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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

By Cedric Bryant

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



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
Cedric Bryant

Louise is polemically outmanned (literally) and outflanked in the novel's protracted debate about race, culture, and survival by, literally, everyone white. No black voices or perspectives are enlisted and none speak about race from a first-person point of view, none from an unmediated interiority. Whatever "black consciousness" is or not, is confined within whorls of speakerly white male and female narrators who all presume to "know" "Negroes" and what is best for them and best for the white South. And, despite a sometimes valiant but impossible effort on Jean Louise's part to insist on an irreducible humanism, there is little difference or distinction between her belief and that of all the white characters—including her father, aunt, uncle, and the community at large—about one salient point: adult black people in the aggregate are not intellectually, culturally, politically, or biologically prepared for the responsibilities of full citizenship. "Now think about this," Atticus says,

What would happen if all the Negroes in the South were suddenly given full civil rights? I'll tell you. There'd be another Reconstruction. Would you want your state governments run by people who don't know how to run 'em?"

"They are simple people, most of them," Scout pleads to her father, "but that doesn't make them subhuman" nor can it "deny them [the] hope" that Jesus loves them and that they too have a God-given right to pursue happiness.

So heavily freighted with the social significance of the Supreme Court ruling desegregating schools, the proliferation of NAACP chapters throughout the South, and the "tyrannous threats" to the sanctity of states' rights posed by an increasingly centralized government, *Go Set a*

Watchman is inescapably a novel of its own time. However, it is emphatically a narrative for our own time as well that reveals the enduring complexity of race and racism through the paradoxes of all the novel's "watchmen," especially Atticus Finch and Jean Louise Finch. "What made her kind of people harden and say 'nigger,'" Jean Louise asks, "when the word had never crossed their lips before?" What, in other words, 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.

It is as difficult in *Go Set a Watchman* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* as it continues to be in our time to push the national (and local) discussion about race beyond the malignity of racial epithets and symbols, like Confederate flags displayed on the grounds of a state capital.

Words and symbols and words as symbols are unarguably important; being human without them is impossible. But the larger discussion about race, in fiction and in reality, always stalls, never seems to move beyond the reasonable recognition that words and symbols can be hurtful and, therefore, should be censured. And with this general consensus the discussion begins to dissipate, until the next racially charged tragedy—the

unspeakable mass murder of black people at Bible study, for example—reignites the debate.

Go Set a Watchman ventures less deeply than *To Kill a Mockingbird* into the place where the "Other" is understood, however inchoately, as ourselves—where "race," as the contributors to the essay collection *Race, Writing, and Difference* contend, is a metaphor, a dangerous "trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific belief systems"

Finally, throughout this sometimes poignantly artful, sometimes regrettably didactic second novel, Jean Louise Finch is repeatedly asked to come home. To do so, however, requires reconciling the past and the "tin god" her father has become with the idealist she is and the pragmatic realist she must learn to be. She must learn in the old biblical ways—"as if through a glass darkly"—to set aside the too simple either/or constructions of race, the South, and family and engage the moral contradictions and ambiguities inherent in them. And, she must learn to be a vigilant watchman, at all times on guard against the frailty and power of this volatile triad in an ever-changing world in which they inextricably and complexly always matter. So too must the reader.

Cedric Bryant is Lee Family Professor of English at Colby. His areas of expertise include Toni Morrison, William Faulkner, Southern regionalism, and the politics of race and gender, diversity, and multiculturalism.