



Insight: Why the 50th anniversary of "To Kill a Mockingbird" matters to us

By Press-Register Editorial Board

April 25, 2010, 5:31AM

By WAYNE GREENHAW

Special to the Press-Register

This year marks the 50th anniversary of Alabama's — and perhaps the world's — best novel, "To Kill A Mockingbird," by Monroeville native Harper Lee.

Fittingly, the book will be celebrated next month at special ceremonies in Montgomery, hosted by the Alabama Humanities Foundation. Featured guests will include authors, musicians and artists.

Several years ago I wrote on these pages about my habit of rereading the book that I first picked up as a 20-year-old junior at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. As I wrote then, the last time I allowed my brain to wander into the world created by Lee, it was as filled with wonder and excitement as the first time. Perhaps even more so.

As a 20-year-old studying writing under Hudson Strode, I believed in the magic of words. The last time I read "Mockingbird," just recently, I was once again thrilled to find beauty and truth in her wonderful pages.

In 2007 my words were from a speech I made at the Brooklyn Public Library in New York, where the administrators counted thousands in the Big Read sponsored by the National Endowment of the Arts.

In that official kickoff of the Big Read program on a Sunday morning, more than 500 people packed the auditorium for my talk about growing up in small towns in Alabama, where I knew many people like those who populate the pages of Lee's work.

I talked about the lazy old town of Maycomb and its people, like the Haverfords, "a name synonymous with jackass," and Walter Cunningham, who never had lunch money but who was too proud to take a handout, and Burris Ewell, who dropped out of school every year after attending the first day of classes.

In all of the neighborhoods where I lived, we had a ghost house. In each lived characters whose mysterious traits were made up by children with overactive imaginations.

These places and their inhabitants made the towns not only real but enormously interesting for those of us who occupied regular houses and lived everyday lives.

As I recently read best-selling author Barbara Kingsolver's novel, "The Lacuna," set in Mexico and the American

South, I was reminded once again of "To Kill a Mockingbird" when the theme of "the most important thing about a person is what you don't know" became a refrain.

I was reminded of Lee's character of Boo Radley, who haunts the pages of "Mockingbird." To me, he is the most important and profound character in the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. His physical absence makes his spiritual presence sing like a Methodist choir.

The fact that he appears only once, toward the end of the action, and says only one short line elevates him to headline stature.

And the knowledge that in the subsequent Academy Award-winning movie, Boo was played by multi-talented actor Robert Duvall in his first film role, makes the character resonate with more depth in my mind as I reread the book.

Others, particularly legal scholars, have written essays on the storyteller Scout Finch's father, Atticus, who takes center stage. "In the Twentieth Century, 'To Kill A Mockingbird' is probably the most widely read book dealing with race in America, and its protagonist, Atticus Finch, the most enduring fictional image of racial heroism," stated a writer in the Library Journal.

In Great Britain, librarians ranked the novel before the Bible and "The Lord of the Rings" as the book "every adult should read before they die."

Since the Big Read in Brooklyn in the fall of 2007, I am told that millions of new readers have picked up "Mockingbird" and scanned its pages, and have written to the publisher about how much the world and the people created by Harper Lee have meant to them.

On Saturday, May 22, the Alabama Humanities Foundation will honor the 50th anniversary of the publication of "To Kill A Mockingbird" with a celebration in Montgomery at Wynfield Estates, home of the late Winton Blount, who himself was honored by AHF years ago with its annual Humanitarian Award (also given to Harper Lee).

More than 30 Alabama artists have donated unique creations from their own perspectives of "To Kill A Mockingbird." These works will be auctioned for sale at the celebration and proceeds will go to AHF to benefit its on-going educational programs around Alabama.

Nicolosi, the famous pop artist to the stars, will travel from his studio in Chicago to Montgomery, where he will unveil his portrait of the stars of the film — Gregory Peck as Atticus, Brock Peters as the accused Tom Robinson, and Mary Badham as Scout. Badham will be on hand to celebrate the occasion.

Also at the event, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Rick Bragg will talk about what "Mockingbird" has meant to him both personally and professionally. Bragg was the 2009 recipient of the Harper Lee Award for Alabama's Distinguished Writer.

In the May issue of Reader's Digest, Bragg — who lives in Tuscaloosa and teaches journalism at the University of Alabama — writes about what the award, the book and Harper Lee mean to him.

All in all, it will be quite a celebration.

Wayne Greenhaw, who lives in Montgomery, will publish his 22nd book, "Fighting the Devil in Dixie: How Civil Rights Activists Took on the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama," in 2011. His e-mail address is waynegreenhaw@mac.com.