



The Mockingbird Syndrome

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For a few decades now I have been scolding, to students, friends and colleagues, what I called “The Mockingbird Syndrome,” basically blaming Harper Lee for a popular fiction genre.

In this genre, a white person, usually female, often a child, always possessing unusual innocence, is presented as the hero/heroine of the story by simple dint of being open-minded in an environment of systemic bigotry. Such novels are almost invariably made into movies, and Hollywood is so prone to the syndrome that there is a book-length analysis called *The White Savior Film* (Matthew W. Hughey), though the made-for-film version favors the hunk hero rather than the innocent.

In fiction, we have had Connie May Fowler’s *Before Women Had Wings*, made into a Hallmark TV drama by Oprah; Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees*, which became a road movie for Queen Latifah and Jennifer Hudson; Sena Jeter Naslund’s *Ahab’s Wife*, which begins with an extended melodrama as the heroine helps a slave escape; Barbara Kingsolver’s manipulative and widely assigned *The Poisonwood Bible*; the autobiographical collage *The Freedom Writers Diary*, with the film savior played by Hilary Swank; Michael Lewis’ semi-biographical *The Blind Side*, which won an Oscar for Sandra Bullock, and what *The New York*

Times greeted as the “button-pushing, soon to be wildly popular novel,” Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help*, and the movie that followed with a vast, star-studded cast.

This is the American myth we pale readers and movie goers want, in which benevolent white people aid and accomplish the validation of surprisingly bright/wise/good/normal black people; and the myth persists in the face of African America, which offers up examples of great learning and power, including a reticent intellectual in the White House—who, however, as we have seen, is not immune either to racism or to the particular myth.

Of course, the genre was not really invented by Harper Lee. All unbiased American innocents descend from the house of Huck, and include at least two pre-*Mockingbird* novels: Carson McCullers’ *The Member of the Wedding* and Ivy Compton Burnett’s *A Little Princess* (who befriends a dying East Indian man, is richly rewarded for it, and whose best friend, in the most recent film, is recast as a black serving girl). But these earlier stories differ in both stylistic and fundamental ways from each other and from the syndrome, and it is *To Kill a Mockingbird* that dictates the form of the beloved twentieth-century fable.

Now we have *Go Set a Watchman*, for which HarperCollins has orchestrated the rollout to maximum effect: a late, miraculous find; a controversy about the author’s wishes; a narrative shocker; and a pub date guarded like the Fort Knox it was.

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But what *are* we to do with Atticus Finch, forever fused with the image of Gregory Peck at his most lovable small-town urbane, now unmasked as a bigot and a hypocrite?

I had better confess that my interest in this kind of story is not disinterested, and may contain a squirt or two of sour grape, because the subject of bigotry infused my childhood as it did Harper Lee's, and I have tried to wrestle honestly in my novels with the complex awkwardness of our interracial American relationships.

I'm only a decade younger than Lee, and the Alabama of *Go Set a Watchman* bears striking resemblance to the Arizona of my childhood, down to the a cappella lilt of the doxology. Like hers, the particular (Anglo, Methodist, tee-totaling) prejudice I grew up in was complicated, unintended, and unexamined.

My mother prided herself on a benevolent inclusivity that Atticus Finch would have recognized. She spoke with emotion of "the brotherhood of man." She taught scripture in The Indian School in Phoenix, never considering or imagining that the girls she guided had been rounded up from the reservation in an attempt to make them "more like us." Like the Atticus of *Go Set a Watchman*, she believed that equality had to be earned, and in its own sweet time.

She in her turn had spent from her fifth to her tenth year in a wood cabin in the remote Chiracahua Mountains, where her father managed a failing marble quarry, dressed in white frock, Mary Janes and hair bow, sitting on a rock she called her best friend because she was not allowed to play with the children of the Mexican laborers. A friend of mine once pointed out that her hypocrisy as an adult was self-protective. "Otherwise, how could she *bear* it?"

In any case, she directed my brother and me to sort through our toys at Christmas, and those we no longer wanted we took "south of the tracks" to distribute at the front yards of the black and Mexican families. One of the dishonesties of our black/white myth is the notion that children are slow to learn societal arrogance (Twain knew better). My heart swelled with benevolence as I set out the toys.

Unlike Jean Louise in *Watchman*, I was still a child, about

eight I think, when I first became aware of parental hypocrisy. I made friends with the daughter of our new black once-a-week maid and begged for her to bring the girl every week. My mother's demurrals were so awkward, so full of twisted reasoning and precise articulation (she was an elocution teacher), that I knew I was being lied to but did not know why.

I was somewhat radicalized by a white high school English teacher who had grown up poor on Chicago's South Side, and I was editor of *The Mustang Roundup* in 1958, the year before the Phoenix schools were to be desegregated. I was shocked that a poll showed some sixty percent of the student body took a dim view of desegregation, and I went down to Carver High School with my clipboard and my saddle shoes to interview the student council. It didn't occur to me that the school was being disbanded in order to prevent the ugly resistance that would occur were white teenagers assigned to Carver, but it did make an impression on me that the black (we still said Negro) students were mourning the loss of their school. What was to become of their trophies, their halls and homerooms, their identity?

By the time I reached adulthood, I believed that I had educated my parents regarding race, and was shocked, when I was married and a mother, to learn that they had borrowed money to join a neighborhood group who would then buy a house on our block in order to prevent a black family from buying it. Like that of Jean Louise, my reaction was physical. The argument with my mother that ensued was the first time I experienced rage as a thundering in my body. My mother protested that she and Dad wanted to "protect the value of the house" in order to pass it on to my brother and me. I replied (spat, probably) that we wanted no such favors. My mother was frail; her heart was bad, and my anger was probably fruitless cruelty. But my frustration at America's racism was by that point the driving force of my writing and I could not disavow it.

So my novels don't deal with saviors. The communities they present are at odds, the interracial and interethnic relationships askew. In one a teacher refuses to teach from a racist textbook

and realizes that by leaving for the North she cuts herself off from every Negro she has known. (This is a phenomenon put to persuasive use by the Atticus of *Go Set a Watchman*.) In the alternate reality of another, a Mexican boy is manipulated into a political asset by a Republican senator. (“I didn’t say you were not sincere,” his wife accuses. “I said you were selling your sincerity.”) In my novel *Cutting Stone*, a Baltimore belle is transplanted to Arizona during the Mexican revolution and must choose between her class and her religion. And in the most recent, *Bridge of Sand*, my heroine realizes that her grandmother was a bigot and her mother was a hypocrite, but considers herself postracial until she falls in love with a black man and they try to live together in a small Gulf Coast town. It’s probably worth mentioning that this book was published about the time Obama took his first presidential oath of office, and I worried (despaired, possibly) that the novel was too late to be relevant, since we were all postracial now.

“Every man’s watchman, is his conscience,” is the inspiring quotation that the publisher picks out for the back cover of *Go Set a Watchman*. The jacket blurb assures us that this book “serves us as [an] essential companion, adding depth, context, and new meaning to an American classic.” Yup. It does that all right. “New meaning,” as in: contradiction.

In fact the title comes from a different use in the novel, from a preacher’s invocation of Isaiah 21.6: “For thus hath the Lord said unto me, Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth.” It’s pretty clear that in the rejected manuscript, Harper Lee meant to declare what she saw in Monroeville, Alabama: the survival in even the best-intentioned citizens, even her beloved father, of a sanctimonious racism. And it is tempting, for a fiction writer, at least, to suppose that what she experienced as she worked (for two years!) with savvy New York editor Tay Hohoff—producing paragraph by paragraph, critique by critique, the *Mockingbird* story that the reading public would adore—was

a gradual retreat from what she had seen and meant to write about in the first place. After such an experience, and such reward (it is tempting, at least for a fiction writer, to ask), is it any wonder she never wrote another?

In one perspective, it's sad to see *To Kill a Mockingbird* unmasked. So many people have touched their better selves by loving this book. "With so many real-life characters," says *The Chicago Tribune*, "tumbling off their pedestals (Bill Cosby comes to mind), why knock such a noble literary hero off his?"

Last century was time enough for such sentiment. The most effective scene in *Go Set a Watchman* comes not when Jean Louise discovers her father's hypocrisy (where in truth the writing is a little strained), but after Atticus has agreed to take the case of a young black defendant—in order to avoid the intervention of an NAACP lawyer. Jean Louise goes to comfort the boy's grandmother, her beloved Calpurnia, only to find that Cal addresses her in the Stepin Fetchit argot she reserves for white bosses.

As I was making notes for this piece, it happened that I crossed an Illinois parking lot and overheard a woman shout into her cell phone, "The white cops can't do anything about the blacks because of this bullshit!"

Yes, she is still with us, in Woodstock, Charleston, Ferguson, New York, Phoenix and Monroeville; and there will be no joy from that quarter. If there's a serious good that can come out of the revelation of *Go Set a Watchman*, it is that we who want a more perfect union should face each other more honestly over the complicated and unlovely truth of our national history: how it deforms us all, black and white. And that we should acknowledge the ongoing, awkward, self-conscious, self-segregating gulf we have barely begun to bridge.