, said a publicist for HarperCollins, who could not provide a number for total sales beyond "millions and millions."

Robert Cremins, a Houston writer who until last year headed the English department at **Strake Jesuit College Preparatory**, calls the book "a good bridge from innocence to experience."

"It's a good introduction to heavy issues like racism," he said, comparing it to *The Diary of* **Anne Frank**. Both books plumb serious themes but in a "slightly soft" way that won't have young readers waking up screaming in the night.

Cremins did note that *To Kill a Mockingbird* doesn't have the classroom monopoly it once had on race in America. Black writers like **Ernest Gaines** and **Toni Morrison** are increasingly popular. Still, at Strake, the novel is a frequently assigned freshman title, he said. Older teachers particularly like it.

The native of Ireland also said *Mockingbird* is among the handful of American novels regularly read in British and Irish schools. "It's been kind of formative in foreigners' view of what the South was like — the racial divide, the gothic feel."

Barbara Samuels, a retired associate professor of education at **University of Houston-Clear Lake** and a specialist in children's literature, loves the book and offers two anecdotes to prove its continuing presence: Just last week, she said, she met a fellow teacher who had named her child Atticus, her "favorite character in all of literature." And recently a ninth-grader arrived at Samuels' house for a Passover Seder with a copy of *Mockingbird* under her arm. Samuels asked if she was reading it for school. The girl replied, "I'm reading it for the seventh time. It's my very favorite book."

What makes the book appropriate for school use is, first, that it has a young narrator, Samuels said. "Because of that, kids identify with it.

"I think they also identify with the whole issue of fairness and being fair. That's always a thread kids connect with."

Stacey Peebles, a visiting assistant professor in UH's **Honors College**, describes *Mockingbird*'s appeal as twofold:

"It's not only a story about a specific historical time and place that engages with issues of civil rights and sexuality and all this good stuff, but it's also a novel of initiation, which is a classic literary genre. It's told from the point of view of a young girl who's dealing with her father, her friends, her sibling and learning to navigate this moral landscape."

So is the book read at the college level?

"Certainly not as much as in the public schools," Peebles said. "But it's certainly still considered part of the canon. Because you can look at it through all these lenses. You can look at it through a feminist perspective, you can look at these troubling issues of race and sexuality, which are still obviously of great interest to critics."

But the question still nags. Is *Mockingbird* in fact a grown-up book, a part of the "canon"?

It didn't make the **Modern Library** editorial board's list of 100 finest English-language novels of the 20th century but did make **Time magazine**'s similar list. It gets a paltry two sentences in the *Columbia History of the American Novel.* In my edition of the **Oxford Companion** *to American Literature*, the Harper Lee entry runs to seven lines, about the same as the entries for **Ernest Lacy** and **Margaret Leech** (no, I've never heard of them, either).

On the other hand, the critic **Harold Bloom** has produced a casebook on *Mockingbird.* That's like St. Peter hand-carrying the book through the Pearly Gates.

A pair of articles that appeared last year provide stimulating commentary on this matter.

In a **New Yorker** review of **Charles J. Shields**' new biography of Harper Lee, **Thomas Mallon** savages *Mockingbird* for its moral simplicity and implausible characters. He calls **Atticus Finch** a "plaster saint" with a way "of making forbearance itself insufferable."

Mallon calls Scout "a kind of highly constructed doll, feisty and cute on every subject from algebra to grown-ups," her voice a "forced mixture" of the child and the adult.

He wraps things up by describing the novel as "a kind of moral Ritalin, an ungainsayable endorser of the obvious." The movie, he writes, is "rather better."

This smackdown prompted Stephen Metcalf, Slate's critic at large, to read the book for the first time and weigh in with a qualified endorsement. He likes Scout, calling her a clever child whose "cleverness nonetheless never interferes with her innocence, and whose innocence is finally a near-flawless arbiter of right and wrong."

He acknowledges that Lee mixes child and adult perspectives but praises the book's voice as being "almost always fetching, often vivid, and the small-town manners it captures are keenly observed." He particularly admires how the book evokes and critiques Southern white-class snobbery.

I find myself leaning a little Mallon's way. I don't find either Atticus or Scout particularly plausible. The black characters are long-suffering and large-hearted in a way that, today, comes across as condescending. Scout too often sounds like no child I ever met — too smart, too spunky.

But that's just my opinion.

Remember, scores of British librarians couldn't be wrong.

fritz.lanham@chron.com