

INTRODUCTION

A Great American Novel

Maybe the great American novel? *The Great Gatsby* stakes a claim, as do *Moby-Dick* and *The Scarlet Letter* and a short list of others. Then there is a *To Kill a Mockingbird*. What company this woman keeps! Fitzgerald, Melville, Hawthorne—and Harper Lee, who for decades has been the author of one published book and now is the author of two.

In New York City, there are mythical institutions. “Madison Avenue” has long meant the advertising community—the Mad Men of lore and legend, and still invokes those who come up with the clever campaigns, even if many of the firms are headquartered down in SoHo or out in L.A. these days. Frankly, Madison Avenue itself is now filled with high-end galleries and Fifth Avenue-type clothing stores.

Another mythological destination is “Publishers Row,” which hasn’t existed for ages—although certainly the book world has always had a heartbeat in New York City.

News spreads up and down Publishers Row pretty fast, especially in our Internet era, but it is safe to say that no news ever spread faster than the news that there was to be a second published novel by Harper Lee. This was a stunner to stun even folks not readily stunned—folks who would never admit to having been stunned.

People didn’t know what to make of this.

She’s still writing?

Why now?

Why at all?

The story unfolded. Ms. Lee, who had written the classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*, had apparently written

an earlier piece of fiction that had not met with such a warm reception on Publishers Row in the mid-1950s. It is a story about the lawyer Atticus Finch, his adult daughter, Jean Louise—“Scout”—and others, and includes flashbacks to Scout’s childhood. Lee ended up putting this story away in order to write *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

It seems the manuscript of *Go Set a Watchman* had long been resting in a secure place owned by Lee’s sister, Alice Lee, who died in November 2014 at the age of 103. And then the pages were brought to light, and Harper decided they were fine enough, and told HarperCollins—a Publishers Row standby—to go ahead and print the book with her blessing.

We will discuss later in these pages the mild controversy surrounding the publication, but for now let us celebrate. Harper Lee wrote one book so tremendous, and with such insight into the American character and issues in the American story that it immediately became a touchstone of our cultural consciousness. It remains one.

Melissa Fay Greene, who was recently named a Guggenheim Fellow and earlier won the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice & Human Rights book award for her *Praying*

for *Sheetrock*—she’s also the author of *The Temple Bombing*² and several other wonderful nonfiction works, some of them concerned with race relations—lives in Atlanta. Like many of us, Greene is deeply familiar with *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and at LIFE’s behest she revisited its pages and now, in our book, helps us understand its magic.

And then we progress with the story of Nelle Harper Lee, the woman behind the books.

And with the classic movie that was made of *Mockingbird*.

And with the latest chapter.

Nelle has long been a very private person, but all who know her, some of whom have talked to us, say she’s keen and funny and fine. In the day, LIFE visited her at home in Monroeville, Alabama, and those photos are presented here as treasures—probably the best pictures ever made of the woman. Gregory Peck . . . well, Gregory Peck, handsome as he was, came before our cameras often. The behind-the-scenes photos from the set of *Mockingbird* are another set of treasures.

Go Set a Watchman is just hitting the shelves.

Publishers Row was thrilled when it heard the news that Harper Lee was back.

So were we.

NELLE HARPER LEE is seen here in a circa-1960 portrait with her book completed but just beginning its astonishing ride. In 2015, she is about to ascend the best-seller lists again, but her legend transcends. In the past

several months, indie rock stations have been playing a very good up-tempo song called “Harper Lee” by the Irish band Little Green Cars. You can read the lyrics over and over and not figure out what any of the words have

to do with this woman or *To Kill a Mockingbird*. But the song is called “Harper Lee,” as if it might be called “George Washington” or “Abe Lincoln” or “Frederick Douglass.” Again: She keeps wonderful company.