

# Fifty Years of TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

**ALABAMA** EARLY REVIEWS OF *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD* were mixed. The *Atlantic Monthly* called it "frankly and completely impossible." *Time* magazine disagreed: "Author [Harper] Lee, 34, an Alabaman, has written her first novel with all of the tactile brilliance and none of the preciosity generally supposed to be standard swamp-warfare issue for Southern writers." The public—and the Pulitzer Prize committee—agreed with *Time*; the book spent eighty-eight weeks on bestseller lists, eventually sold more than thirty million copies, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1961. Since then, it's been named the favorite twentieth-century novel of librarians in a 1999 poll by *Library Journal*, and in a 1991 survey conducted by the Library of Congress it ranked second, behind the Bible, as the book that made the most difference in peoples' lives.

Despite the book's immediate success, it was also condemned and banned by local school boards across the country. "Book bannings have plagued the novel since its publication, even in Alabama," says Nancy Grisham Anderson, associate professor of English at Auburn University at Montgomery. "The reasons vary from objections to race, to the racial epithets, to 'immoral' issues. Bannings have continued within the past year or so in locations as disparate as Canada and Texas for reasons just as diverse: A book that uses a racial epithet is unacceptable or a book about a black man raping a white woman is unacceptable. At least the former reason is based on a reading of the novel, while the latter one is not."

Upon hearing that the *Richmond News-Leader* printed a flurry of letters praising a Virginia board of education for banning the book in 1966, Harper Lee responded with this rebuke:

Editor, *News-Leader*:

Recently I have received echoes down this way of the Hanover County School Board's activities, and what I've heard makes me wonder if any of its members can read.

Surely it is plain to the simplest intelligence that "To Kill a Mockingbird" spells out in words of seldom more than two syllables a code of honor and conduct, Christian in its ethic, that is the heritage of all Southerners. To hear that the novel is "immoral" has made me count the years between now and 1984, for I have yet to come across a better example of doublethink.

I feel, however that the problem is one of illiteracy, not Marxism. Therefore I enclose a small contribution to the Beadle Bumble Fund that I hope will be used to enroll the Hanover County School Board in any first grade of its choice.

Harper Lee  
Monroeville, Ala.



TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD 50TH-ANNIVERSARY  
COMMEMORATIVE PORTRAIT BY NICOLÒ SHI

A few years after the initial firestorm, Lee retreated to her home in Monroeville, never publishing another book and rarely granting interviews. Because of this, myths have swirled around the book and its author. The most persistent is that it was not Lee, but her friend Truman Capote, who authored the book. Anderson addresses this error and others in her talk, "To Kill a Mockingbird: Successes and Myths," at the Harbert Center in Birmingham on May 11.

Additional events celebrating the book's fiftieth anniversary include a traveling art exhibition on display at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute through May 14 and at the Stonehenge Gallery in Montgomery May 18-21 with a screening of the movie at the Capri Theatre in Montgomery on May 20. Art from the exhibition will be auctioned at Wynfield Estates in Montgomery on May 22. Guests at the auction include Alabama's Pulitzer Prize winners Rick Bragg, Joey Kennedy, and Harold Jackson, as well as Mary Badham, who played Scout in the 1962 film. Attendees will get a preview of the documentary *Our Mockingbird* by Sandra Jaffe.

Fifty years after publication, *To Kill a Mockingbird* continues to sell about a million copies a year worldwide and is taught in schools in the United States, Europe, Canada, and Australia. "This is a phenomenal record for a single book," says Anderson. "Readers everywhere, regardless of nationality, can recognize the characters and their struggles with right and wrong and their courage to undertake a task even when failure is the inevitable outcome."

—BY LAURA WOLFF SCANLAN

# Around the Nation

COMPILED BY LAURA WOLFF SCANLAN

A Roundup of Activities Sponsored by the State Humanities Council



AN EXHIBITION IN ALABAMA CELEBRATES HALF A CENTURY OF TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD, INCLUDING SONGS FOR FARTER LEE AND BY JIMMY KIMMEL

## ARIZONA

The Paul Espinosa Border Film Festival at the Tempe Center for the Arts, May 7-9, features five Espinosa films focused on the U.S.-Mexico border region. A scholar-led discussion follows each screening.

The Arizona History Museum in Tucson presents "It Saved My Life: Civilian Conservation Corps" on May 14. The National Park Service exhibition chronicles the Corps' projects in Arizona's southwest region. Related events include public presentations, docent trainings, and a teacher workshop.

Beginning May 25, the Prescott Public Library hosts "Prescott's Distant Neighbor," a six-part speaker series featuring scholars and authors exploring Arizona's role in U.S.-Mexico border relations.

## CONNECTICUT

Two exhibitions on the life and work of Mark Twain are open during May and June in Hartford: "Legacy" at the Mark

Twain House and Museum and "Life along the Connecticut River, 1870-1900" at the Hartford Public Library.

"Goods for Sale! Cash, Credit, Trade in Litchfield, 1790-1850" is on display at the Litchfield Historical Society. The exhibition examines the tradesmen and craftsmen who worked in Litchfield.

"Pictures for Victorian America" is on display at the Connecticut Historical Society Museum and Library through July 17, showcasing prints by Hartford's Kellogg Brothers.

## FLORIDA

Scholar Leroy Mitchell Jr. performs as author James Weldon Johnson at the Stage Aurora Performance Hall in Jacksonville on May 6 in conjunction with the theater's production of Johnson's *God's Trombones*.

Actor James Bullock tells stories of the African-American experience in Florida at Flagler College in St. Augustine on

May 18. Among other topics, Bullock will discuss Fort Mose, founded in 1774 as the first legally sanctioned community of freed slaves in the colonial Americas.

Archaeologist William Lees discusses Florida's Civil War history at the Milledgeville Sainer Pavilion in Sarasota on May 28.

Bilingual storyteller Carrie Sue Ayres appears at the Boynton Women's Club in Boynton Beach on May 23.

Archaeologist Sarah E. Miller talks about the frauds, myths, and mysteries of Florida's past at the Anderson-Price Memorial Building in Ormond Beach on May 29.

## HAWAII

The Hawai'i Book and Music Festival is held at Honolulu Hale and surrounding area on May 15 and 16. This year's program, "A Celebration of Story and Song," features fourteen panel sessions.

Students from grades 3-12 read their winning poems in "Star Poets: Celebrate Poetry" at the Palikū Theater of Wind.