*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

Summary Notes -- brought to your by Shmoop.



Chapter 1

* The story begins with an injury: the narrator's brother Jem got his arm broken when he was thirteen.
* Years afterward, brother and narrator argue over where the story really starts: the narrator blames it on the Ewell family, while Jem (the older sibling by four years) puts the beginning at the summer they first met Dill.
* **The flash-forward conversation continues:** the narrator says that if you want to get technical about it, everything began with Andrew Jackson, whose actions led their forefather Simon Finch to settle where he did. **The flash-forward becomes a flashback**: Simon Finch was a pious and miserly Englishman who left his home country to wander around America, before settling in Alabama with his accumulated wealth, his family, and his slaves. Simon's homestead was called Finch's Landing, and was a mostly self-sufficient estate run by Simon's male descendants, who sold cotton to buy what the farm couldn't produce itself. The Civil War put an end to a lot of that (like the slave-owning), but the tradition of living off the land remained. Until now. Atticus, the narrator's father, studied law in Montgomery, while his younger brother went all the way to Boston to become a doctor. The only Finch left at the Landing is their sister Alexandra and her quiet husband. After becoming a lawyer, Atticus returned to Maycomb, the county seat of Maycomb County, twenty miles from Finch's landing. Atticus feels at home in Maycomb, not least because he's related to nearly everyone in the town.
* **Out of the flashback**, into the present-time of the story. The narrator thinks about the Maycomb s/he (we don't know which yet) knew. It's not a happening place. Everyone moves slower than sweat, and there's not much worth hurrying for, let alone much sense of what might be happening outside the county lines. The narrator lives on the town's main residential drag with her brother Jem, her father Atticus, and their cook Calpurnia, who is a force to be reckoned with. You may notice there's no mom to be found: she died when the narrator was two, and the narrator doesn't really remember her, though Jem does.
* **The story really gets underway the summer when the narrator is five going on six and Jem is nine going on ten. This is the summer Dill arrives in Maycomb.**
* Their first meeting happens like this: Jem and the narrator are playing in their backyard, hear a noise next door, and go to check it out. They find a small boy, six going on seven but looking younger, who introduces himself as Charles Baker Harris and announces that he can read. Charles Baker Harris says that people call him Dill. Dill tells the narrator and Jem a bit about himself: he's from Meridian, Mississippi, but he's spending the summer with his aunt, the Finches' next-door neighbor Miss Rachel.
* The narrator asks Dill about his absent father. Apparently this is a sore subject, so Jem tells his sibling to shut up.
* Jem, Dill, and the narrator spend the summer acting out stories from the books they've read, over and over and over. Sound boring? Eventually, the kids think so too. **Dill comes to the rescue with a new idea: they can try to make Boo Radley come out.**
* **The Radley Place is the haunted house of the neighborhood, complete with ghost Boo Radley, who got in trouble with the law as a teenager and has been holed up in the house unseen ever since.**

Chapter 2

* Summer's over, and Dill heads back home to Meridian.
* The narrator looks forward to joining the kids at school for the first time instead of spying on them through a telescope like a pint-size stalker.
* Jem takes the narrator to school, and explains that it's different from home—and he doesn't want his first-grade sibling cramping his fifth-grade style.
* The narrator's teacher is a young woman by the name of Miss Caroline Fisher, who's from North Alabama, otherwise known to the native Maycombians as Crazy Land.
* Miss Caroline puts the alphabet up on the board. All of the class already knows it.
* Amazing! Is it a class full of geniuses? Nope. Most of them are starting first grade for the second time.
* Miss Caroline asks the narrator to read, and is not pleased that she's already good at it. See, the teacher assumes that Atticus has taught the narrator how to read. Apparently, these lessons must stop because Atticus isn't a licensed teacher and therefore is doing his child more harm than good. Even though she's already a fluent reader, when the rest of the class is repeating first grade.
* The narrator gets the impression that reading, which seems to come as naturally as breathing, is something like a sin when it's done out of class.
* Trying to stay out of further trouble, the narrator zones out till recess, then complains to Jem.
* Jem says that Miss Caroline is at the center of educational reform in the school, which he calls "the Dewey Decimal System". This new system results in boring class time, so the narrator starts writing (in cursive) a letter to Dill. Miss Caroline makes the narrator stop, saying that first graders print, and cursive isn't taught until third grade.
* The narrator remembers that Calpurnia had passed rainy days by giving writing lessons.
* Miss Caroline is halted in her inspection of her students' lunches by Walter Cunningham, who doesn't have one. She tries to lend him a quarter for lunch, but he refuses to take it. The narrator, whose name we now learn is Jean Louise, steps in, explaining to Miss Caroline that Walter is a Cunningham.
* That explanation, crystal clear to Jean Louise, doesn't mean much to Miss Caroline, so she explains further: the Cunninghams won't take anything from anybody, preferring to get by on the little they have.
* **Flashback**: Jean Louise knows about the Cunninghams because Walter's father hired Atticus for some legal work, and paid for the service by barter rather than in cash.
* **Back to the schoolroom present:** Jean Louise wants to explain but can't, so she just says that Miss Caroline is making Walter ashamed by trying to lend him money he can't pay back.
* Miss Caroline cracks at this, and calls Jean Louise up to the front of the class, where she pats her hand with the ruler and makes her stand in the corner. The class breaks out laughing when they realize that the ruler taps were supposed to be corporal punishment. The bell rings and everyone leaves for lunch. Miss Caroline collapses with her head in her hands at her desk.

Chapter 3

* Jean Louise catches Walter Cunningham in the schoolyard and beats him up for being the reason she got in trouble, but Jem stops her. She explains to Jem (who calls her Scout, so we will too) what happened.
* Jem invites Walter to come home for lunch with Scout and him.
* At the Finch house, Atticus talks to Walter about farming, while Jem and Scout listen half-comprehendingly.
* Walter asks for molasses, which he proceeds to pour all over his food.
* Scout is all, "What?," and he stops in embarrassment.
* Calpurnia calls Scout into the kitchen, where she gives her a lecture on hospitality—Walter's a guest and so he can basically do whatever he wants.
* The kids go back to school, and Scout grumps silently about Calpurnia's lecture.
* She's called back to the here and now by a shriek from Miss Caroline, who's seen a "cootie" —probably a louse, which may sound more familiar in the plural, lice—on one of the students.
* Miss Caroline tries to send the student, named **Burris Ewell**, home to wash his hair (after looking up lice remedies in a reference book), and says he should take a bath (which he apparently really needs, since he looks worse than Pigpen from Peanuts) before coming back to class. But Burris tells her that he's not coming back. What? Apparently, Burris is one of the Ewells. Ewells come the first day to satisfy the truant officer and then skeddaddle. Burris decides he's already done with school for the year even though the first day isn't over yet, and manages to make Miss Caroline cry before he leaves.
* The other students try to cheer Miss Caroline up, and she reads them another boring story.
* Highly dissatisfied with her first day of school, Scout goes home and makes plans to run away. Atticus comes home from work, having apparently forgotten about Scout's lunchtime misbehavior, and Calpurnia gets back on Scout's good side with tasty crackling bread.
* After dinner, Atticus invites Scout to come read with him, which brings up unpleasant memories. Scout tries to convince Atticus that she doesn't really need to go to school, but he's not buying it.
* She tells him about her first day of school, and Atticus tells her to try to think about things from the other person's perspective—in this case, Miss Caroline, who was only trying to do her best in a strange place, whose ways she doesn't yet understand. Scout says that Burris Ewell stays home from school so she should be able to do so too, **but apparently what holds true for Ewells doesn't apply to Finches.**
* Finally, Atticus proposes a compromise: they'll keep reading at home if she'll keep going to school—but she shouldn't tell Miss Caroline about it.

Chapter 4

* Every day Scout runs by the Radley Place to get home after school.
* One day she notices something, and works up the nerve to go back and look at it.
* **A tree at the edge of the Radley yard has some tinfoil stuck to a knothole, and inside the hole Scout finds two pieces of chewing gum.**
* She takes it home, and, after some testing to try to make sure it's not poisoned, she chews it.
* Jem's not too pleased with this and makes her spit it out… and then gargle.
* Finally, it's summer. Hooray! School's out!
* **On their way home, they find another piece of tinfoil in the same knothole, and behind it a jewelry box, decorated with more tinfoil, containing two Indian-head pennies.**
* Should they keep it? Chewing gum is one thing, but money is another entirely.
* Soon Dill shows up, full of stories. They're already bored, so Dill kick things up a notch by saying he can smell death, and tells Scout that her end is nigh. She tells him to shut it, and Jem mocks both of them for being (or pretending to be) superstitious. They horse around a little, and Scout ends up flying down the sidewalk in a tire (don't ask), which ends up dumping her in … The Radleys' front yard.
* Thanks to this adventure, **Jem invents a new game: acting out the life and times of Boo Radley.**
* The game starts out simple, but gets more and more complex as the summer goes on.
* Atticus gives this game the side-eye, but he doesn't explicitly forbid them from doing it since he doesn't know for sure what they're doing.
* But Scout isn't so sure. **She's pretty convinced that when she got dumped out of the tire she heard someone laughing inside the Radley house.**

Chapter 5

* Scout convinces Jem to back off on the Radley game, and then Dill asks Scout to marry him. (Hey, it is the South.)
* Despite this moment of passion, the boys spend most of their time together and neglect Scout. So, Scout spends her time hanging out with Miss Maudie Atkinson, a usually stand-off-ish old lady. Bonus: Miss Maudie makes the best cakes in the neighborhood, and best of all, shares them with the three kids.
* **Miss Maudie tells Scout more about the Radleys, including that old Mr. Radley (Boo's father) was a "foot-washing Baptist", which is apparently much more hardcore than just regular Baptists**.
* In fact, some of Mr. Radley's fellow foot-washers have told Miss Maudie that she and her flowers are going to burn in hell, because any time spent not reading the Bible is time spent in sin, especially if it involves creating something pleasing to the senses. (No word on whether criticizing one's neighbors counts as a sin with them.)
* **Miss Maudie says that the Radleys are "so busy worrying about the next world they've never learned to live in this one".** Is Boo crazy? Well, if he wasn't when this whole thing started, he probably is now.
* Scout finally breaks into Jem and Dill's Get Rid Of Slimy girlS Club, and finds out what they've been planning to do: use a fishing pole to put a note to Boo through one of the upper windows of the Radley Place. When they put the plan into action, Jem has some difficulty maneuvering the fishing pole, which is too short to reach the window.And then Atticus shows up. And he doesn't look pleased.
* **Atticus tells the kids to stop bothering Boo, who has a perfect right to stay in his house if he wants to.** Atticus also tells them to stop playing their stupid game, and Jem says they weren't making fun of Boo, inadvertently revealing to Atticus that they were in fact playing at being the Radleys. Jem eventually realizes he's been fooled by the oldest lawyer's trick in the book. Oops.

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#### Works Cited

#### Shmoop Editorial Team. "To Kill a Mockingbird Summary." *Shmoop*. Shmoop University, Inc.,

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