

Mary McDonagh Murphy

a frightening thing to another novelist to see somebody write a book that good and then shut up. It is a great puzzle.

This was a very brave book to have written when Harper Lee wrote it, and she probably gets zero credit anymore. We are speaking a truth that people in 1959, 1960, were not ready to acknowledge. People forgot how divided this country was, what the animosity was to the Civil Rights Act, which probably never would have been passed if John F. Kennedy hadn't been assassinated, and instead it became his legacy. But that was 1963, and in 1960, there were no laws guaranteeing that African Americans could enter any restaurant, any hotel. We didn't have those laws. In that world, to speak out this way was remarkable.

Oprah Winfrey

Oprah Winfrey was born in Kosciusko, Mississippi, in 1954. She is a talk-show host, TV and film producer, founder of O, The Oprah Magazine, radio programmer, actress, philanthropist, and chairman of Harpo, Inc. Winfrey was the recipient of the National Book Foundation's Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in 1999.

At the time that I read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I was living with my mother in Milwaukee. I would not have had any money to buy it, so I would undoubtedly have chosen it from the library. I was one of those kids who would go to the library every two weeks, withdraw five books, read the five books, and return them. It was a librarian who said, "If you like reading that kind of book, I think you will like reading this book."

So I picked up *To Kill a Mockingbird* at the library. It was one of five other books, and I remember starting it and just devouring it, not being able to get enough of it, because I fell in love with Scout. I wanted to be Scout. I thought I was Scout. I always took on or wanted to take on the characteristics of whoever I was reading about, and so I wanted to be Scout and I wanted a father like Atticus.

Atticus isn't even real, I know, but my gosh, did I want a dad like Atticus! And I wanted to have a relationship like Scout had with Atticus, so I could call him by his first name. I wanted a nickname like Scout's. I was drawn to the book because of that, and it wasn't until I saw the book transformed into a film that I came to realize the depth of the racial implications of the book.

I remember watching the movie with my father many years after I first read the book. The impact of the movie on my father caused me to see the book differently and experience the book differently. I am right after the cusp of the civil rights movement. I wasn't a child of the civil rights movement. I am one of those people who has been one of the greatest beneficiaries of the civil rights movement. I don't know what it is like to be told to go to the back door.

I did not live a Jim Crow segregated life, because I was one of the fortunate ones who were able to escape Mississippi. And I do

mean escape—1960, when this book was published, was about the time I was leaving Mississippi.

I left for Milwaukee and left my grandmother when I was six years old, so I never experienced the segregation of the South. I moved to an integrated school and was the smartest kid in the class, and when you are the smartest kid in the class, you always get a lot of attention. I never felt any of the oppressiveness of racism. I always recognize that life would have been so different for me had I been raised in a segregated environment, if I had to experience even secondhand what was happening in that environment.

I think of myself as a Southerner. My roots are Southern. Not only was I born in the South, in Mississippi, but for a great part of my life, I was raised in Tennessee, so I identify with being a Southern woman.

I identified with being a Southern child. After reading this book, I wished I had an accent, and I would go around trying to imitate Scout. It was really sickening, I guess. I scared a lot of other kids because, just like I do now, I remember reading this book and then going to class and not being able to shut up about it. I read it in eighth or ninth grade, and I was trying to push the book off on other kids. So it makes sense to me that now I have a book club, because I have been doing that since probably this book. This is one of the first books I wanted to encourage other people to read.

I loved it from the beginning, and like a lot of people, I get the lines blurred between the movie and the book. The movie is very distinct for me because the reading experience comes alive for me in a way that my imagination cannot. In the history of filmmaking I have never seen a book really live its essence through

film like this one, and that is because of the casting of Scout and Atticus, and all of them, really.

Maybe ten years ago, I had the honor of being seated next to Gregory Peck at a luncheon held for Quincy Jones in Hollywood. I was so like, *Oh my God, it is Gregory Peck. What I am going to do? What I am going say? I am not just at the same table, but next to Gregory Peck.* Even though it is long after I have had the talk show and I have interviewed many people, I could not think of one thing to say. Finally I turned and I said, "So, how is Scout doing?" And he said, "Well, that was forty years ago, but OK." I say, "So, how is Scout doing? Do you ever see her?" Because in my brain, no matter what role Gregory Peck has done since then, he will always be Atticus to me, and whoever the woman was who played Scout is, she is always Scout in my mind.

You just liked Scout. You connected with her. I liked her energy. I liked the spirit of her. I liked the freshness of her. I liked the fact that she was so curious. I loved this character so much. The character was so fully realized and showed, even at ten years old, that she knew who she was and was very assertive and had a lot of confidence and believed in herself and was learning about this whole world of racism in such a way that I could feel myself also experiencing or learning about it—my eyes opening as her eyes were opening to it.

I think *To Kill a Mockingbird* is our national novel. If there was a national novel award, this would be it for the United States. I think it is a favorite book of almost everybody you meet. When I opened my school [in South Africa], everybody wanted to know what we can bring and what can we give the girls. I asked everybody to bring their favorite book, and I would say we probably have a hundred copies of this book. Each person who brought

the book wrote their own words to the girls about why they believe this book was important, and everybody says something different.

Of course I wanted to choose this for the book club even though America already loves it. I thought, "Wouldn't it be an amazing thing to have Harper Lee come on and be interviewed for *To Kill a Mockingbird*?" I started that process several years ago and worked on it for a couple of years with my staff calling back and forth between her agent.

Finally, we were able to arrange a meeting, and I was so excited. I remember it was a rainy day in New York, and we were going to have lunch at the Four Seasons. I saw her walking along the street with an umbrella and boots. It was so disarming and charming I couldn't believe it. So all of that *What am I going to say? What am I going to do?* went away. We were like instant girlfriends. It was just wonderful, and I loved being with her. I knew twenty minutes into the conversation that I would never be able to convince her to do an interview, and it is not my style to push. I decided to relax and enjoy this time that I had. Because [in Southern accent] honey, she was not going to be convinced at all. She said to me, "I already said everything I needed to say. Already we have those buses coming down to my house, and they pull up to the door still looking for Boo Radley, and I just don't want that to happen any more than it already does." She said no, and I knew that no meant no. Sometimes no means, "Hmm . . . let us see what else you have to say." But when Harper Lee said, "Well, honey, I already said everything I had to say," I knew that was the end of it. I just enjoyed the lunch. It was fantastic.

I think, *Why didn't I take a tape recorder?* because your brain is like, *Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, I am having lunch with Harper Lee,*

and I hope I remember everything, and I am trying to memorize every sentence she is saying! Then afterwards you say, "What did she say? What did I say?"

One of the things that struck me: She said, "If I had a dime for every book that was sold . . ." I was thinking, *I hope you have more than a dime for every book that was sold, because nobody expected this.* Certainly she didn't expect it; and obviously the publishers didn't expect it. [Fifty years later], we are still talking about this book and that it is the number one book on almost everybody in America's list for their favorite novel. So she wasn't prepared for it.

She said to me, "You know the character Boo Radley?" And she said, "Well, if you know Boo, then you understand why I wouldn't be doing an interview, because I am really Boo." That is all she had to say to me. OK, I know we are not going to bring Boo Radley out to sit on the *Oprah* show.

I was honored to be able to have that time and communicate with her. That was very special, and I take it for what it is. She will be one of those people, like Jackie Onassis, who I also had wanted to interview, who told me no, and I honor that.

The way I felt about being turned down is exactly the way I felt about Jackie Onassis. In the end, I was glad that she didn't do it, that she was able to hold on to that for herself. I believe [Harper Lee] is never going to do an interview, and I am glad that she didn't. I am glad that she was able to hold on to that, because she is obviously a woman of great principles and integrity.

Andrew Young

Andrew Young was born in 1932 in New Orleans. He has been the United States ambassador to the United Nations, a congressman from Georgia, and was the mayor of Atlanta from 1982 to 1990. Young was a minister who joined the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1960 and worked closely with Martin Luther King Jr.