

Things Fall Apart

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor



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It's stream-of-consciousness time, folks. That's what happens on this page when the world is spinning too fast – when reality spirals beyond my ability to comprehend it, much less comment on it with any coherence.

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold,” wrote Yeats back in the day. I swear that guy was a prophet.

Donald Trump just won the SC Republican primary and seems well on his way to becoming the GOP nominee for president. *Donald Trump*. It seems like only yesterday he was a cartoonish tycoon with a reality show on TV, a regular presence in the tabloids, and a big fat “D” by his name. (For Democrat, not Donald.)

My, how time flies. How things change.

Political campaigns, for instance. I dropped off my daughter for a Beaufort High basketball game on the night of Trump's rally here in town. The rally had been in progress for half an hour when we arrived – packing the school's two auditoriums and spilling outside. The parking lot was a circus – rally rejects milling around, merchandise vendors hawking “Make America Great Again” caps and shirts, youthful Bern-feeling protestors with posters (and Trump fans yelling at them), cop cars with lights flashing.

Actually, it felt more like a rock concert than a circus, with a frisson of danger and malice

in the air. I hesitated to let my child out of the car.

Trump has emerged as the bad boy of American politics. (Who knew we needed one?) The more outrageous his behavior, the more his fans adore him. I fully expect somebody to throw a bra on stage at a Trump rally soon. Perhaps The Donald will even smash a guitar. Or bite the head off a chicken. And soon thereafter, we may very well call him President Trump.

("And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches its way toward Washington, DC to be inaugurated?" – the Ghost of W.B. Yeats)

My poor mother down in Alabama is nearing despair. A lifelong Republican and true believer in conservative principles, she can't bear it that this flashy vulgarian – with nary a sincere conservative conviction – is the likely standard bearer for the Grand Old Party. In her day, good manners and civility were part and parcel of the Republican brand. One of its big draws, even. Of course, talk radio and cable news have been blasting away at any semblance of GOP gentility for decades now, but somehow, the rise of Trump into that vacuum still shocks her . . .

And in other news of the vulgar . . . Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia died last week, and the word had barely surfaced before vile comments began appearing on my Facebook newsfeed. Seriously. People couldn't even give it 15 minutes. "Good riddance to bad rubbish" was the gist of these insensitive posts, and as I read them, I felt my stomach turn and my heart break.

Is this really who we are now? Is our political scene so coarse and virulent, our citizenry so harshly divided against itself, that we no longer recognize common decency . . . or the common humanity of our ideological foes?

Another towering American figure left us last week, with the passing of Harper Lee. Thankfully, I've seen nothing but love and praise pouring out for the legendary author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

But that wasn't the case back in July when her controversial second novel (first novel, actually) *Go Set a Watchman* was published, and the chattering classes screeched that Ms. Lee had sullied her legacy.

Even worse – she’d sullied the good name of our national hero, one Atticus Finch.

There was a lot of anger out there back then, but nobody was quite sure which way to aim it. At the aged and ailing Harper Lee? Her publishers? Her lawyers? Her caregivers? Somebody had to be blamed for the fall of “our” Atticus. But who?

For those of you who somehow missed this brou-ha-ha last summer . . . the book gave us a portrait of an imperfect Atticus Finch. Atticus as segregationist. And much like his daughter Jean Louise, we lost it. [As I wrote at the time:](#)

“Jean Louise comes unhinged. You, dear reader, might come unhinged, too . . . But 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.”

For my money, *Go Set a Watchman*, though an inferior literary work, is more relevant to our times – and has, perhaps, even more to teach us – than *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

While

Mockingbird,

at its heart, is a book about justice, courage and unwavering virtue,

Watchman

is a book about brokenness and pride and mercy. It’s a story about complicated people learning to love each other in spite of their flaws, their blind spots, their disagreements . . . in spite of all the ways they let each other down. There are no saints in

Watchman

, and no cozy resolutions. It’s a less polished book than

Mockingbird

, rougher and more provocative and harder to love. But that’s what makes it so well-suited to our times, I think. In this torn and fractured era – this era when it seems so hard to love each other – we need its lessons more than ever.

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And in this vulgar, vulgar age . . . I think we could all use a return visit to Lee's fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama. Things aren't perfect there, but at least they appreciate good manners and common courtesy. By our current standards, that's YUGE.