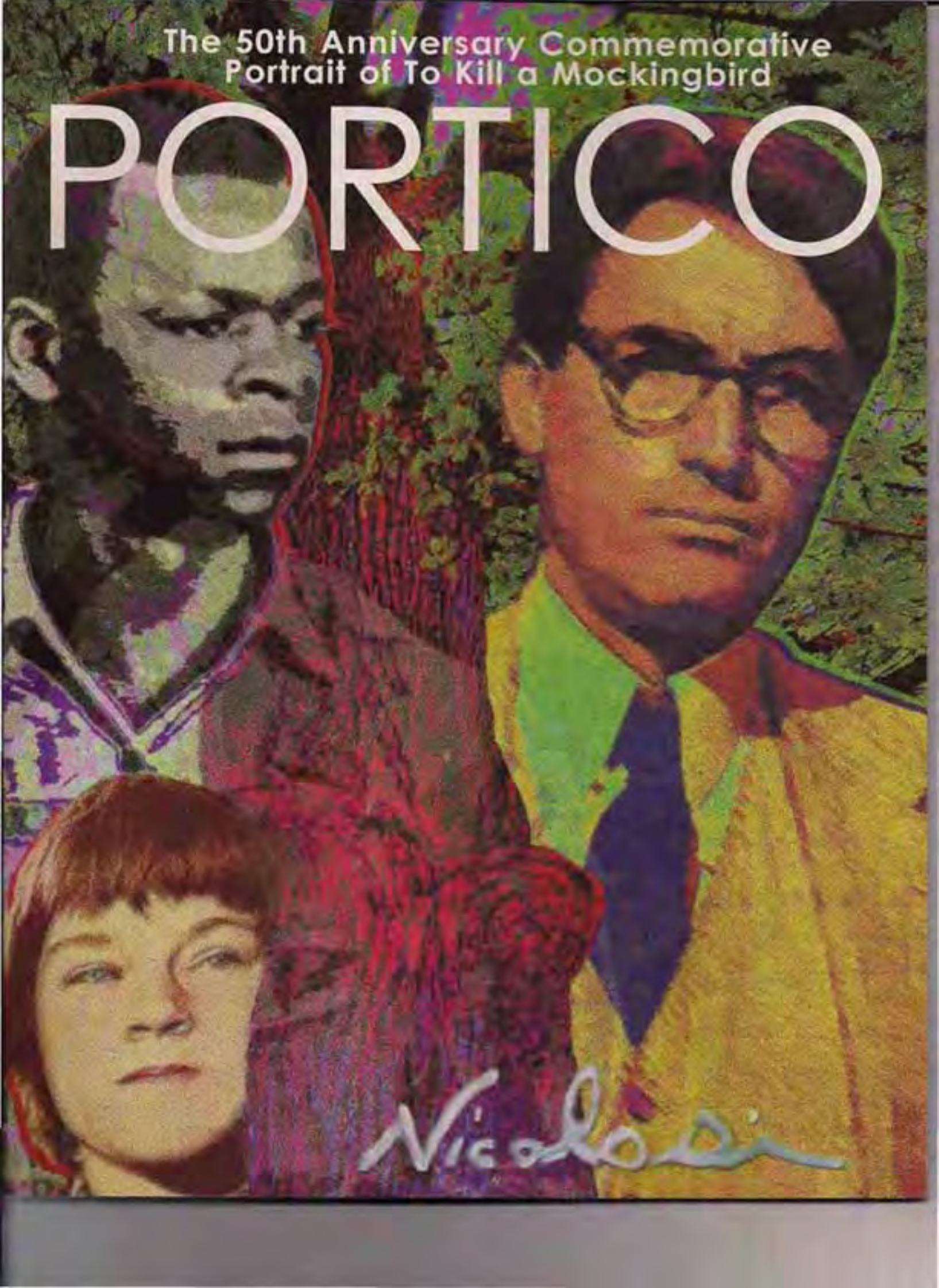


The 50th Anniversary Commemorative
Portrait of To Kill a Mockingbird

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A Timeless Tale Turns 50:

to kill a mockingbird

celebrating a lasting legacy

Fifty years can seem like a very long time. The American South of 1960, the year Harper Lee published her classic novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, was a profoundly different place from the American South of today. If you need evidence of that, look no farther than Congressman Artur Davis' current campaign for governor of Alabama. Polls show that Davis, a Harvard-educated black man who was born and raised in Montgomery, is ahead in his party's primary and in a statistical dead heat with all of the opposing party's candidates. Win or lose, the viability of his candidacy alone represents a cultural sea change from the world Lee was writing about half a century ago. Clearly some things have changed in these five long decades.

But the South is also a timeless land of myths and monsters and the chivalrous heroes who set out to slay them. In such a place, 50 years is a blink of an eye and the things that change aren't nearly as telling as the things that have always been true. And those enduring myths aren't always so easy to measure. Things like honor and dignity and grace in the midst of hardship can be difficult to quantify. That's what art is for.

To Kill a Mockingbird is at home in both of those worlds. The novel works as history and myth, and that's its genius. It's a story that accurately reflects a certain time and place—the human struggles and triumphs, big and small, of a tucked-away Alabama town in the middle of a turbulent century—while also transcending it. Such a balancing act is no small trick, especially for a first-time author.

Adding to the book's mystique, the author herself is a lot of mystery, reverence and the rampant speculation that often accompanies both. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not just Lee's first novel, it's her only novel, which puts her in company with the likes of Ralph Ellison and J.D. Salinger—enigmatic writers who

produced an influential book very early and then did little or nothing to turn that success into a long and prolific career.

It's possible that Harper Lee's experience of writing *To Kill a Mockingbird* was so difficult that she decided against doing battle with the typewriter ever again. There's a well-known story of Lee becoming so frustrated as she was finishing the novel that she tossed the manuscript out the window of her New York apartment building one winter evening, only to retrieve it from a pile of sooty snow at the urging of her editor.

It's also possible that, at some point, she simply decided it was unwise to try to out-perfection. Upon its release, the novel was greeted with reviews hailing it as equal parts literary gem and potent agent of social enlightenment. *The Washington Post* suggested it would outweigh "a hundred pounds of sermons on tolerance, or an equal measure of invective deploring the lack of it." The book stayed on national bestseller lists for more than a year and a half, winning the 1961 Pulitzer Prize along the way.

The following year, the story was adapted for the screen. The film, which brought Gregory Peck an Academy Award for his portrayal of Atticus Finch, cemented *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s status as a lasting classic of American storytelling that played no small role in reshaping the nation's social fabric.

It came at a critical time in the fight for racial justice and civil rights legislation that would put an end to some of the worst of the bigotry and the restriction and the repression in the South. Peck once told the makers of *Fearful Symmetry*, a documentary on the making of the film:

Cleo Thomas, an attorney in Anniston who, in 1976, was the first African American to be elected president of the SCA at the University of Alabama, believes

BY T. BEITELMAN

"Atticus is the shield. Even though he is trying to protect all the other characters from the hardship of life, he's already lost his innocence.

The only way he can do it is to teach them moral values.

Atticus is the conscience. All of the other characters are mockingbirds.

They haven't lost their innocence." —Nicolosi



MOBILE COUNTY HISTORICAL MUSEUM
COURTESY OF THE AARON WHITE COLLECTION

the book achieved its place in the canon so quickly not just because it spoke a hard truth to power, but also because of the way it spoke that truth. "The magic is for it to be declaimed in a child's voice, in such a domestic way. At the breakfast table, on the porch," says Cleo. "It's a classic because it's simply so true."

Of course, things can change in 50 years. Sanford University literature professor Dr. Chris Metress, whose presentation "The Rise and Fall of Atticus Finch" has been featured by the Alabama Humanities Foundation's Road Scholars program, is interested in how the book's reception has evolved since its publication—particularly the current critical debate over whether Atticus is a hero in the fight against racial intolerance or just some-

one whose futile efforts to work within a corrupt system are a part of the problem, not the solution.

"It's easy from our own time and place to imagine that Atticus could have done more to challenge the racism that shaped daily life in Maycomb," says Metress. "But if there comes a time when we can no longer admire what Atticus Finch stood for, and what he stood up against, that probably tells us more about our own shortcomings than it does about Atticus."

And that is the mark of great art. Even as the culture transforms around it, it still reflects the deeper secrets of the human experience. *To Kill a Mockingbird* has always served that vital purpose and, for that reason, it's always been worth celebrating.



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COUNTY HERITAGE MUSEUM



Each May, The Mockingbird Players perform the play based upon Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* at the Old Monroe County Courthouse. Tickets are on sale now (and sell out quickly). Come for the show, then visit the Monroe County Heritage Museum to view the permanent exhibit, Harper Lee *In Her Own Words*. (Literary fans, take note: the museum also features an exhibit on Truman Capote's childhood, which he spent in Monroeville.) For more information call 251.575.7433 or visit tokillamockingbird.com.

Above: Director Robert Mulligan and set designer Henry Bumstead took measurements of the Monroe County courtroom to make an exact replica on a soundstage in Hollywood for the movie. Left: The Mockingbird Players perform the second act of their production in the courtroom that inspired the film's set. Opposite: Harper Lee and Gregory Peck grab a bite at the Wee Diner in Monroeville. Peck visited Lee's hometown to get a feel for his character, Atticus, and the fictional town of Maycomb.

TKAM 2010

The Alabama Humanities Foundation (AHF) is in the business of celebrating the way literature helps shape our understanding of the human experience. When AHF planners were looking to stage a major event at multiple locations throughout the state in 2010—the better to emphasize the foundation's mandate to serve all of Alabama—the choice was clear.

Thus, "TKAM 2010: *To Kill a Mockingbird*—Awakening America's Conscience" was born. TKAM 2010 will consist of a series of programs to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the novel's publication and to honor its lasting significance in Alabama and around the world. Starting at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute on April 9 with a panel discussion on the novel's legacy and running through the end of May in Montgomery, the festivities will also include a traveling exhibition of original art inspired by the book as well as a sneak preview of *Our Mockingbird*, a documentary by director Sandra Jaffe featuring the story of two Alabama high schools from vastly different socioeconomic backgrounds, Mountain Brook and Fairfield, who come together to create a stage production of the novel.

"We see this program as a way to celebrate the book but also to highlight our mission and make people aware of what we do," says Katie Crawford, public relations manager for AHF.

With AHF facing funding uncertainty at the state and federal levels, it's also a much-needed fundraising opportunity, according to AHF board member Lisa Narell-Mead. Along with fellow board member Jim Noles, Narell-Mead is spearheading the statewide art exhibit and auction featuring the work of talented national and local artists.

"Everybody's just gotten so excited about this entire event," says Narell-Mead, who grew up in Arab, Alabama. "I first read the book when I was 11 and I've probably read it about every four years since then. It's why I became a lawyer. That book has opened a lot of eyes."

As, no doubt, will the art it inspires.

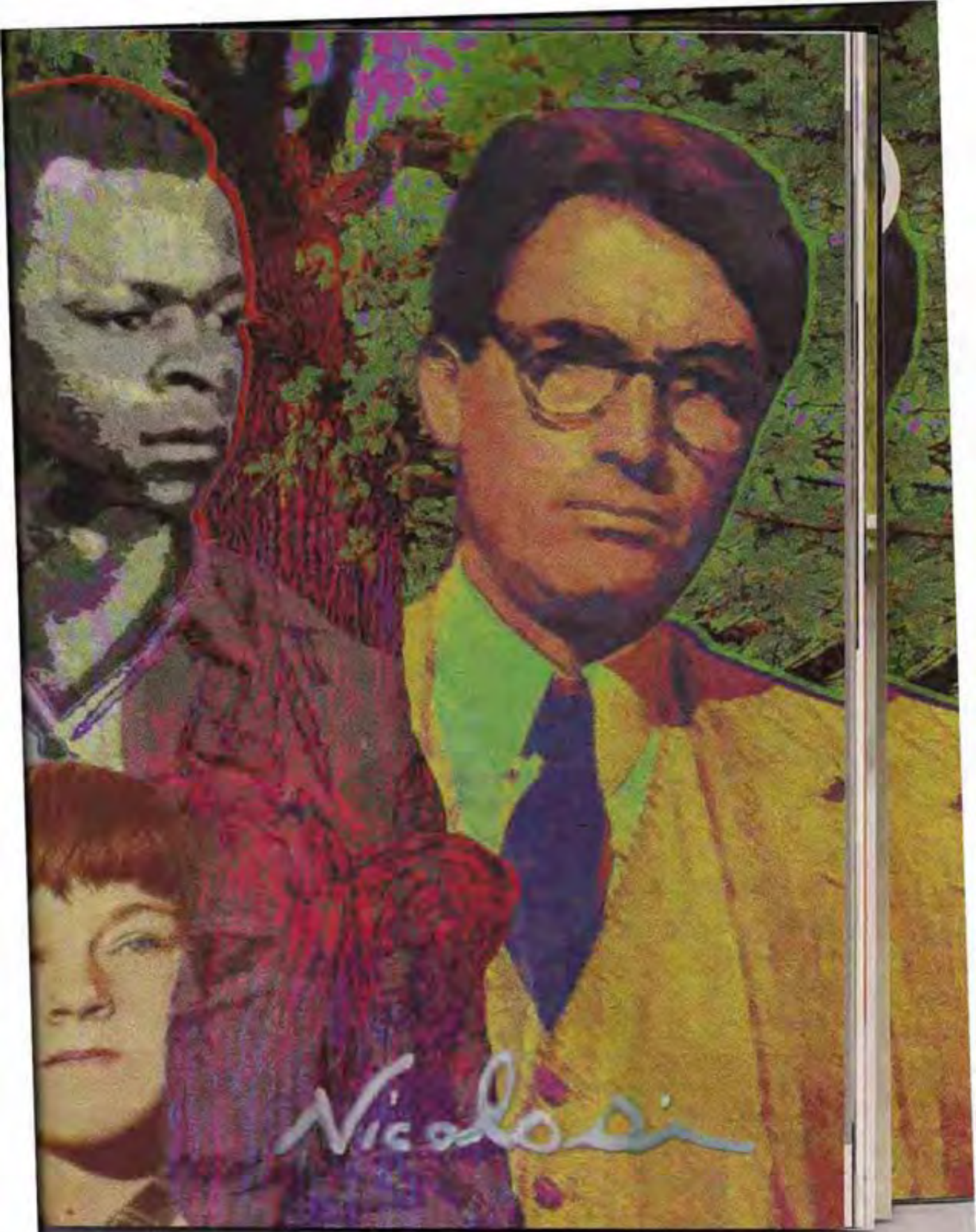
"When Lisa told me about this project, I said, 'You don't even have to ask, Lisa. I'm there for you,'" recalls Narell-Mead's friend, Nicolosi, an internationally renowned pop

artist who has made a name for himself painting stylized portraits of A-list Hollywood celebrities and powerful political figures. Though Nicolosi's distinctive style is more Andy Warhol than Norman Rockwell, he welcomed the challenge of creating an iconic image that reflected this classic American novel's underlying message.

"All of the classics still ring true today," he says. "The core values that were true thousands of years ago are true today. I use that as the foundation and interpret it in a style that gives a wink to the modern age that we're in. The message is don't forget where we came from. We haven't come all that far from what really matters."

All of the exhibit's artwork, including pieces by other well-known artists such as Nafi, Charlie Lucas, William Christenberry and others, will be auctioned as part of a special reception at Wynfield Estates, the home of the late Winston and Carolyn Blount, in Montgomery on May 22 from 5 to 8 p.m. Those attending the panel discussion and opening night reception at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute on April 9 will also have an opportunity to bid on the artwork. The "TKAM 2010: *To Kill a Mockingbird*—Awakening America's Conscience" traveling art show will be open to the public at the BCRI from April 9 to May 14 and will then travel to Montgomery, where it will be on display at the Stonehenge Gallery May 18 to 21.

Tickets for the May 22 Montgomery event are \$50 per person. All other program events are free and open to the public. For information on purchasing tickets or on the "TKAM 2010: To Kill a Mockingbird—Awakening America's Conscience" event, contact Katie Crawford, AHF public relations manager, at 205.658.3991.



Nicolaosi