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Good Scout

**Garrison Keillor | June 2006**

Here is a book about a woman who knew when to get off the train. A tomboy from Monroeville, Ala., editor of her college humor magazine, The Rammer Jammer, and law school dropout, she took it on the lam to New York, got a job, made friends and managed to write a novel that hit the best-seller lists and stayed there, won a Pulitzer, got made into a major movie and became a staple of high school English along with "Romeo and Juliet" and "The Great Gatsby." Total sales are somewhere around 30 million, and it continues to sell hundreds of thousands of copies a year. As her father, A. C. Lee, said, "it's very rare indeed when a thing like this happens to a country girl going to New York."

She worked for years on a second novel, and then, in the mid-1980's, on a book of nonfiction about a serial murder in Alabama, neither of which worked out to her satisfaction and so she squashed them. She made her peace with being a one-book author. Unlike her friend Truman Capote, she didn't enjoy the limelight. So she backed away from celebrity, declined to be interviewed or be honorifically degreed and simply lived her life, sometimes in Manhattan, riding city buses, visiting museums and bookstores in her running suit and sneakers, seeing old friends, and most of the time in Monroeville, in a ranch house with her older sister Alice, a house full of books. Built-in bookshelves, floor to ceiling.

Every summer, Monroeville draws crowds of tourists to see a staged version of "To Kill a Mockingbird" at the old county courthouse that was the model for the one in which Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch strode before the all-white jury to argue for Tom Robinson's acquittal, as little Scout and her brother Jem and friend Dill looked on from the gallery. Everyone would surely love it if Miss Lee would consent to walk out on stage and wave and take a bow, or even say a few words, but she will not do it. She has been known to show up at the high school and speak to English classes, but this is rare.

She is 80 years old and wears a hearing aid and eats out at the diner or the country club and to strangers who seek her out, she can be frosty. A reporter and photographer from Birmingham banged on her door 10 years ago and Miss Lee opened it and said, "What is it?" They asked her to autograph a copy of her book. She wasn't happy about it but she fetched a pen. "I hope you're more polite to other people," she said. She signed it: "Best wishes, Harper Lee." She said, "Next time try to be more thoughtful." They thanked her. She gave them a big warm smile and said, "You're quite welcome."

Charles Shields is a former English teacher who taught Harper Lee's book, and a scrupulous journalist who respects the lady's privacy even as he opens up her life. This biography will not disappoint those who loved the novel and the feisty, independent, fiercely loyal Scout, in whom Harper Lee put so much of herself.

If you were going to draw a movie from this book, you'd start on York Avenue in Manhattan on a cold winter night in the late 1950's. Pages of manuscript fluttering out of an apartment window and then a young woman, weeping, picking them up out of the snow. She is an airline ticket clerk and she has been working at her typewriter late at night ever since she came to the city over her parents' objections in 1949. She is on her own. Her childhood pal, Truman, an effeminate boy befriended by the boyish girl, is nearby but out of range, flying high, a heralded young novelist ("Other Voices, Other Rooms") with a Broadway musical in the works. In his wake, she strikes people as dumpy and distant. She perseveres. In November 1956, she walks into an agent's office at 18 East 41st Street with five short stories in hand, and is encouraged. On Christmas Day, at her friends Michael and Joy Brown's town house on East 50th, they present her with a gift, a note — "You have one year off from your job to write whatever you please. Merry Christmas." She is bowled over by their generosity. A year later, she has the beginnings of a novel, "Go Set a Watchman," which becomes "Atticus," which, under the tutelage of a patient editor at Lippincott named Tay Hohoff ("dressed in a business suit with her steel gray hair pulled tightly behind her, . . . short and rail-thin with an aristocratic profile and a voice raspy from cigarettes"), after the cold winter night breakdown, she finishes in the summer of 1959.

One evening in mid-December, she meets Truman at Grand Central and they board the 20th Century Limited for Chicago. He has reserved a pair of roomettes. He's on his way to Garden City, Kan., on assignment for The New Yorker, to write about the murders of four members of a prominent farm family, the Clutters, and he's asked her to help him do the research. They spend a month in Kansas, an odd couple. A short man in a sheepskin coat and moccasins and a long scarf, a rather pushy self-centered New York queer, and a tall gracious Southern woman with a knack for saying the right thing. Their big breakthrough comes on Christmas Day. They're invited for dinner at the home of Cliff Hope, the attorney of the murdered farmer, Herb Clutter. Also present are the detective Alvin Dewey and his wife, Marie. Dewey is coordinating the murder investigation and he had been put off by Truman at first, but he and his wife and the Hopes are literate people with a high regard for writers and there is a bottle of J&B Scotch and Harper Lee is a steady woman in whose presence Truman shines. And thus Dewey becomes their key source, the man who makes "In Cold Blood" possible.

It's the beginning of the time of her life. Her book is done, a big relief, and she is getting intimations of the success to come. A lawyer's daughter, she is on a big murder case. She works hard, takes 150 typewritten pages of careful notes, puts her writerly intelligence at the service of her friend (who will never acknowledge the extent of her help), gets engrossed in the story, feels the thrill of collaboration. She goes back to New York to correct her own galleys, returns to Kansas with Truman for the trial of the killers, then back to New York for the publication of the book on July 11, 1960. She is 34 and in six months she has had her hands on two American classics. Ahead of her is a deluge of success, a potful of money and some sort of vindication in the eyes of Monroeville. Truman will disintegrate and die at 59 and she will persist. The lady looks around at a room full of books, closes the door, and drives off with her sister to an early supper at Dave's Catfish Cabin, a plate of fish and hush puppies and a glass of tea. Everybody at Dave's knows who she is and nobody asks her made-up questions about writing or fame or how she explains the long run her novel has enjoyed. She is apparently in good humor and enjoying her food and not planning to go on [Oprah](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/w/oprah_winfrey/index.html?inline=nyt-per) or Charlie Rose. And so there, dear reader, you will just have to leave her.