

Jean Louise's Story

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

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It's far from perfect, its politics are not pristine, and it's very much a product of its time and place. Harper Lee's new (old) book *Go Set A Watchman* is a lot like her iconic character Atticus Finch. And I love them both anyway.

A little background, in case you've been on summer vacation in outer space: Lee first submitted *Watchman* for publication in 1957, but the book was rejected. Her editor at the time asked her to rewrite the novel from the viewpoint of a young girl. This request resulted, a few years later, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which won a Pulitzer Prize and went on to become one of the most popular novels in history, selling over 40 million copies globally. When *Watchman* recently resurfaced and HarperCollins purchased it, there was much speculation that Lee wouldn't have wanted it published – that someone had taken advantage of an old, infirm woman – but an investigation by Alabama state officials reportedly found otherwise. Apparently, Lee signed on with all her “marbles” in tact, and with enthusiasm.

Having now read the book, I would have done the same thing. And I say to Harper Lee, with all honor and deference: *You go, girl!*

The timing of *Watchman's* release felt almost providential, coming right on the heels of the Emanuel AME Church massacre and subsequent removal of the Confederate flag from SC statehouse grounds. [Suddenly, we felt submerged again in a South we thought we'd put behind us for good.](#) Those who'd long cherished the rebel flag as an emblem of their heritage were forced to acknowledge – however painfully – that it had far too often been used in the service of hate. And just as that complicated symbol was coming down, we learned that another beloved southern icon was poised to fall from grace.

Et tu, Attice?

So it was with a wee bit of trepidation and a whole lot of curiosity that I got my hot little hands on *Watchman* the day it became available on Kindle. Having been told by “them” – the South-disdaining cultural powers that be – that this grand archetypal figure, our noble Atticus, was going down, I had dual urges to both prove them wrong . . . and get it over with already.

The reviews were, by and large, not great. Critics said that Harper Lee's prose in *Watchman* was not as polished as in *Mockingbird* . . . that her dialogue was sometimes stilted . . . that her narrative was fragmented . . . that there were too many philosophical conversations, too much “telling” and not enough “showing.”

All this is true, I suppose; and it's not surprising, considering *Mockingbird* went through an intense, two-year editing process while

Watchman

has been published virtually “as is.” Yet, much like the legendary “diamond in the rough,”

Watchman

sparkles with such intensity – such integrity – that these superficial flaws seem almost irrelevant to me.

I devoured the book in a couple of days, sneaking in a page here and a page there during my work hours – you can do that when your boss is you – and staying up far too late at night. For me, it was one of those books you can't wait to finish even while you wish it would never end. I was delighted to be back in Maycomb, Alabama, and would have been happy to linger there a bit longer.

(Now's the time I should probably bid some of you adieu with a Spoiler Alert. This isn't a “review” per se, but I'll need to discuss some plot points. Please come back and see me again at www.lcweekly.com once you've finished the book. If you don't intend to read it, feel free to stick around.)

So, about Atticus. I guess we can't get around that. I think it's important to remember, though,

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that the *new* Atticus is actually the *old* Atticus . . . the one Harper Lee originally intended for us to know. And in terms of personality, he feels very much like the Atticus we

do

know

– the same dry wit, the same twinkle in his eye, the same innate kindness. He is now 72 years old and arthritic, but his spirit remains temperately cheerful, and his reputation – both personal and professional – remains beyond reproach. As the story begins, he is still the unassailable hero of his daughter Jean Louise – aka “Scout” – who’s just come home for a visit from New York City, where she lives and works.

It’s 20 years after *Mockingbird* in the little town of Maycomb, and things feel the same – which is comforting – but different – which isn’t – to the 26-year-old Jean Louise. The Supreme Court has recently reversed the Plessy v. Ferguson “separate but equal” ruling, and there’s a new tension in the air. Eventually, Jean Louise discovers that Atticus and his protégé, her boyfriend Henry, have been attending Citizen’s Council meetings, and she’s faced with the shocking truth that the two men she loves most in the world – one of whom she idolizes – are segregationists. Minor league, well-meaning, genteel . . . but undeniable segregationists.

And Jean Louise comes unhinged. You, dear reader, might come unhinged, too. Some of the words that Atticus speaks in *Watchman* are pretty hard to take – especially from Atticus, who, as you know, looks just like Gregory Peck – and I kept reading and rereading them (hoping it was me, not him), trying to conjure up a different interpretation. But, alas, there was none to be had.

Still, I was not willing to give up on Atticus. With apologies to Otis Redding, *I’ve been loving him too long; I can’t stop now*

. So I decided to get off my high horse, instead. I came down from my lofty perch here in 2015 and greeted Atticus Finch as the character Harper Lee first conceived in 1955 – a man of his time and place. A fine man, an honorable man, but

just

a man. By doing this – by allowing Saint Atticus to leave his shrine – I freed myself to love him again. And that’s exactly what Jean Louise must do in

Watchman

, and exactly what she does. Eventually.

Go Set a Watchman is not Atticus’s story, you see. It belongs to Jean Louise. It’s the story of a remarkable young woman – with ideas and instincts ahead of their time – coming to terms with false idols and, in doing so, coming of age. In many ways, it’s a period piece – a wonderfully

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precise portrait of a very specific time and place, exploring and challenging but never really transcending the attitudes of its era. (Even Jean Louise expresses opinions about race that wouldn't fly today.) But if you can leave the politics aside – and trust me, I know I'm asking a lot – what you'll find is a beautiful human story shimmering with all the wit, wisdom, wry observation and uncanny insight that made you fall in love with Harper Lee in the first place. This novel may be less polished, less universally heartwarming, than *Mockingbird*, but I believe it's more truthful, more "grown up," and far more fascinating.

There's a scene, near the end, that I predict will be controversial, but which struck me as profound. In her distress at Atticus's betrayal, Jean Louise has run to her quirky Uncle Jack – despite being the town "eccentric," Jack strikes me as the most clear-eyed character in the book – who tells her that she and her father are actually very similar. "You're very much like him," says Uncle Jack, "except you're a bigot and he's not." What?!?! Jean Louise, who's been busy packing her bags – having decided to leave Atticus, Henry, and all of Maycomb behind forever in a delicious fit of self-righteousness – is completely taken aback. She rushes to the Dictionary and looks up the word. "Bigot," she reads. "Noun. One obstinately or intolerably devoted to his own church, party, belief or opinion." She bristles.

Uncle Jack continues, "You've no doubt heard some pretty offensive talk since you've been home, but instead of getting on your charger and blindly striking it down, you turned and ran. You said, in effect, "I don't like the way these people do, so I have no time for them.""

Thus begins Jean Louise's *real* coming of age, which must always start with an honest examination of one's self, not others. I won't tell you exactly how the book ends. But I will say this: At its heart, *Go Set a Watchman* is not a book about justice and equality. It's a book about grace and forgiveness. It's a story about real people learning to love each other in spite of their flaws, in spite of their blind spots, in spite of their wrong-headedness, in spite of all the ways they let each other down.

If you prefer to read about a perfect person – someone you can idolize – by all means go reread *Mockingbird*. Or better yet, stick with the New Testament. But it'd be a shame if you missed this book.

Margaret Evans is the editor of Lowcountry Weekly. Read more of her [Rants & Raves here](#), or visit her blog at www.memargaret.com