Summary of the Novel

To Kill a Mockingbird takes place in Alabama during the Depression, and is narrated by the main character, a little girl named Jean Louise "Scout" Finch. Her father, Atticus Finch, is a lawyer with high moral standards. Scout, her brother Jem, and their friend Dill are intrigued by the local rumors about a man named Boo Radley, who lives in their neighborhood but never leaves his house. Legend has it that he once stabbed his father in the leg with a pair of scissors, and he is made out to be a kind of monster. Dill is from Mississippi but spends his summer in Maycomb at a house near the Finch's.

The children are curious to know more about Boo, and during one summer create a mini-drama they enact daily, which tells the events of his life as they know them. Slowly, the children begin moving closer to the Radley house, which is said to be haunted. They try leaving notes for Boo on his windowsill with a fishing pole, but are caught by Atticus, who firmly reprimands them for making fun of a sad man's life. Next, the children try sneaking over to the house at night and looking through its windows. Boo's brother, Nathan Radley, who lives in the house, thinks he hears a prowler and fires his gun. The children run away, but Jem loses his pants in a fence. When he returns in the middle of the night to get them back, they have been neatly folded and the tear from the fence roughly sewn up.

Other mysterious things happen to the Finch children. A certain tree near the Radley house has a hole in which little presents are often left for them, such as pennies, chewing gum, and soap carved figures of a little boy and girl who bear a striking resemblance to Scout and Jem. The children don't know where these gifts are coming from, and when they go to leave a note for
the mystery giver, they find that Boo's brother has plugged up the hole with cement. The next winter brings unexpected cold and snow, and Miss Maudie's house catches on fire. While Jem and Scout, shivering, watch the blaze from near the Radley house, someone puts a blanket around Scout without her realizing it. Not until she returns home and Atticus asks her where the blanket came from does she realize that Boo Radley must have put it around her while she was entranced by watching Miss Maudie, her favorite neighbor, and her burning house.

Atticus decides to take on a case involving a black man named Tom Robinson who has been accused of raping a very poor white girl named Mayella Ewell, a member of the notorious Ewell family, who belong to the layer of Maycomb society that people refer to as "trash." The Finch family faces harsh criticism in the heavily racist Maycomb because of Atticus's decision to defend Tom. But, Atticus insists on going through with the case because his conscience could not let him do otherwise. He knows Tom is innocent, and also that he has almost no chance at being acquitted, because the white jury will never believe a black man over a white woman. Despite this, Atticus wants to reveal the truth to his fellow townspeople, expose their bigotry, and encourage them to imagine the possibility of racial equality.

Because Atticus is defending a black man, Scout and Jem find themselves whispered at and taunted, and have trouble keeping their tempers. At a family Christmas gathering, Scout beats up her cloying relative Francis when he accuses Atticus of ruining the family name by being a "nigger-lover". Jem cuts off the tops of an old neighbor's flower bushes after she derides Atticus, and as punishment, has to read out loud to her every day. Jem does not realize until after she dies that he is helping her break her morphine addiction. When revealing this to Jem and
Scout, Atticus holds this old woman up as an example of true courage: the will to keep fighting even when you know you can't win.

The time for the trial draws closer, and Atticus's sister Alexandra comes to stay with the family. She is proper and old-fashioned and wants to shape Scout into the model of the Southern feminine ideal, much to Scout's resentment. Dill runs away from his home, where his mother and new father don't seem interested in him, and stays in Maycomb for the summer of Tom's trial. The night before the trial, Tom is moved into the county jail, and Atticus, fearing a possible lynching, stands guard outside the jail door all night. Jem is concerned about him, and the three children sneak into town to find him. A group of men arrive ready to cause some violence to Tom, and threaten Atticus in the process. At first Jem, Scout and Dill stand aside, but when she senses true danger, Scout runs out and begins to speak to one of the men, the father of one of her classmates in school. Her innocence brings the crowd out of their mob mentality, and they leave.

The trial pits the evidence of the white Ewell family against Tom's evidence. According to the Ewells, Mayella asked Tom to do some work for her while her father was out, and Tom came into their house and forcibly beat and raped Mayella until her father appeared and scared him away. Tom's version is that Mayella invited him inside, then threw her arms around him and began to kiss him. Tom tried to push her away. When Bob Ewell arrived, he flew into a rage and beat her, while Tom ran away in fright. According to the sheriff's testimony, Mayella's bruises were on the right side of her face, which means she was most likely punched with a left hand. Tom Robinson's left arm is useless due to an old accident, whereas Mr. Ewell leads with his left. Given the evidence of reasonable doubt, Tom should go free, but after hours of deliberation, the jury pronounces him guilty. Scout, Jem and Dill sneak into the courthouse to see the trial and sit
in the balcony with Maycomb's black population. They are stunned at the verdict because to them, the evidence was so clearly in Tom's favor.

Though the verdict is unfortunate, Atticus feels some satisfaction that the jury took so long deciding. Usually, the decision would be made in minutes, because a black man's word would not be trusted. Atticus is hoping for an appeal, but unfortunately Tom tries to escape from his prison and is shot to death in the process. Jem has trouble handling the results of the trial, feeling that his trust in the goodness and rationality of humanity has been betrayed.

Meanwhile, Mr. Ewell threatens Atticus and other people connected with the trial because he feels he was humiliated. He gets his revenge one night while Jem and Scout are walking home from the Halloween play at their school. He follows them home in the dark, then runs at them and attempts to kill them with a large kitchen knife. Jem breaks his arm, and Scout, who is wearing a confining ham shaped wire costume and cannot see what is going on, is helpless throughout the attack. The elusive Boo Radley stabs Mr. Ewell and saves the children. Finally, Scout has a chance to meet the shy and nervous Boo. At the end of this fateful night, the sheriff declares that Mr. Ewell fell on his own knife so Boo, the hero of the situation, won't have to be tried for murder. Scout walks Boo home and imagines how he has viewed the town and observed her, Jem and Dill over the years from inside his home. Boo goes inside, closes the door, and she never sees him again.
Biography of the Author

Harper Lee was born on April 28, 1926, in Monroeville, Alabama. Lee Harper is best known for writing the Pulitzer Prize-winning best-seller *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960)—her one and only novel. The youngest of four children, she grew up as a tomboy in a small town. Her father was a lawyer, a member of the Alabama state legislature, and also owned part of the local newspaper. For most of Lee’s life, her mother suffered from mental illness, rarely leaving the house. It is believed that she may have had bipolar disorder.

One of her closest childhood friends was another writer-to-be, Truman Capote (then known as Truman Persons). Tougher than many of the boys, Lee often stepped up to serve as Truman’s protector. Truman, who shared few interests with boys his age, was picked on for being a sissy and for the fancy clothes he wore. While the two friends were very different, they both shared in having difficult home lives. Truman was living with his mother’s relatives in town after largely being abandoned by his own parents.

In high school, Lee developed an interest in English literature. After graduating in 1944, she went to the all-female Huntingdon College in Montgomery. Lee stood apart from the other students—she could have cared less about fashion, makeup, or dating. Instead, she focused on her studies and on her writing. Lee was a member of the literary honor society and the glee club.

Transferring to the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, Lee was known for being a loner and an individualist. She did make a greater attempt at a social life there, joining a sorority for a while. Pursuing her interest in writing, Lee contributed to the school’s newspaper and its
humor magazine, the *Rammer Jammer*. She eventually became the editor of the *Rammer Jammer*.

In her junior year, Lee was accepted into the university’s law school, which allowed students to work on law degrees while still undergraduates. The demands of her law studies forced her to leave her post as editor of the *Rammer Jammer*. After her first year in the law program, Lee began expressing to her family that writing—not the law—was her true calling. She went to Oxford University in England that summer as an exchange student. Returning to her law studies that fall, Lee dropped out after the first semester. She soon moved to New York City to follow her dreams to become a writer.

In 1949, a 23-year-old Lee arrived in New York City. She struggled for several years, working as a ticket agent for Eastern Airlines and for the British Overseas Air Corp (BOAC). While in the city, Lee was reunited with old friend Truman Capote, one of the literary rising stars of the time. She also befriended Broadway composer and lyricist Michael Martin Brown and his wife Joy.

In 1956, the Browns gave Lee an impressive Christmas present—to support her for a year so that she could write full time. She quit her job and devoted herself to her craft. The Browns also helped her find an agent, Maurice Crain. He, in turn, was able to get the publishing firm interested in her first novel, which was first titled *Go Set a Watchman*, then *Atticus*, and later *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Working with editor Tay Hohoff, Lee finished the manuscript in 1959.

Later that year, Lee joined forces with old friend Truman Capote to assist him with an article he was writing for *The New Yorker*. Capote was writing about the impact of the murder of
four members of the Clutter family on their small Kansas farming community. The two traveled to Kansas to interview townspeople, friends and family of the deceased, and the investigators working to solve the crime. Serving as his research assistant, Lee helped with the interviews, eventually winning over some of the locals with her easy-going, unpretentious manner. Truman, with his flamboyant personality and style, also had a hard time initially getting himself into his subjects’ good graces.

During their time in Kansas, the Cutters’s suspected killers, Richard Hickock and Perry Smith, were caught in Las Vegas and brought back for questioning. Lee and Capote got a chance to interview the suspects not long after their arraignment in January 1960. Soon after, Lee and Capote returned to New York. She worked on the galleys for her forthcoming first novel while he started working on his article, which would evolve into the nonfiction masterpiece, *In Cold Blood*. The pair returned to Kansas in March for the murder trial. Later that spring, Lee gave Capote all of her notes on the crime, the victims, and the killers,

Soon Lee was engrossed her literary success story. In July 1960, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published and picked up by the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Literary Guild. A condensed version of the story appeared in *Reader’s Digest* magazine. The work’s central character, a young girl nicknamed Scout, was not unlike Lee in her youth. In one of the book’s major plotlines, Scout and her brother Jem and their friend Dill explore their fascination with a mysterious and somewhat infamous neighborhood character named Boo Radley. But the work was more than a coming-of-age story, however. Another part of the novel reflected racial prejudices in the South. Their attorney father, Atticus Finch, tries to help a black man who has
been charged with raping a white woman to get a fair trial and to prevent him from being lynched by angry whites in a small town.

The following year, *To Kill a Mockingbird* won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize and several other literary awards. Horton Foote wrote a screenplay based on the book and used the same title for the 1962 film adaptation. Lee visited the set during filming and did a lot of interviews to support the film. Earning eight Academy Award nominations, the movie version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* won four awards, including Best Actor for Gregory Peck’s portrayal of Atticus Finch. The character of Atticus is said to have been based on Lee’s father.

By the mid-1960s, Lee was reportedly working on a second novel, but it was never published. Continuing to help Capote, Lee worked with him on and off on *In Cold Blood*. She had been invited by Smith and Hickock to witness their execution in 1965, but she declined. When Capote’s book was finally published in 1966, a rift developed between the two friends and collaborators. Capote dedicated to the book to Lee and his longtime lover Jack Dunphy, but he failed to acknowledge her contributions to the work. While Lee was very angry and hurt by this betrayal, she remained friends with Truman for the rest of his life.

That same year, Lee had an operation on her hand to repair damage done by a bad burn. She also accepted a post on the National Council of the Arts at the request of President Lyndon B. Johnson. During the 1970s and 1980s, Lee largely retreated from public life.

She spent some of her time on a nonfiction book project about an Alabama serial killer, which had the working title *The Reverend*. But the work was never published.
Lee continues to live a quiet, private life in New York City and Monroeville. Active in her church and community, she usually avoids anything to do with her still popular novel.
**Character List**

**Scout (Jean Louise Finch)**

The narrator and main character who begins her story at almost six years old. A rebellious tomboy, Scout has a fierce disposition toward any who challenge her, but at heart she believes in the goodness of people. Scout reacts to the terrible events of the book without losing hope in humanity.

**Jem (Jeremy Finch)**

Scout's older brother, who is nearly ten at the beginning of the story. Jem is quieter and more reserved than his sister, and has very high standards and expectations for people. When these expectations are not met, Jem has a difficult time resolving his feelings.

**Dill (Charles Baker Harris)**

A friend of the Finch children, who is a little older than Scout, quite short for his age, has an active imagination, and exhibits a strong sense of adventure. He initiates the first expeditions toward the Radley house, and is Scout's best friend. His family life is less than ideal, and he tends to resort to escapism when confronted with difficult situations. Dill spends summers with his aunt, who lives next door to the Finch family.

**Atticus Finch**

The father of Scout and Jem, Atticus is a lawyer and an extremely morally upright man who strives to deal with everyone fairly. Atticus is sometimes overly optimistic, but his unshakable hope in mankind and self-created role as the town 'do-gooder' sustain him. Atticus' wife died when Scout was very small, and he has raised his children only with the assistance of Calpurnia, his black housekeeper and cook.

**Boo Radley**

A recluse who never emerges from his house. As a young boy, he was in trouble with the police, and his strictly religious and reclusive parents have kept him indoors ever since. A prisoner in his home, he stabbed his father with scissors once, and no one has seen him since. The town has developed a myth that he is an insane monster who wanders around at night peering into people's windows. Throughout the book, he lives with his brother, who is highly controlling.
**Tom Robinson**

A black man who stands falsely accused of raping Mayella Ewell. Atticus agrees to take his case, even though he knows it is probably hopeless, if only to show the white community its own moral degeneracy.

**Calpurnia**

A black woman who works as the Finch family's cook and housekeeper. She is one of the many motherly figures in Scout's life and one of the few who can negotiate between the very separate black and white worlds of Maycomb.

**Aunt Alexandra**

Atticus's sister, who has very strict, traditional ideas of how society works and the role a Southern woman should play. She earnestly tries to pass along this information to Scout, who is not particularly interested. Alexandra is concerned with raising Atticus's children "properly," and thus appears during the summer of Tom's trial to stay with them.

**Maudie Atkinson**

A kind, cheerful, and witty neighbor and trusted friend of Scout's, who also upholds a strong moral code and helps the children gain perspective on the events surrounding the trial. She also loves gardening.

**Bob Ewell**

An evil, ignorant man who belongs to the lowest substratum of Maycomb society. He lives with his nine motherless children in a shack near the town dump. Evidence from the trial suggests that he caught his daughter kissing Tom, proceeded to beat her, and then encouraged her to claim Tom raped her. He drinks heavily and spends his relief checks on whiskey rather than food for his family. Bob holds a strong grudge against Atticus and attacks his children at the end of the novel.

**Mayella Ewell**
The oldest of the many Ewell children, at age nineteen. She lives a miserable and lonely existence, despised by whites and prohibited from befriending blacks. However, she breaks a social taboo by trying to seduce Tom, then reacts with cowardice by accusing him of rape and perjuring against him in court.

**Heck Tate**

Maycomb County's trusty sheriff, who is ultimately an honest and upstanding man.

**Reverend Sykes**

The reverend for the all-black congregation, First Purchase African M.E. church, which Scout and Jem visit one day with Calpurnia.

**Judge Taylor**

The judge for Tom's trial. Taylor is a good, sensible man with a sense of humor, who manages a strict courtroom.

**Mr. Gilmer**

Lawyer for the Ewell family in Tom Robinson's case.

**Mrs. Dubose**

A mean, sick, very old woman who lives near the Finch family. Jem unknowingly assists her with her heroic attempt to conquer her morphine addiction, a fight that wins her Atticus's highest praises.

**Walter Cunningham**

A poor farmer who is among the "Sarum bunch," a crowd which assembles near the town jail the night before Tom's trial in order to start a lynching. He is deeply moved by Scout's friendly words when she tries to diffuse the situation, and as a result leads the rest of the men in going home. Ever after, he respects the Finch family greatly.

**Walter Cunningham (Jr.)**

Son of the other Walter, who attends first grade with Scout.

**Adolphus Raymond**
A white man who chose to marry a black woman and have "mixed" children. He pretends to be a drunk so that the townspeople will have a way to more comfortably explain his behavior and life choices.

**Helen Robinson**

Wife of Tom.

**Uncle Jack**

Atticus's brother, a doctor Jem and Scout are very fond of.

**Francis**

One of Aunt Alexandra's grandchildren, who spends Christmas with the Finch family and annoys Scout by being both boring and cruel.