

How a Mockingbird Gave Birth to A Little Canary

By Monique Truong



*"An' they chased him 'n' never could catch him 'cause they didn't know
what he looked like, an' Atticus, when they finally saw him ... he was real nice ..."
His hands were under my chin, pulling up the cover, tucking it around me.
"Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them."*

The epigraph for *Bitter in the Mouth* is an exchange between Scout and her father Atticus Finch, which appears on the last page of the closing chapter of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

For Scout, "him" is a reference to a character in *The Gray Ghost*, a favorite book of hers and her brother Jem, which Atticus is reading to ease her into sleep. For us, "him" is also Boo Radley, the sequestered subject of the Finch siblings' childhood curiosities and fears who had emerged to save them from the very real evils that inhabit their town. "Him," in addition, could be a myriad of characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird* who are occluded by hearsay, lies, illness, poverty, racial prejudice, or plain old ignorance. The blinders are so many, and Scout is just beginning to recognize them as the novel ends.

When I first read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I was eleven years old, a little older than Scout and not as old as Jem. I don't think I read the book for a school assignment. I was a voracious reader and probably picked it out on my own from the library. My family was living in Centerville, Ohio, by then. I can still remember my father boasting to my mother that our new, solidly middle-class neighborhood was once home to Erma Bombeck and Phil Donahue. What my father meant was look how far we've come! And, we really had.

In 1975 my family had come to the United States as refugees from the Vietnam War, and now there we were, four years later, sharing the same sight lines of detached houses with their well-tended lawns bordered by impatiens and yew shrubs that the media elites had of the Midwest, before they made it big and moved elsewhere. Never mind. My father still had a point.

Centerville, Ohio, was a world away from Boiling Springs, North Carolina, the first place in the U.S. we had called home.

On the pages of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I must have noted the similarities between Scout's hometown of Maycomb, Alabama, circa 1935, and Boiling Springs, North Carolina, circa 1975. The azaleas, the screened porches, the respect afforded to the baker of a really good layer cake, among all the other details, must have sounded just right to me. The leafy oak trees and the courthouse square must have reminded me of the same at the heart of nearby Shelby. I must have found in Atticus's words and actions a primer for understanding why the children of my small southern town had taunted me for the color of my skin. Before I came to the U.S., I didn't even know that my skin had a color, and I could have never imagined that the color would be "yellow."

I write "must have" because I'm not certain of what I actually took away from the complex, multi-theme *To Kill a Mockingbird* after my first read of it. Except for this: I remember reading in my bedroom and experiencing the uncanny feeling that if I pulled the curtains back from the windows I would see the streets of Maycomb. Now of course, I can say that Harper Lee's writing—so clear, precise, and pointed—had "transported" me into Scout's milieu, but at the age of eleven I just knew that the feeling was akin to magic, and that a book had cast the spell.

I've read *To Kill a Mockingbird* many times since, and each time I find something new, something that thrills me as a reader and a writer. I'm uncomfortable describing it as a "coming of age" novel, because to me it's so much more. Unless "coming of age" means, in fact, a heartbreaking indictment of the flawed world that adults have created for their children to inherit. The genre probably does mean that, and perhaps that's why these narratives that we read in our youth mean so much to us and stay with us for the rest of our lives like the truest of friends.

When I decided to set *Bitter in the Mouth* in the American south, I immediately turned to *To Kill a Mockingbird* for inspiration. I also read Truman Capote's first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. It's a perfect companion to read with Lee's novel, as Capote and Lee were friends from childhood and he was the real-life inspiration for the character Dill, the impish instigator who brightened the long summers for Scout and Jem.

As I re-read, the first thing that struck me was how Scout is an absolute credit to her nickname. She's smart, outspoken, independent, and brave. She's everything that a girl should be in 1935, 1975, 2011 and beyond. Lee's characterization of Scout made me think about how many girls begin our youth this way, and how these interior traits—so delicate because they are just forming—get clumsily and cruelly chipped away. How the focus of attention is then too quickly directed toward the outside of our bodies. I began to think about my characters,

Linda Hammerick and Kelly Powell, as coming from the same bright, sturdy stock as Scout, and that these three girls would have been fast friends.

As I re-read, I also underlined this sentence from the first chapter of *To Kill a Mockingbird*: “[T]here were other ways of making people into ghosts.” The statement is attributed to Atticus. It’s his response to Jem’s heated speculation that Boo Radley must be kept inside of his house with chains or other forms of intimidation. I hadn’t remembered ever reading that sentence before. That’s one of the pleasures of re-reading for me. The text of a well-written book remains very much alive, offering up different parts of itself, or rather that I, very much alive and changing, am newly receptive to passages that previously have been eclipsed.

Boo Radley is Lee’s most evocative creation. He has his counterparts in most if not all Southern gothic novels. Boo Radley belongs to a long line of shrouded, hidden, secreted away, or for some other reason “unseen” characters who are the embodiments of the anxieties, fears, and violations of the norms of the family, the community, and the greater world around them. In Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, for instance, the figure in the shadows is the feminine alter persona of Uncle Randolph.

As I re-read, I began to think more about what it means to set a novel in the American south, and how I could contribute to a genre that has already given readers so many of the defining narratives of the region. By the time I reached the last page of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the passage that would become the epigraph for my own novel, I was asking myself this question: What if the narrator, Linda, was the family secret? How would she “reveal” herself to the readers, and how would that unmasking change how her story is ultimately understood? In short, who do we see when we “finally see” her?

The closing exchange between Scout and Atticus sparkled anew for me for another reason as well. In my mind, “him” was Boo Radley and the other characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I had forgotten until I re-read the passage that Scout was actually referring to a character in *The Gray Ghost*. I did a bit of quick research and found that it was a real book, part of the once popular Seckatary Hawkins series of children books written by Robert F. Schulkers.

That Harper Lee is one cheeky writer. Her main character learns an important, indelible life lesson from a book on the last page of her own book. What elegant symmetry! And, how hadn’t I seen it before? What an apt way to affirm the inherent power of reading and reading young.

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