Lee’s Inspirations

Harper Lee, known locally as Nelle, based her only published novel on the people and places with which she was familiar. Many of her childhood experiences in a sweltering small town in Alabama in the Depression era were incorporated into To Kill a Mockingbird, written some 30 years later.

The setting for To Kill a Mockingbird, Maycomb, was based on the author’s hometown of Monroeville, a sleepy Bible-Belt community surrounded by red dirt and cotton fields. Lee’s father, like Atticus, was a lawyer, and in his only criminal case he defended two African-American men accused of robbery and manslaughter. Both were hanged. Lee never took another criminal case and remained a real-estate lawyer for the rest of his life. The story of Tom Robinson and Mapella Ewell was undoubtedly inspired by a case tried in the Monroeville court when Harper Lee was about Scout’s age. An African-American man was found guilty of raping a white woman and sentenced to death. Leading citizens of the town, presumably including Lee’s father, came to have doubts about the facts of the case, but the prisoner suffered a breakdown while awaiting execution and later died in custody.

The author has confirmed that she based the character of Dill on a young boy who came to live with his cousins in the house next door to hers. His name was Truman Streckfiss Persons, later known as Truman Capote, author of Breakfast at Tiffany’s and In Cold Blood. He was a great friend and playmate of Lee’s.

The Old Courthouse

The lines between fact and fiction blur when you visit Monroeville, because you can’t help seeing it through the eyes of both a young Harper Lee and the fictional Scout Finch. The Old Monroe County Courthouse, a red brick building with an octagonal clock tower, dominates the Town Square. The unusual oval-shaped courtroom has been restored to look exactly as it did in the 1930s. Timber staircases lead to the curved ‘coloured’ galleries, from where the judge and his jury sit. At the far end of the room is the pulpit, where the judge sits. The floor is covered in green carpet, and the walls are painted in shades of green and blue. The courtroom is furnished with large wooden chairs, and there is a long wooden table in the center of the room. The room is lit by gas lamps, and the walls are covered with old newspaper articles, including a article about the trial of Tom Robinson.

To Kill a Mockingbird, which is performed every May, takes place on the Courthouse grounds in front of the small facade of the houses of the Finch’s, Boo Radley, Mrs Dubose and Miss Maudie. These sets are now completely under the spreading oak and pecan trees in the Town Square. The actors and audience move inside to the courtroom for Act 2, where the trial of Tom Robinson is recreated. The judge, lawyers, witnesses and audience all occupy the positions they would in a real trial, and the African-American cast members are confined to the balconies, as they were in the 1930s. Appropriate members of the audience are selected to form the all-white male jury which decides the fate of Tom Robinson. Ticket go on sale on the first business day of March each year and quickly sell out.

Walking the Town

A museum brochure details a self-guided walking tour exploring Monroeville as it was in the 1930s, when not only Lee and Capote played there, but also Maycomb would have been where Scout and Dill lived and played there, too. Points of interest include a monument erected by the Alabama State Bar, paying tribute to the fictional Atticus Finch’s lawyer-hero who knows how to see and to tell the truth; the building where Lee’s father practised law, and the jail outside which Atticus faced down a lynch mob. Lee’s childhood home has been demolished and is now the site of an ice-cream shop. Mel’s Dairy Dream. The house next door, where Capote lived with his cousins, was destroyed in a fire. Only the remains of a stone wall, fish pool and historical plaque mark the place where two future writers played in a tree house and wrote stories about local people on an old Underwood typewriter given to them by Lee’s father. Over the road, a service station has replaced the old garage, backing onto the school grounds, immortalised as the mysterious Radley place. With the aid of the map, it is easy to retrace Jem and Scout’s steps along South Alabama Avenue, from the schoolhouse and site of Boo Radley’s house, past the imagined residences of Miss Maudie, Stephanie Crawford, Mr Avery and Mrs Dubose, to the Courthouse and the nearby jail. Many gardens in Monroeville feature camellias, like the ones Jem destroyed in Mrs Dubose’s front yard. Large outdoor murals depict scenes from the novel, including one featuring Jem, Scout and Dill trying to catch a glimpse of the reclusive Boo Radley through a fence.

To experience the flavour of Harper Lee’s Deep South, take a leisurely stroll past the historic homes in Mount Pleasant Street, then sample local delicacies such as catfish, cheese grits and corn bread at David’s Catfish House. Drive a short way out of town to Rickaby’s Mill, to see the water-powered gristmill grind corn into cornmeal and grits, and displays of other traditional crafts, including blacksmithing and the making of cane syrup.

Mockingbirds are quite common in the Monroeville area, so the chances are good that you will hear and see one of these small grey-and-white creatures imitating the sounds of other birds, humans and mechanical noises.

In honour of the town’s extraordinary literary tradition, Monroeville has been declared the ‘Literary Capital of Alabama’ and the Monroeville Writers’ Fountain at Alabama Southern Community College honours outstanding writers who have lived in Monroe County, including Harper Lee.

Other literary attractions in the State of Alabama include the F Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald Museum, based in their former home in Montgomery; the home of Helen Keller at Ivy Green, Tuscumbia; and the Inland Cafe in Inland, which was the real-life model for Fanney Flagg’s Whistle Stop Cafe and famous for its fried green tomatoes.

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