

Standards Focus: Exploring Expository Writing

Author Biography: Harper Lee (1926-)

Nelle Harper Lee was born in the small town Monroeville, Alabama on April 26, 1926 to Amasa Coleman Lee, a lawyer and former newspaper editor, and Frances Finch Lee. The youngest of four, Harper Lee was a self-confessed tomboy who enjoyed reading and writing at a very young age. She went to the local grammar school and high school in Monroeville with author Truman Capote (*In Cold Blood*), upon whom the character Dill is said to be based.

After high school, Lee attended Huntingdon College in Montgomery, then transferred to the University of Alabama to study law. After three years, Lee realized her passion was not law, but writing, and she quit school to move to New York just one semester short of receiving her law degree.

After moving to New York, Lee supported herself by working as an airline reservation clerk while writing short stories about her life in the South. In 1957, she submitted her short stories to the J.B. Lippincott publishing company. Agents of the firm encouraged her to take a year to string her short stories into one major work. After two and a half years, Lee completed the novel and in 1960, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published.

To Kill a Mockingbird became an international success, and was eventually translated into over thirty languages. It won the *Pulitzer Prize* for fiction in 1961 and was adapted for screen in 1962. The film, starring Gregory Peck, was nominated for eight Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Peck received the Academy Award for Best Actor.

In 1966, Lee was appointed to the National Council of Arts by then President Lyndon B. Johnson, and has received several honorary doctorates from universities such as the University of Alabama, Sewanee University, and Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama.

Today, Lee prefers a private existence, giving few interviews and speeches. After decades of silence, Lee was prompted by Oprah Winfrey to put pen to paper yet again, writing a letter which appeared in the July 2006 issue of Oprah's *O* magazine. The letter describes a time in Lee's life in which books were scarce, and there were no public libraries, yet her parents continued to read anything they could get their hands on to the young Lee. She lamented our modern-day lack of attraction to books, asking Oprah, "Can you imagine curling up in bed to read a computer?" and declaring "I still plod along with books. I prefer to search library stacks because when I work to learn something, I remember it."

Lee has also been recently seen at the annual essay writing contest for high school students, held for the last six years at the University of Alabama. In January of 2006, she gave her first interview since 1964 to the New York Times at the essay contest award ceremony. "They always see new things in it," she said of the student essays about *To Kill a Mockingbird*. "And the way they relate it to their lives now is really quite incredible." To date, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has remained her only published novel.