Harper Lee: A Short Biography

Famed author Nelle Harper Lee was born on April 28, 1926, in Monroeville, Alabama. Lee is best known for writing the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel To Kill a Mockingbird (1960). 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 sensitive and for the fancy clothes he wore. While the two friends were very different, they both had 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 couldn't have cared less about fashion, makeup or dating. Instead, she focused on her studies and 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, eventually becoming the publication's editor.

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 Rammer Jammer editor. After her first year in the 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 north 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 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 publisher J.B. Lippincott Company interested in her work. Working with editor Tay Hohoff, Lee worked on a manuscript set in a small Alabama town, which eventually became her novel To Kill a Mockingbird.