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To Love a 'Mockingbird'

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Of course lawyers like "To Kill a Mockingbird." Its hero is Atticus Finch, a small-town Alabama lawyer who is honest, wise and courageous, and doesn't seem at all preoccupied with billable hours.

But enduring devotion to Harper Lee's novel extends beyond the legal profession to teachers, students and librarians. Independent bookstore owners declared it their favorite 20th century fictional work in a survey a few years back.

Publishers constitute yet another rabid cheering section. "We love that book!" said Susan Weinberg, editorial director of HarperCollins, which publishes the hardback edition.

And why wouldn't they? "To Kill a Mockingbird" is a lyrical, sensitive, life-affirming novel that absolutely dominates the marketplace.

Yet many in laid-back southern Alabama seem not to appreciate the literary and publishing phenomenon that one of their own, Lee, hath wrought.

Since debuting in 1960, "To Kill a Mockingbird" has sold more than 30 million copies. It may be the best-selling novel ever. Because no one rigorously tracks sales for older, "backlist" books, it's impossible to say.

What's clear is that "The Bird" as the very private Lee reportedly calls it is not just holding its own but soaring in popularity.

There's a new \$11.95 trade paperback edition, to go with the smaller and cheaper mass market paperback, and the hardback, big-print and audio-book editions. Of late, Chicago and nine other U.S. cities have chosen "To Kill a Mockingbird" as a book that local citizens should read and discuss in library-sponsored programs. Monroeville, the Alabama town where Lee grew up and still lives part-time, and on which she based the "Maycomb" of her book, now sees 25,000 literary pilgrims a year.

Sales are relentlessly boffo. In 2001, more than a million copies of "To Kill a Mockingbird" sold in the United States alone, according to Lee's literary agent, Samuel Pinkus of the New York firm McIntosh & Otis.

"I can also tell you that the sales over the last few years have increased annually," Pinkus said. "If not unique, it is certainly unusual in the book industry for a 42-year-old book to have increased sales."

Domestic sales of Warner Books' mass market paperback edition of "To Kill a Mockingbird" have been about 1 million copies each of the last three years, confirmed Chris Barba, AOL Time Warner Book Group executive vice president of sales. She added that 650,000 copies had sold through the end of July, which puts that edition on track to sell 1.1 million copies in 2002.

Although HarperCollins would not give sales figures for the hardback edition of "To Kill a Mockingbird," Weinberg said they are strong.

"It continues to do well in all formats, and even to grow," she said. "More people seem to discover the book each year."

Weinberg said HarperCollins chose to add a trade paperback edition which is larger and has bigger type than a typical paperback because officials there feel "To Kill a Mockingbird" can handle even more "presence" in the marketplace.

It's not just the United States that's fond of "To Kill a Mockingbird." The book has been translated into at least 40 languages. It is sold in nearly every country, Pinkus said.

Last year, London-based Arrow Books' edition of "To Kill a Mockingbird" sold 55,000 copies in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and India, and another 85,000 in the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), according to publishing director Andy McKillop.

"Those are big numbers for the UK," McKillop said. "It's a title that goes on selling, and everywhere."

Accessible but not shallow, an Alabama period piece that somehow seems universal and timeless, "To Kill a Mockingbird" is the only fiction Lee has published.

She set her novel in the bottom of the Depression. Atticus Finch is the widower father of a boy, Jem, and a tomboy daughter, Scout. The first-person narration is by Scout (as an adult, looking back), and describes the consequences for the family and the town of Maycomb when Finch defends a local black man falsely charged with raping a white woman.

Lee, 76, hasn't given an interview in decades. When she was talking to the press, she discouraged the idea that in writing the novel she drew closely on Monroeville events and citizens. But she never disputed that her father, A.C. Lee a lawyer, legislator and editor of the local weekly newspaper inspired the character of Atticus Finch.

Careful readers with a knowledge of Monroeville believe Harper Lee used herself as model for Scout; that her late brother Edwin Lee inspired Jem; and that the writer Truman Capote, who spent summers in Monroeville during his boyhood, was the basis for Scout and Jem's highly imaginative playmate, Dill.

As for Boo Radley, a mysterious, almost-never-seen neighbor who frightens and fascinates Dill and the Finch children, Monroeville residents of Lee's generation say he was based on a reclusive young man everyone in town knew and wondered about.

Lee wrote "To Kill a Mockingbird" in New York in the 1950s, where she had moved after leaving the University of Alabama law school just short of graduation. She started the book as a series of interrelated stories, written at friends' insistence (she had been telling them the stories) in her spare time from her job as an airline reservations clerk.

Her friends had faith in her talent, and one Christmas some of them gave her money so she could quit work and write full time for a year. Eventually, she took a manuscript to J.B. Lippincott Co., a distinguished publisher no longer in business. There, editor Tay Hohoff worked with her to develop the characters and unify the story.

"To Kill a Mockingbird" was published to mostly highly favorable reviews in July 1960. It was featured by Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Guild and Reader's Digest Condensed Books, and quickly climbed to near the top of the best-seller lists for hardback fiction.

Sales accelerated when the book won the 1961 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. By 1962 a paperback of "To Kill a Mockingbird" was out. The next year saw another publicity windfall, with the release of the acclaimed movie version, starring Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch.

Teachers guaranteed the long-term commercial success of Lee's novel. As early as 1963, just three years after publication, "To Kill a Mockingbird" was taught in 8 percent of U.S. public middle schools and high schools, according to a National Council of Teachers of English survey. By 1988, when the survey was repeated, the figure was 74 percent. Only "Romeo and Juliet," "Macbeth" and "Huckleberry Finn" were being assigned more often.

Arthur Applebee, a professor of education at the University of Albany, State University of New York, did the second survey for the National Council of Teachers of English. He has not updated it, but said in an interview that he would be surprised if "To Kill a Mockingbird" had not extended its reach in schools.

"It is an appealing story for teenagers, with the literary characteristics and moral ambiguities that make it a highly 'teachable' text," he said. "By that I mean that there are a whole variety of things worth serious discussion, from societal issues to discussions of literary form."

The legions of "To Kill a Mockingbird" teachers include Jewell Knotts of Mary Help of Christians School, a Catholic middle school in inner-city Tampa, Fla. Twice a year, every year for the last two decades, she has taught the novel to eighth-grade classes there.

Knotts insists on reading the book aloud, cover to cover, with every class. She handles the narration, and they do the dialogue.

That's 40 times Knotts has marched through "To Kill a Mockingbird," enjoying or enduring her students' efforts at rural Alabama accents. She still isn't sick of the book.

"I've never been bored," she said. "I love the book, and anything you love, the kids pick up on." She estimated that nine out of 10 of her students very much like "To Kill a Mockingbird," a higher percentage than with any other text she has assigned.

In her early years of teaching the novel, she especially valued its theme of racial tolerance. She still thinks that's important, but is even more grateful now for the example of Atticus Finch as a father who gives his children freedom within limits, and sets a strong moral example.

Garry Burnett too has taught "To Kill a Mockingbird" for 20 years to teenage students at Malet Lambert School in Hull, England. He reads the book aloud, and even puts a "Do Not Disturb" sign on his door during certain intense passages, such as the trial of Tom Robinson, the black man charged with rape.

"To Kill a Mockingbird" has long been an optional text within the national curriculum for high school students in England, and is widely used by English teachers, according to Burnett.

"It's a glorious piece of writing," he said. "A text like 'To Kill a Mockingbird' provides you with a blueprint for teaching emotional intelligence. It's all about empathy, tolerance, optimism. It's got social and emotional currency as well as being a classic of literature."

The versatility of "To Kill a Mockingbird" as a teaching text can be seen on college campuses. It's used in humanities courses, and as a supplementary book in history courses dealing with Jim Crow and the Depression. Law school professors sometimes find room for it in discussions of legal procedure or electives on literature and the law.

The one place where "To Kill a Mockingbird" hasn't been taught much is in Southern literature courses at the college and graduate school level.

"I guess maybe it's been relegated to the realm of young adult literature," said Claudia Durst Johnson, a retired University of Alabama professor of English who wrote some of the first scholarly articles about Lee's novel. "Literary folks don't think it deserves their exalted attention."

That appears to be changing. Since 1990, there have been 19 doctoral dissertations that deal with "To Kill a Mockingbird," an academic database search shows. Gregg Hecimovich, who teaches English at East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C., said the novel is finding its way onto more Southern literature reading lists, at both the undergraduate and graduate school levels.

"When a work begins to be taken seriously at the graduate level, it starts its life in the higher canon," Hecimovich said.

Somewhere below the higher canon are practicing lawyers, some of the most ardent fans of "To Kill a Mockingbird." Jonathan Harvey of Columbia, S.C., is among those who credit the book and movie with helping them decide on a career in law.

"It's Atticus Finch," explained Harvey, 47, who read the book in high school, later saw the movie and now specializes in criminal defense. "He's just such a principled character."

There's an inspirational book for lawyers titled "In Search of Atticus Finch," and California Lawyer magazine recently published a certain well-known lawyer's tribute to "To Kill a Mockingbird."

"In my life I encountered one book that resonated deeply with me, and its message became a friendly companion as I embarked upon my journey to justice," wrote Johnnie L. Cochran Jr., defense lawyer for O.J. Simpson, in an essay in the magazine's May issue.

Librarians are yet another big fan base for "To Kill a Mockingbird." In 1998, Library Journal magazine asked its readers to name the most influential novel of the 20th century. "To Kill a Mockingbird" finished first in the poll going away.

Last year, the Chicago Public Library decided to join the "One Book" program, wherein a library system endorses a book for local citizens to read and organizes discussion groups over a set period. A committee of Chicago librarians decided on "To Kill a Mockingbird" for the city's first selection.

The library already owned 1,200 copies of the novel but bought another 2,000. During the seven weeks of the highly publicized program, the copies circulated 6,500 times. "To Kill a Mockingbird" also became one of the top 10 bestsellers at the three Barnes & Noble bookstores in Chicago.

Mary Dempsey, commissioner of the Chicago Public Library, said the strong response proved "To Kill a Mockingbird" appeals to readers of various ages and backgrounds.

"We had young people, old people, black people, white people, all reading and loving that book," she said.

To date, nine other U.S. cities Cleveland; Jacksonville, Fla.; Bakersfield, Calif.; Stockton, Calif.; Pikes Peak, Colo.; Valparaiso, Ind.; Duluth, Minn.; Fergus Falls, Minn.; and Victoria, Texas have through their libraries chosen "To Kill a Mockingbird" as a book to be read and discussed.

If all this weren't momentum enough, the play adaptation of "To Kill a Mockingbird," by Christopher Sergel, has become a staple of amateur theater, with more than 190 productions in the United States and Canada since 1999. A troupe from Monroeville draws sold-out crowds for its spring performances in the old courthouse there, and has taken its production to Mobile, Ala., Washington, Israel and England.

Then too, several Internet Web sites have emerged to provide background information on "To Kill a Mockingbird" and Lee, and to foster e-mail discussion by teachers, students and fans. The most comprehensive of the sites, by Jane Kansas of Halifax, Nova Scotia, has had 96,000 visitors in a single month.

Flying high as it is, "To Kill a Mockingbird" would seem to be the last novel to need help from Oprah Winfrey, network TV's champion of reading.

So, naturally, Oprah has weighed in. On her Web site she calls "To Kill a Mockingbird" a "masterpiece" and "my favorite novel of all time."