



Go Set a Watchman, by Harper Lee
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, October 2015

A half century after she won the Pulitzer Prize for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee, to the surprise of many, allowed a long-dormant manuscript to be published. Her “new” novel, *Go Set a Watchman*, written in the mid-50s, revisits the beloved Maycomb County characters of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Go Set a Watchman takes up the story of Jean Louise “Scout” Finch, now a 26-year-old woman, working in New York City. Jean Louise returns home to Alabama to help her aging father Atticus, who lives with his bigoted sister Alexandra. Henry Clinton, Jean Louise’s childhood friend and Atticus’s current law associate, hopes to rekindle her affection.

On the surface, Maycomb appears to be the familiar, comforting community Jean Louise lovingly recalls. However, Jean Louise soon discovers that, while Maycomb’s citizens have stayed the same, she and her thoughts about race relations have evolved. “In New York you are your own person,” she tells a former classmate, “You work with them (blacks), eat by and with them, ride buses with them....(before) I never opened my eyes. I never thought to look into people’s hearts, I looked only in their faces.”

Then one evening, finding a pamphlet entitled “The Black Plague” among her father’s papers, she follows Atticus and Henry to a County Citizens’ Council meeting and sits up in the balcony. To her disgust, she hears a man, “who had quit his job to devote his full time to the preservation of segregation,” spew racial comments. And to her horror, she sees her beloved father Atticus and new beau Henry sitting to the man’s left and right. There, the truth is out: Atticus is not the sterling hero Jean Louise has adored all her life.

Perhaps it would have been better, several critics have noted, if Harper Lee didn't publish *Go Set a Watchman*. After all, now our admiration for Atticus Finch has been altered irrevocably. I disagree; for although *Go Set a Watchman* isn't as elegantly written as its predecessor, it is a compelling read on its own. Unvarnished and a bit raw, *Go Set a Watchman* reflects the mid-50s attitudes of racism through the prism of its times. We readers are the richer for it.