If you grew up in Alabama, as I did, you knew all about "To Kill A Mockingbird." Along with Helen Keller and Bear Bryant, it was one of your few claims to fame. You might not have read the book, but you probably said you had, and maybe you even believed it, since you'd seen the movie so many times. Chances are, your mama even knew somebody who knew somebody who knew Harper Lee" This year, TKAM turns 50, and as a result, has been having something of a renaissance in the public imagination: The Alabama Humanities Council has been hosting a series of symposiums" "Outliers" author Malcolm Gladwell wrote an incendiary take-down of Atticus Finch in The New Yorker" Tom Ashcroft recently hosted a fascinating edition of "On Point" with TKAM as its topic"   I didn't know about any of this last summer when a member of my new book club picked TKAM as our first read. All I knew was that I looked forward to revisiting the book. I had read it as a child " I think? " but to be honest, I had no recollection of the experience. And every time I tried to conjure one up, scenes from the movie flooded my brain instead. But oh, were they vivid! Two children running through a dark wood, one dressed as a ham" Robert Duvall behind that door" Gregory Peck walking out of that courtroom" "Miss Jean Louise, stand up. Your father's passin""" But it had been years " decades, actually " since I'd even seen the movie, and as I approached the book, I wondered how the story would hold up. Fifty years is a long time. Much has changed since TKAM was published in 1960, on the cusp of the Civil Rights movement; and even more since the 1930s, when the story is set, during the Depression in the Jim Crow south. Not surprisingly, TKAM had been the source of ongoing controversy over the years. Its racial slurs, profanity, and "adult" subject matter have spurred plenty of censorship campaigns, though I can find no evidence that the book has ever been officially banned. According to the oracle Wikipedia, one of the first incidents took place in Hanover, Virginia, in 1966: "A parent protested that the use of rape as a plot device was immoral. Johnson [the parent] cites examples of letters to local newspapers, which range from amusement to fury; those letters expressing the most outrage, however, complained about [white] Mayella Ewell's attraction to [black] Tom Robinson over the depictions of rape. Upon learning the school administrators were holding hearings to decide the book's appropriateness for the classroom, Harper Lee sent $10 to The Richmond News Leader suggesting it to be used toward "the enrollment of the Hanover County School Board in any first grade of its choice." You gotta love her. As attitudes about race changed, so did the controversy, which hasn't been limited to the US. In the 1990s, school districts in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, Canada attempted to have the book removed from standard teaching curricula, saying: "The terminology in this novel subjects students to humiliating experiences that rob them of their self-respect and the respect of their peers. The word 'Nigger' is used 48 times in the novel...We believe that the English Language Arts curriculum in Nova Scotia must enable all students to feel comfortable with ideas, feelings and experiences presented without fear of humiliation... To Kill a Mockingbird is clearly a book that no longer meets these goals and therefore must no longer be used for classroom instruction." Well, when you put it like that" Nobody wants to rob high school students of their self-respect or the respect of their peers. Nobody wants them fearful or humiliated. And, of course, we all want students to "feel comfortable with ideas, feelings and experiences"" Wait a minute. Strike that last line. Do we really want teenagers to feel "comfortable" with all ideas, feelings and

experiences? I would argue forcefully that we don't. I can't imagine Harper Lee wrote TKAM in hopes that her readers would come away feeling "comfortable." I don't think any serious author writes for that reason. What I found, upon revisiting TKAM as an adult, was a beautiful, funny, poignant story that made me deeply uncomfortable. And I needed it. I needed to feel really feel how things were at that time, in that place, for those people. I needed to wrestle with their contradictions, recognize their flaws and their gifts, watch as some of them evolved while others stagnated. I needed to see my own resemblance to these characters even some of the "bad" ones and acknowledge our kinship. I needed to feel uncomfortable. I've had a tendency to bristle, in the past, over all the attention we lavish on the issue of race in the US. My complaint always goes something like this: If we really want to get beyond race in this country if we are truly "post-racial" and "colorblind" then we've got to stop imagining racism around every corner. And when I said "we," I was just being polite. What I really meant was "they." I could never understand why "they" were so obsessed with race all those people who are, I mean when clearly, it's a non-issue in the 21st century. Clearly to me, anyway. And I live in the Deep South. If there were still significant racism in America, I'd have seen it, right? So went my thinking, anyway. But then I go and re-immerse myself in TKAM, set in the state where I grew up, in the years just before my mother was born. And it's full of such truth and power, with characters so real and familiar characters I recognize doing and saying things so hurtful in a time and place not that far removed from my own. And I realize that I've been insensitive. Or maybe just wrong. I still believe we make too much of race in this country I think it's often a convenient scapegoat that obscures the real issues at hand but thanks to TKAM, I now understand why we do. It just hasn't been that long, you see. It's important to remember how things were, especially for those of us who didn't live through Jim Crow and, frankly, find it hard to imagine. It's important to see how far we've come. And it's important not to get too comfortable. But great literature and I do think TKAM qualifies, despite its ongoing popularity must do more than just make us uncomfortable. A great novel is a self-contained universe, full of depth and color and paradox, where we willingly take up residence for a while. If it were only a "lesson" or a "sermon" or a "morality tale" full of black and white characters, we wouldn't keep reading. If the fictional town of Maycombe, Alabama weren't hot and haunted and beautiful, we wouldn't linger so long with Scout and Jem. If the irrepressible Dill didn't have a dark, sad past, we might not care so much about his fate. If the maid Calpurnia weren't so wise and good, we might feel sorry for her. And if Atticus were a saint, we might not see our fathers in him. Great novels are like life convoluted and contradictory, bittersweet and mysterious. My mother grew up in Alabama in the 1940s. I've seen the little house where she lived as a very young child, on Line Street in Old Decatur, beneath the spreading oaks. On the phone last night, Mom told me about Willie Mae, the maid who took care of their family in those days. She remembers sitting on the kitchen counter while Willie Mae cooked dinner, listening to "Young Widow Brown" on the radio. She remembers playing with the neighborhood children while the maids sat watching them, laughing and chatting on the steps of the First Methodist Church. "I loved Willie Mae. We were the best of friends," Mom told me. "Of course, I was only a little girl, so what do I know? I suspect we didn't pay her very much. But, it was during the war. We didn't have very much. Nobody did." The best novels tell us the truth about life that it's complicated. And that's why they should be read and reread and

reread again. Even the ones that make us uncomfortable. Especially those.

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