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Of Blue Jays, Mockingbirds, and (Atticus) Finches: Go Set a Watchman reveals a more complex - and, sadly, still relevant - view on racial equality

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Go Set a Watchman, Harper Lee’s much-anticipated second novel, has now been released, and among the wide range of first impressions about it is a palpable ambivalence, tending towards hostility, concerning what may be called the moral decentering or collapse of Atticus Finch.

To Kill a Mockingbird was first published in July 1960, and for 55 years both Atticus Finch and this Pulitzer Prize-winning novel have stood for social justice and humanism over the tyranny of bigotry and hate. Time, it seems, has radically altered, or perhaps more accurately, simply revealed, Atticus Finch’s complex views on racial equality, “due process,” and “equal protection”—basically all the best parts of the 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution. In narrative time this stunning revelation has happened in just 20 years, between the 1930s era of To Kill a Mockingbird and the mid-1950s trip back to Maycomb, Ala., made by a grown up Scout, called Jean Louise in Go Set a Watchman.

This new novel is thematically and narratively the contrapuntal complement to its canonical sibling. Race, class, gender, law and order, civil rights, innocence, and corruption are the exigent issues of both novels. However, Go Set a Watchman adds a minor but important concern with aging and eldercare that is notable both for its enlargement of To Kill a Mockingbird’s topics and for their relevance in our own time, especially as the Baby Boomer generation retires in ever-larger numbers. The Atticus Finch indelibly imprinted in our minds as a tall, dark-haired Gregory Peck (and dressed in white) standing in solidarity next to a proud black man played by Brock Peters in the famous courtroom trial, that Atticus Finch, in Go Set a Watchman, is 72 years old, severely arthritic, and (reluctantly) dependent on the kindness of kinship ties.

The heart of this troubling new novel is concealed in its biblical title, which stresses the responsibility of conscience. “Every man’s island, Jean Louise, every man’s watchman, is his conscience,” her uncle, Dr. Finch, cautions her. What catalyzes this modern morality play is the myth of home and the journey to it, or rather to the possibility of it, which human experience reminds us is always an evolution and a revision of who we are, and never simply a repetition. Occasionally, Go Set a Watchman carries the reader into the heart of its subject matter as poignantly and artfully as To Kill a Mockingbird. More often, however, the play of art, politics, and morality veers away from art, becoming too often didactic, mismanaging the critical balance between “showing” and “telling” that narrative fiction depends on.

When discursive telling takes the place of dramatically showing, and even when the balance is aesthetically right, Jean

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By Cedric Bryant
What ... compels a paragon of moral rectitude, like Atticus Finch, to join Maycomb’s White Citizen’s Council? The answer, then and now, is essentially the same: when we perceive a threat to the privileged positions—economically, socially, culturally—from which we, all of us, define self, our identity can make monstrous shape shifters of us all.”

—Lee Family Professor of English
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