

## Scottsboro Trials - The Novel's Setting in the 1930s

There are many parallels between the trial of Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and one of the most notorious series of trials in the nation's history, the Scottsboro Trials. On March 25, 1931, a freight train was stopped in Paint Rock, a tiny community in Northern Alabama, and nine young African American men who had been riding the rails were arrested. As two white women - one underage - descended from the freight cars, they accused the men of raping them on the train. Within a month the first man was found guilty and sentenced to death. There followed a series of sensational trials condemning the other men solely on the testimony of the older woman, a known prostitute, who was attempting to avoid prosecution under the Mann Act, prohibiting taking a minor across state lines for immoral purposes, like prostitution.

Although none of the accused were executed, a number remained on death row for many years. The case was not settled until 1976 with the pardon of the last of the Scottsboro defendants.

Some of the parallels between the Scottsboro trials and the trial of Tom Robinson are shown in the chart below: (next page)

## Parallels Between the Scottsboro and Tom Robinson Trials

### The Scottsboro Trials

Took place in the 1930s  
Took place in northern Alabama  
Began with a charge of rape made by white women against African American men  
The poor white status of the accusers was a critical issue. A central figure was a heroic judge, a member of the Alabama Bar who overturned a guilty jury verdict against African American men.  
This judge went against public sentiment in trying to protect the rights of the African American defendants.  
The first juries failed to include any African Americans, a situation which caused the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn the guilty verdict.  
The jury ignored evidence, for example, that the women suffered no injuries.  
Attitudes about Southern women and poor whites complicated the trial.

### Tom Robinson's Trial

Occurs in the 1930s  
Takes place in southern Alabama  
Begins with a charge of rape made by a white woman against an African American man  
The poor white status of Mayella is a critical issue. A central figure is Atticus, lawyer, legislator and member of the Alabama Bar, who defends an African American man.  
  
Atticus arouses anger in the community in trying to defend Tom Robinson.  
  
The verdict is rendered by a jury of poor white residents of Old Sarum.  
  
The jury ignores evidence, for example, that Tom has a useless left arm.  
  
Attitudes about Southern women and poor whites complicate the trial of Tom Robinson.

## The Author and the Book

Nelle Harper Lee, the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, had many childhood experiences which are similar to those of her narrator, Scout Finch.

### Harper Lee's Childhood

Grew up in 1930s - rural southern Alabama town  
Father - Amasa Lee - attorney who served in state legislature in Alabama

Older brother and young neighbor (Truman Capote) are playmates  
Harper Lee - an avid reader

Six years old when Scottsboro trials were meticulously covered in state and local newspapers

### Scout Finch's Childhood

Grew up in 1930s - rural southern Alabama town  
Father - Atticus Finch - attorney who served in state legislature in Alabama

Older brother and young neighbor (Dill) are playmates

Scout reads before she enters school; reads *Mobile Register* newspaper in first grade

Six years old when the trial of Tom Robinson takes place

## **The Civil Rights Era - Setting the Historical Context for the Novel and the Film**

Lee wrote the novel during the beginning of the Civil Rights era (from about 1955 to 1958). Alabama was very much in the news at this time with the Montgomery bus boycott, Martin Luther King's rise to leadership, and Autherine Lucy's attempt to enter the University of Alabama graduate school.

Harper Lee, who was well known on campus as editor of the politically satirical student newspaper, graduated from the university and entered law school, leaving one semester short of receiving a law degree. Lee's book was published in 1960 - a time of tumultuous events and racial strife as the struggle in the Civil Rights movement grew violent and spread into cities across the nation, and into the American consciousness on TV screens and the nightly news.

The novel shot to the top of the New York Times Best Seller list, as it began to make its remarkable impact on a divided nation. A year after its publication Lee worked as a consultant on the film adaptation of the novel and the screenplay written by Horton Foote. The film was released in 1962 and went on to receive five Academy Award nominations, winning three.

## Publication/Release of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the Civil Rights Era: A Chronology

<b>1954</b>	United States Supreme Court rules in <i>Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas</i> , that racial segregation in the public schools is inherently unequal and, therefore, illegal.
<b>1955</b>	Rosa Parks is arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery city bus.
	Boycott of Montgomery County city buses begins officially. Emmett Till, a young African American man, is murdered while visiting the South.
<b>1956</b>	Autherine Lucy receives a letter granting permission to enroll for classes at the U. of Alabama, Tuscaloosa.
	Home of Martin Luther King, Jr. is bombed in Montgomery. King is a leader in the boycott and designated spokesperson.
	Motions are filed in U.S. District Court calling for an end to bus segregation.
	Violence erupts on the campus of the U. of Alabama and in the streets of Tuscaloosa; continuing for three days. (TV evening news and Movietone newsreels showing "Week In Review" newsclips in between feature films in movie theaters documented these events.)
	Autherine Lucy is forced to flee U. of Alabama campus; the university's Board of Trustees bars her from campus. (TV/Movietone)
	Warrants are issued for arrest of 115 leaders of the Montgomery bus boycott.
	Autherine Lucy ordered by the courts to be re-admitted to U. of Alabama, only to be expelled by Board of Trustees. (TV / Movietone)
<b>1957</b>	U.S. Supreme Court decides in favor of Montgomery bus boycotters, by ruling bus segregation illegal.
	African Americans first board buses in Montgomery, according to a first-come, first-served basis. (TV/Movietone)
<b>1957</b>	Federal troops sent to Little Rock, Arkansas, to enforce court-ordered desegregation of schools. (TV/Movietone)
<b>1960</b>	Publication of <b><i>To Kill A Mockingbird</i></b> in the Fall (Shoots to top of NY Times Best Seller list) ...In Greensboro, N.C., attempt to integrate lunch counters is thwarted (TV/Movietone).
<b>1961</b>	Charlayne Hunter enters the U. of Georgia through lines of jeering white protesters (TV/Movietone)

	Freedom Riders begin arriving in the deep South to test desegregation. Violence necessitates the deployment of federal troops. (Major TV news event/Movietone )
	Violence erupts at U. of Mississippi over integration (featured on TV networks, in newspapers and magazines/Movietone).
	<b>To Kill A Mockingbird</b> , is released; the screen adaptation by Horton Foote receives 5 Academy Award nominations.
<b>1963</b>	Dogs and power hoses are directed at peaceful demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama; America watched on TV news.
	Three Civil Rights workers are found murdered in Mississippi.
	Massive Civil Rights March is held in Washington, D.C.
<b>1964</b>	The Civil Rights Act is passed.
<b>1965</b>	March for Voting Rights is held in Selma, Alabama.

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## Historical Background Discussion Questions

1. Compare the kinds and level and frequency of violence in the society of Maycomb in the 1930s and violence in American communities today.
2. What changes have taken place between the time of the novel and today? Consider, for example, family relationships then and now; use of language then and now; expectations of the behavior of little girls then and now; the use of guns to resolve conflict then and now; justice in the courts, then and now, (e.g., the O. J. Simpson trials).
3. Conduct research on how the book and the film were received by the public and by book reviewers. See, for example, issues of the New York Times, Time magazine, and other sources beginning around autumn of 1960. What kind of impact does it appear the book had on the public; on society? Document and share with class.

Source: Johnson, Claudia Durst. "Historical Background." 2 May 2007.  
 <<http://library.thinkquest.org/12111/SG/SG5.html>>