



The Mockingbird Next Door: Life with Harper Lee

By Marja Mills



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To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee is one of the best loved novels of the twentieth century. But for the last fifty years, the novel's celebrated author, Harper Lee, has said almost nothing on the record. Journalists have trekked to her hometown of Monroeville, Alabama, where Harper Lee, known to her friends as Nelle, has lived with her sister, Alice, for decades, trying and failing to get an interview with the author. But in 2001, the Lee sisters opened their door to *Chicago Tribune* journalist Marja Mills. It was the beginning of a long conversation—and a great friendship.

In 2004, with the Lees' blessing, Mills moved into the house next door to the sisters. She spent the next eighteen months there, sharing coffee at McDonalds and trips to the Laundromat with Nelle, feeding the ducks and going out for catfish supper with the sisters, and exploring all over lower Alabama with the Lees' inner circle of friends.

Nelle shared her love of history, literature, and the Southern way of life with Mills, as well as her keen sense of how journalism should be practiced. As the sisters decided to let Mills tell their story, Nelle helped make sure she was getting the story—and the South—right. Alice, the keeper of the Lee family history, shared the stories of their family.

The Mockingbird Next Door is the story of Mills's friendship with the Lee sisters. It is a testament to the great intelligence, sharp wit, and tremendous storytelling power of these two women, especially that of Nelle.

Mills was given a rare opportunity to know Nelle Harper Lee, to be part of the Lees' life in Alabama, and to hear them reflect on their upbringing, their corner of the Deep South, how *To Kill a Mockingbird* affected their lives, and why Nelle Harper Lee chose to never write another novel.

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The Mockingbird Next Door: Life with Harper Lee By Marja Mills Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

An Amazon Best Book of the Month, July 2014: In 2001, *Chicago Tribune* journalist Marja Mills traveled to Monroeville, Alabama in search of something that no other journalist had been able to land: an interview with the reclusive Harper Lee. Instead, she got an interview with her older sister, Alice--content with that, Mills prepared to return to Chicago to write her story. But then she got word that Lee (known as "Nelle" to those close to her) wanted to sit down for a "visit." Many visits later they were friends, and in 2004 Mills was even invited to move in next door to the Lee sisters' home. Underneath the plain, clear language of *The Mockingbird Next Door* is an enchanting, atmospheric portrait of two sisters and the southern town they inhabit (when Harper Lee is not living in New York). Mills makes a point of avoiding gossip, but that hardly matters. The book is compelling and charming; and it brings Harper Lee and her world, both past and present, to full life. --*Chris Schlueter*

From Booklist

Starred Review Harper Lee, author of the "national touchstone," *To Kill a Mockingbird*, withdrew from the relentless vortex of fame and never published another book. Her silence, like that of J. D. Salinger, has been a compelling literary mystery. When *To Kill a Mockingbird* was chosen for One Book, One Chicago in 2001, Chicago Tribune reporter Mills traveled to Lee's Alabama hometown, certain that she would never get anywhere near the author. Instead, Mills found herself living a literary fairy tale, as Alice, Harper's older sister by 15 years, still working as an attorney in her nineties, ushered Mills into their book-filled home. Soon Mills, much to her astonishment, is watching football games, going fishing, and sharing meals with Alice, Nelle (Harper is her middle name), and their friends. When the Lees express their hope that Mills will record their reminiscences and "set the record straight," she rents the house next door and devotes herself to listening to tales of the Lee family; Nelle's relationship with their childhood neighbor, Truman Capote ("Truman was a psychopath, honey"); and the nearly overwhelming repercussions of Nelle's novel. Mills' struggles with lupus bring her even closer to the sisters. As she portrays the exceptional Lee women and their modest, slow-paced world with awed precision, Mills creates a uniquely intimate, ruminative, and gently illuminating biographical memoir. --Donna Seaman

Review

Washington Post:

"There are many reasons to be grateful for *The Mockingbird Next Door*, Marja Mills's wonderful memoir of Harper Lee and her sister....Sympathetic and respectful it may be, but *The Mockingbird Next Door* is no sycophantic puff piece. It is a zesty account of two women living on their own terms yet always guided by the strong moral compass instilled in them by their father.... It is also an atmospheric tale of changing small-town America; of an unlikely, intergenerational friendship between the young author and her elderly subjects; of journalistic integrity; and of grace and fortitude.... Mills doesn't avoid prickly issues, but she approaches them obliquely and accepts partial answers. Despite her enervating illness, Mills's writing is energetic. *The Mockingbird Next Door* is warm yet wistful, a lament for the books Harper Lee never wrote. It ends on an elegiac note, since by the time Mills was able to complete it, the Lees were fading fast, in separate assisted-living facilities. The world she depicts is sadly gone, but—lucky for us—she caught it just in time."

USA Today:

“A lot of people have a lot of ideas about what it means to be American, but here’s one more: *To Kill a Mockingbird* . . . That fact alone makes *The Mockingbird Next Door*, a memoir by *Chicago Tribune* reporter Marja Mills about her friendship with the book’s author, Harper Lee, a valuable artifact. It’s also a thoughtful, sweet-tempered, witty piece of work . . . *The Mockingbird Next Door* offers a winning, nuanced portrait. Indeed, given Lee’s deep privacy and advanced age, it seems unlikely we’ll ever have a better record of a remarkable American life.”

People:

“[Marja Mills] has written an intimate, moving book about a rare talent.”

NPR Fresh Air, Maureen Corrigan:

“Charming . . . *The Mockingbird Next Door* offers a rich sense of the daily texture of the Lee sisters’ lives . . . The world that Mills was invited into over a decade ago has disappeared: both Alice (now 102) and Harper Lee (now 88) are in nursing homes, memories faded. Fortunately, in Mills, the sisters found a genteel family chronicler knocking at their door at the eleventh hour.”

O, The Oprah Magazine:

“Mills has done what no writer before her could: She got Harper Lee to open up about her life, her work, and why she never wrote another book.”

Boston Globe:

“A rare, surprising, and respectful look at the Lees and their milieu.”

New York Post:

“It’s a testament to one-time *Chicago Tribune* reporter Mills’ skill—and being in the right place at the right time—that she befriended Lee and her lawyer sister, Alice, in the author’s hometown of Monroeville, Ala., and was chosen to set the record straight on Lee. A wonderful, insightful and long overdue tale about the author of one of the greatest American novels.”

Vanity Fair:

“Hot Type: The Mockingbird Sings: More important than these answers, however, is the voice of Lee herself—and her message, which we still need to hear.”

Huffington Post

“I’m grateful for the time Marja Mills spent with both Lee sisters and their perceptive hometown friends . . . a gentle and evocative portrait of Monroeville today . . . Ms. Mills’ brief, charming memoir offers a rare picture of the reclusive author in her later years, a valuable addition to Harper Lee lore.”

Elle:

“In telling their story in *The Mockingbird Next Door*, Mills writes with the amazement of one who feels kissed by fate. We in turn are blessed with an intimate portrait of Lee.”

Shelf Awareness:

“The development of trust and friendship between Mills and the Lee sisters took time, but even in those first

minutes, the relationship was nearly unprecedented ... Told charmingly in the Lees' southern drawl and with the affection and closeness that the story reveals, *The Mockingbird Next Door* is quietly admiring and satisfyingly intimate, and will captivate not only fans of Lee's great American novel, but fans of real people living modest lives in small-town Alabama, or anywhere."

Southern Living:

"Reading *The Mockingbird Next Door* is like opening a window into Harper Lee's private world. As the window closes on the last page, we're left with nostalgia for one of literature's greatest talents and the feeling we had the very first time we read her remarkable novel."

OWN, The Oprah Winfrey Network:

"Another real discovery ... This intrepid journalist ... learned more about the stories behind *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Harper Lee than anyone before, after or since."

Good Housekeeping:

"This glimpse of a rare bird is delightful."

BookPage:

"A winning and affectionate account..... *The Mockingbird Next Door* offers a tender look at one of our most beloved and enigmatic writers, as well as the town that inspired her."

Flavorwire:

"Marja Mills' engrossing first book...is an extraordinary account of roughly a decade in the day-to-day life of the reclusive writer behind one of America's seminal texts: *To Kill a Mockingbird*....The result is a gentle read, best enjoyed over a mint julep, say, or some sort of sipping drink, that sheds some necessary light on a persistent literary mystery....This one-of-a-kind work may stand as the closest thing to an autobiography that we're getting."

Garden and Gun:

"[Mills is] a skilled writer and storyteller...*The Mockingbird Next Door* has a near perfect combination of story and fact."

Books & Culture

"...[U]nlike the masses that went before her, Mills pulls off a journalistic coup by getting first Lee's sister Alice to open doors for her and then Lee herself . . . Mills has enjoyed unprecedented access to Lee, and we should be grateful for the tidbits she throws our way."

Houston Chronicle

"For *To Kill a Mockingbird* fans it's a must-read."

Book Reporter

"Mills's book is remarkable."

LibraryReads, Top 10 of July 2014

"A warm and engaging telling of the life story of Harper Lee. Like no other biography, this book offers

insights directly from Lee's point of view as shared with the journalist she and her sister embraced in friendship late in their lives. Informative and delightful!"

Booklist (starred):

"As she portrays the exceptional Lee women and their modest, slow-paced world with awed precision, Mills creates a uniquely intimate, ruminative, and gently illuminating biographical memoir."

Publishers Weekly (boxed review):

"A must-read for fans...thoughtful, witty, and rich in feeling."

Kirkus Reviews:

"In her first book, a journalist offers a gentle, loving portrait of a reclusive writer.... Mills portrays Nelle as a grown-up Scout, the feisty and defiant heroine of *Mockingbird*.... [A] charming portrait of a small Southern town and its most famous resident."

David Maraniss, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Barack Obama* and *First in His Class*

"The *Mockingbird Next Door* is quirky, honest, unpretentious, delightful, insightful, and moves at its own sweet pace. It is wholly unlike anything I've ever read, a reflection of both the author and her sympathetic subject. We should all be glad that Marja Mills went down to that Best Western in Monroeville in search of Harper Lee."

Elizabeth Berg, New York Times bestselling author of *Open House*

"You might come to *The Mockingbird Next Door* to find out why Harper Lee never wrote another novel. But you'll stay with it for its lush evocation of the South, and for the insight into what made this reclusive author the person she became. In these pages, you'll see the book-crowded house where Harper Lee lives with her sister, Alice. You'll go along on outings, sit in living rooms and at restaurant tables with the Lees, read faxes they and the author send back and forth, and appreciate the small and not-so-small revelations they offer: life when they were growing up with their father, who was the model for Atticus Finch; how reading sustains a person for a lifetime, how deeply embedded values don't change just because the times do, why it's a good idea to regularly count the ducks you feed. I suppose we all thrill to the notion of learning personal things about a deeply private but world-famous person. What we don't necessarily expect to see is how gently, respectfully and, above all, naturally it can be done. While I appreciated getting to see and hear the 'real' Harper Lee, I enjoyed as well the chance to meet Marja Mills, the woman who did what no one before her had because of her guileless trustworthiness, kindness, and care."

Andrew Carroll, New York Times bestselling author of *War Letters*

"In *The Mockingbird Next Door*, Marja Mills offers readers a rare gift, the opportunity to know an American icon. We all know that Harper Lee made a singular impact on American culture and letters with her classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*. But, we have never had the opportunity to know the great lady herself. I'm so glad that she and her sister Alice Lee decided to open up their world to Mills. I promise that the real Harper Lee is more than worth the wait, and Alice Lee emerges as a fascinating character in her own right. Mills was lucky enough to be invited into the lives of the Lee sisters, and it's a treat for all of us to join her there."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Henrietta Jimerson:

Typically the book *The Mockingbird Next Door: Life with Harper Lee* will bring you to definitely the new

experience of reading any book. The author style to elucidate the idea is very unique. In the event you try to find new book to study, this book very suitable to you. The book *The Mockingbird Next Door: Life with Harper Lee* is much recommended to you to study. You can also get the e-book through the official web site, so you can easier to read the book.

Curtis Locke:

Exactly why? Because this *The Mockingbird Next Door: Life with Harper Lee* is an unordinary book that the inside of the book waiting for you to snap it but latter it will distress you with the secret the item inside. Reading this book alongside it was fantastic author who write the book in such awesome way makes the content within easier to understand, entertaining technique but still convey the meaning entirely. So , it is good for you because of not hesitating having this anymore or you going to regret it. This excellent book will give you a lot of benefits than the other book get such as help improving your expertise and your critical thinking means. So , still want to hesitate having that book? If I had been you I will go to the reserve store hurriedly.

Robert Wallace:

The Mockingbird Next Door: Life with Harper Lee can be one of your beginner books that are good idea. Many of us recommend that straight away because this publication has good vocabulary which could increase your knowledge in words, easy to understand, bit entertaining but nonetheless delivering the information. The article writer giving his/her effort to place every word into delight arrangement in writing *The Mockingbird Next Door: Life with Harper Lee* however doesn't forget the main stage, giving the reader the hottest and based confirm resource data that maybe you can be considered one of it. This great information can drawn you into completely new stage of crucial thinking.

Connie Curtis:

Many people spending their period by playing outside along with friends, fun activity having family or just watching TV all day every day. You can have new activity to shell out your whole day by studying a book. Ugh, do you consider reading a book will surely hard because you have to take the book everywhere? It all right you can have the e-book, bringing everywhere you want in your Cell phone. Like *The Mockingbird Next Door: Life with Harper Lee* which is getting the e-book version. So , why not try out this book? Let's find.

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