

About the Author

Nelle Harper Lee decided she wanted to be a writer when she was seven years old, growing up in Monroeville, Alabama. Her childhood was very much like Scout's in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and she knew of many cases in which black men were unjustly convicted and imprisoned or executed for raping white women. Her father was a lawyer, and for a time she was sidetracked into the study of law at the University of Alabama. She also attended Oxford University in England as an exchange student for one year, but she found she did not want to be a lawyer after all—she wanted to write. She quit her law studies and her job as an airlines reservations clerk and moved into a tiny cold-water apartment in New York City, which she furnished with castoffs and orange crates. There she began her writing career.



When she took her first stories to an agent, the agent liked one of them and encouraged her to expand it into a novel. At about this time, Lee's father, Amasa Lee, became ill, and she began traveling frequently to Alabama. During these visits to Monroeville, Lee was once again confronted with the scenes and people of her childhood, one of whom had been her childhood friend, Truman Capote, who would become the model for the character of Dill in her book. She found a fertile field in which to sow her literary seeds in the lush environs of Alabama, and she began working on *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

She finished her first draft of the novel in 1957, but the first editor to read it turned it down, so she spent another two and one-half years rewriting and revising what she had begun. It was difficult and discouraging at times, writing the book over and over again, but she did not give up until she finally got it the way she wanted it. When it was published in 1960, her hard work was rewarded. Critics loved the book, and readers of all ages agreed. It became a selection for several book clubs, and the movie rights were sold almost immediately. The film, starring Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch, is one of the few movie gems in which the essence of a novel is captured on film. In 1961, Lee was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

Harper Lee was suddenly famous. Stories about her appeared in all the leading magazines and newspapers. Lee, basically a private person who did not relish being the object of attention, soon acquired the reputation of being a recluse, which she was not. When interviewers asked her whether she was writing another novel, she said she was, but that novel has never been published.

Harper Lee has, over the years, become almost a mythical literary figure, even though she has never published another book. She is not a hermit. According to friends and relatives, she is a jolly and genial person, but she still enjoys her privacy and spends equal amounts of time between New York City and her hometown of Monroeville. According to a story by Kathy Kemp in *The News Observer* (November 12, 1997), Lee's cousin says she once told him when he asked why she had never written another book, "When you have a hit like that, you can't go anywhere but down."

Myths and Urban Myths

Myths are not just stories people believed long ago. People throughout time have believed myths. The people of Maycomb County in the 1930s did, and we have myths we believe today. Myths help us make sense of our world. They explain why things are the way we think they are, why people do as they do. Myths are not always about gods and goddesses. They explain the trivial as well as the important. They may not be true, but many people believe them anyway.

The myths of Maycomb County taught its citizens that certain things were true: Crawfords don't mind their own business; Bufords walk a certain way because they're Bufords; Delafields don't tell the truth, so never take a check from one without calling the bank first; Mrs. Merriweather sips gin out of a Lydia Pinkham tonic bottle just like her mother did; non-whites are not quite human and do not fall under the same protection as whites; a lazy white man is more deserving of justice than a hard-working non-white.

While Scout, Jem, and Dill, thanks to the admonitions of Atticus, do not believe the local myths about non-whites, they have their own myths. Many of these concern Arthur "Boo" Radley, who is white. Since they have never seen him, despite his living nearby, they speculate about him endlessly. They think that he goes out at night when it is pitch dark to spy through folks' windows and to scratch at their screens; that he is six-and-one-half feet tall and eats raw squirrels and cats, leaving his hands bloodstained; that his face is scarred, his teeth yellow, his eyes popped out, and he drools. One could be killed just going up to his door and knocking!

Their myths about Boo lead the children into mischief. They become obsessed with the prospect of making Boo "come out," while at the same time they fear doing so. Their summers center around an irresistible desire to see Boo in the flesh, while at the same time they dread the terrible fate which awaits them if they do. It feels to them like walking barefoot down a grassy path, hoping to see a rattlesnake in the grass but fearing getting bitten while doing so.

In the meantime, while the children's self-made explanations about Boo Radley color their days and lead them into less than compassionate activities aimed at seeing him, the townspeople's explanations about non-whites and whites lead them to accept activities aimed at preserving life as they have always known it. Their myths tell them things should stay the way they have always been to make the world safer. Then they suddenly learn to their shame that what they had always known to be true may not be true after all.

What kinds of myths do we have today? Most are harmless, the stuff of entertainment. Some are beliefs which lead people to fear and illogical behaviors.

Our modern world is filled with a new phenomenon called the urban myth or legend. These are stories and beliefs which get started in various ways. Sometimes a television personality makes an offhand statement which is taken seriously. A talk-show host may state an opinion his or her listeners take as gospel truth. Someone posts something on the Internet on a message board which is repeated and spread onto other boards and other venues until no one knows where it began. A newspaper editor writes an opinion which is taken as fact. Sometimes an urban myth gets started as a joke which, over time, is taken seriously.

On the following page are some urban myths and their possible origins. Read them and then do the activities that follow.

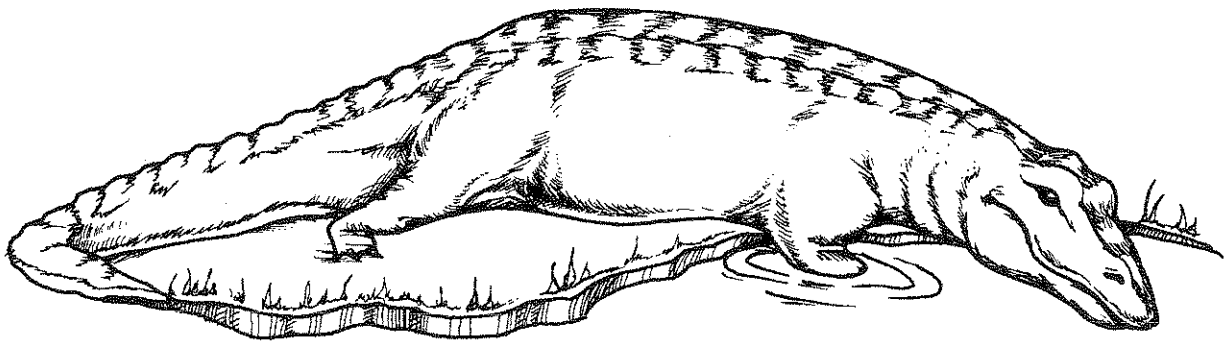
Myths and Urban Myths (cont.)

Here are some recent urban myths and their possible explanations.

1. **Urban Myth:** A thriving colony of white alligators lives in the sewers of New York City, the offspring of baby alligators brought back as pets from Florida, where they grow to huge sizes and terrorize anyone brave enough to go under the city.

Possible Origin: There are many stories from the past 90 years of alligators found in streams, parks, bushes, even the rivers of New York, some of which were later found to be lizards. One "spinner of colorful yarns" actually claimed to have found a large number of alligators there but never proved any of his stories.

Fact: Alligators cannot live in the cold temperatures of New York City, and they would die very quickly from the bacteria present in sewers. They have never been found there.



2. **Urban Myth:** Spiders will crawl into the hair of a person with a lot of hair or with dreadlocks and cause the person to grow sick and die.

Possible Origin: People have often said that with some hairdos, a person might forego washing it in order to preserve the style.

Fact: There is no known case of someone having died from a bite by a spider who set up residence in a person's hair.

3. **Urban Myth:** A woman dies of a heart attack after her husband calls her from his grave.

Possible Origin: Some people's fear of being buried alive leads them to invent devices to put in a tomb so the dead can call out and say a mistake has been made.

Fact: There have been no proven cases of the deceased giving the living a call on the telephone.

Activities

- A. In groups of three or four, find and list several myths from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. These may be myths the children believe or ones believed by adults in the community. Record the myths, identify their sources, if you can find them, and tell what actually happened. Discuss the reasons you think the myths got started and why anyone would believe them.
- B. Can you identify any such myths which have circulated around your school, your neighborhood, or your city? Report back to the class on what you have discovered.