to kill a mockingbird

by harper lee · Language: EN

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Overview

Set in the fictional small town of Maycomb, Alabama, during the 1930s, "To Kill a Mockingbird" tells the story of six-year-old Jean Louise Finch, known as Scout, and her older brother, Jem. The narrative unfolds through Scout's innocent yet perceptive eyes, chronicling their childhood adventures, their fascination with the reclusive neighbor Boo Radley, and the profound impact of their father, Atticus Finch, a morally upright lawyer. The first part of the book establishes the setting, introduces the eccentric characters of Maycomb, and explores the children's early encounters with the town's social dynamics and prejudices.

The central conflict of the novel arises when Atticus is appointed to defend Tom Robinson, a Black man falsely accused of raping a white woman, Mayella Ewell. The ensuing trial exposes the deep-seated racial prejudice and injustice prevalent in the Southern community, challenging Scout and Jem's understanding of fairness, morality, and human nature. Through Atticus's unwavering commitment to justice and his compassionate approach, the children learn valuable lessons about empathy, courage, and standing up for what is right, even in the face of overwhelming opposition. The novel culminates in a dramatic confrontation that brings the themes of innocence, prejudice, and the protection of the vulnerable full circle, leaving a lasting impression on the reader about the complexities of good and evil.

Key Takeaways

- Cultivate empathy by walking in another person's shoes before judging them, as Atticus frequently advises his children.
- Recognize that true courage is not about physical strength but about fighting for what is right, even when you know you're licked before you begin.
- Challenge societal prejudices and injustices, as silence in the face of wrongdoing perpetuates harm.
- Protect the innocent and vulnerable, symbolized by the 'mockingbird,' who do no harm and only bring joy.
- Understand that childhood innocence can offer unique perspectives on the world, often seeing truths that adults overlook.
- Stand firm in your moral convictions, even when it means facing isolation or criticism from your community.

• Acknowledge that justice can be flawed and influenced by deeply ingrained biases, requiring constant vigilance and effort to uphold.

• Seek to understand the motivations behind people's actions, as even the most feared individuals may have complex reasons for their behavior.

Chapter Summaries

Chapters 1-3: Introduction to Maycomb and the Radleys

The novel introduces Scout Finch, her older brother Jem, and their widowed father, Atticus, a lawyer in the sleepy, Depression-era town of Maycomb, Alabama. Their summer neighbor, Charles Baker "Dill" Harris, sparks their fascination with the reclusive Arthur "Boo" Radley, who lives next door and is the subject of many local rumors. The children spend their summer trying to lure Boo out of his house. Scout's first day of school is a difficult experience, as her teacher, Miss Caroline Fisher, misunderstands Maycomb's social dynamics and Scout's advanced reading ability. Scout also encounters Walter Cunningham, a poor but proud boy whose family never takes what they cannot repay, and Burris Ewell, a filthy boy from a notoriously disrespectful family. Calpurnia, the Finch's black housekeeper, teaches Scout a lesson in empathy regarding Walter.

Chapters 4-7: The Radley Mystery Deepens

The children continue their summer games, often reenacting the rumored life of Boo Radley, much to Atticus's disapproval. They discover gifts, including two pieces of chewing gum, two polished Indian-head pennies, carved soap figures resembling themselves, a broken watch and chain, and a silver knife, hidden in a knothole of an oak tree on the Radley property. Dill proposes a plan to peek into the Radley house, leading to a tense encounter where Jem loses his pants while escaping. Later, Miss Maudie Atkinson's house burns down, revealing her resilience and positive outlook. Jem confesses to Atticus about his lost pants, which he found mended and folded on the fence, adding to the mystery surrounding Boo Radley. The knothole is cemented up by Nathan Radley, Boo's brother, who claims the tree is dying.

Chapters 8-11: Atticus's Principles and Courage

Maycomb experiences a rare snowfall, delighting the children. Atticus agrees to defend Tom Robinson, a black man accused of raping a white woman, Mayella Ewell, a decision that draws criticism and racist remarks from the townspeople, including Scout's cousin Francis Hancock. Atticus teaches Scout about standing up for what is right, even when it's unpopular. The children are surprised to learn of Atticus's hidden talent when he shoots a rabid dog, Tim Johnson, with a single shot, revealing his past as "One-Shot Finch." Jem and Scout frequently pass Mrs. Dubose's house, a cantankerous old woman who insults Atticus. Jem, provoked, destroys her camellia bushes. As punishment, Atticus makes Jem read to Mrs. Dubose daily, during which she overcomes her morphine addiction before her death, demonstrating true courage to Jem.

Chapters 12-14: Calpurnia's World and Aunt Alexandra's Arrival

With Atticus away in the state legislature, Calpurnia takes Jem and Scout to her church, First Purchase African M.E. Church, offering the children a glimpse into the black community's life and struggles. They witness the challenges of illiteracy and the strong sense of community support. Aunt Alexandra arrives to stay with the Finches, determined to instill proper Southern lady behavior in Scout and uphold the family's "gentle breeding." Her presence creates tension in the household, particularly with Calpurnia, whom Alexandra believes is no longer needed. Scout and Jem find Dill hiding under Scout's bed, having run away from his stepfather in Meridian, feeling unwanted. Atticus allows him to stay, showing his compassion.

Chapters 15-17: The Trial Begins

A group of concerned men, including Link Deas, visits Atticus to discuss the potential dangers of the upcoming trial, fearing a mob. Later, a mob of men, led by Walter Cunningham Sr., gathers outside the jail, intending to lynch Tom Robinson. Scout, Jem, and Dill follow Atticus to the jail. Scout, recognizing Walter Cunningham Sr., innocently engages him in conversation about his son, shaming the men into dispersing. The trial begins, and the children sneak into the courthouse to watch from the colored balcony. Judge Taylor presides. Bob Ewell testifies, painting a picture of Tom Robinson's guilt, but his testimony is riddled with inconsistencies and his crude language offends the court.

Chapters 18-20: Mayella's and Tom's Testimonies

Mayella Ewell takes the stand, recounting her version of the alleged assault, claiming Tom Robinson attacked her. Atticus's cross-examination reveals her loneliness, her father's abusive nature, and the inconsistencies in her story, particularly her refusal to admit her father beats her. Tom Robinson then testifies, explaining that Mayella made advances toward him, and when her father saw, he became enraged. Tom, a kind and helpful man, explains his left arm is crippled from a cotton gin accident, making it impossible for him to have inflicted the injuries on Mayella's right side. Link Deas speaks up for Tom, but is ejected. Atticus delivers a powerful closing argument, appealing to the jury's sense of justice and exposing the deep-seated racial prejudice at play.

Chapters 21-24: The Verdict and Its Aftermath

Despite Atticus's compelling defense, the all-white jury finds Tom Robinson guilty. Jem is devastated and heartbroken by the injustice. The black community shows its respect for Atticus by standing as he leaves the courtroom and later by sending him food. Bob Ewell, feeling humiliated by Atticus's exposure of his lies, spits in Atticus's face and threatens him. Aunt Alexandra hosts a missionary tea, where the hypocrisy and prejudice of the Maycomb ladies are subtly revealed through their discussions about the Mrunas tribe and their disdain for the black community at home. Tom Robinson is tragically shot and killed while attempting to escape from prison, a senseless act that deeply affects Atticus and the children.

Chapters 25-27: Maycomb's Reaction and Ewell's Revenge

Maycomb reacts to Tom Robinson's death with a mix of indifference, gossip, and some genuine sorrow. Mr. Underwood writes a scathing editorial comparing Tom's death to the senseless slaughter of songbirds. Scout reflects on the injustice and the town's failure to protect an innocent man. School resumes, and Scout learns about current events, including Hitler's persecution of Jews, from her teacher, Miss Gates, who ironically expresses prejudice against black people. Bob Ewell continues to harbor a grudge against Atticus and anyone associated with the trial. He loses his job, blames Atticus, attempts to break into Judge Taylor's house, and harasses Helen Robinson, Tom's widow, on her way to work, escalating his threats.

Chapters 28-31: The Attack and Boo Radley's Revelation

On Halloween night, Jem and Scout walk to the school pageant. Scout, dressed as a ham, misses her cue and is embarrassed. On their way home through the dark woods, they are attacked. Jem's arm is broken, and Scout is saved by her ham costume. A mysterious figure intervenes, fighting off their assailant. Scout realizes the attacker is Bob Ewell, who is found dead at the scene with a knife in his ribs. The mysterious rescuer is revealed to be Boo Radley. Sheriff Heck Tate, understanding the true sequence of events and wanting to protect Boo from public scrutiny and a trial, insists that Ewell fell on his own knife. Atticus initially struggles with this lie, but Scout helps him understand that exposing Boo would be like "killing a mockingbird." Scout walks Boo home, finally seeing Maycomb from his perspective.

Themes

- Racial Injustice
- Loss of Innocence
- Moral Education
- Prejudice and Empathy
- Courage and Conscience
- Social Class and Inequality

Frequently Asked Questions

What is to kill a mockingbird about?

"To Kill a Mockingbird" is about a young girl, Scout Finch, growing up in the Depression-era South. It chronicles her childhood experiences, her fascination with a reclusive neighbor, and her father Atticus's defense of a Black man falsely accused of rape, exploring themes of racial injustice, prejudice, and the loss of innocence.

Is to kill a mockingbird worth reading?

Yes, "To Kill a Mockingbird" is widely considered a classic for its powerful exploration of racial injustice, empathy, and moral courage. Its timeless themes and memorable characters make it a profound and thought-provoking read that continues to resonate with readers of all ages, offering valuable insights into human nature and societal flaws.

How does to kill a mockingbird end?

Spoiler: The book ends with Bob Ewell attacking Scout and Jem, and Boo Radley emerging from his house to save them, killing Ewell in the process. Sheriff Heck Tate, understanding that exposing Boo would harm him, decides to report that Ewell fell on his own knife. Scout walks Boo home, finally seeing the world from his perspective, and gains a deeper understanding of empathy and the quiet heroism of her reclusive neighbor.

Who should read to kill a mockingbird?

"To Kill a Mockingbird" is suitable for young adults and adults alike. It's particularly recommended for those interested in American history, civil rights, moral dilemmas, and coming-of-age stories. Its accessible narrative and profound themes make it a staple in high school curricula and a beloved book for general readers.

How long does it take to read to kill a mockingbird?

On average, it takes about 6 to 7 hours to read "To Kill a Mockingbird." This estimate is based on an average reading speed of 250 words per minute and the book's approximate length of 100,000 words.

Best Quotes

“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

3

Atticus Finch says this to Scout early in the novel, teaching her the fundamental lesson of empathy. This quote is central to the book's themes, urging readers to look beyond surface appearances and prejudices to truly comprehend others' experiences and motivations, a skill Scout gradually masters.

“Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.”

10

Miss Maudie Atkinson explains this to Scout and Jem, echoing Atticus's earlier advice. This line introduces the central metaphor of the novel: mockingbirds are innocent creatures that bring joy, symbolizing characters like Tom Robinson and Boo Radley, who are harmless and

undeserving of harm.

“Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.”

10

Miss Maudie further elaborates on the mockingbird metaphor. This quote explicitly defines why killing a mockingbird is wrong, highlighting their innocence and benevolence. It serves as a moral compass for the children and the reader, emphasizing the protection of the vulnerable and harmless.

“Before I can live with other folks I've got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience.”

11

Atticus says this to Scout when explaining why he must defend Tom Robinson, despite the town's disapproval. It underscores his unwavering moral integrity and commitment to his principles, even when facing societal pressure. This quote defines Atticus's character and his personal code of ethics.

“I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand.”

11

Atticus tells Jem this after Mrs. Dubose's death, revealing her struggle with morphine addiction as an example of true bravery. This quote redefines courage, moving beyond physical prowess to emphasize moral fortitude, perseverance, and fighting for what is right, even in the face of certain defeat.

“Simply because we were licked a hundred years before we started is no reason for us not to try to win.”

9

Atticus says this to Scout when she asks why he is defending Tom Robinson, knowing he will likely lose. This quote encapsulates Atticus's commitment to justice and his belief in fighting for what is right, regardless of the odds. It teaches the children about perseverance and moral duty.

“Well, it'd be sort of like shootin' a mockingbird, wouldn't it?”

30

Scout says this to Atticus, understanding Sheriff Heck Tate's decision to cover up Bob Ewell's death to protect Boo Radley. This quote demonstrates Scout's growth and her grasp of the mockingbird metaphor, recognizing Boo's innocence and the injustice of exposing him to public scrutiny.

“Let the dead bury the dead.”

30

Sheriff Heck Tate says this to Atticus, insisting that Bob Ewell's death should be attributed to falling on his knife, rather than revealing Boo Radley's role. This quote signifies Tate's pragmatic justice, protecting Boo from unwanted attention and preventing further tragedy, allowing the community to move on.

“Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them.”

31

Atticus says this to Scout after she walks Boo Radley home and reflects on his perspective. This final line of the novel reinforces the central theme of empathy. It suggests that understanding and compassion can reveal the inherent goodness in people, a lesson Scout has fully internalized.

“Cry about the simple hell people give other people—without even thinking. Cry about the hell white people give colored folks, without even thinking.”

20

Mr. Dolphus Raymond says this to Scout and Dill outside the courthouse. He explains his pretense of drunkenness allows people to rationalize his unconventional lifestyle. This quote highlights the casual, thoughtless cruelty of prejudice and injustice, particularly against African Americans, in Maycomb society.

“When a child asks you something, answer him, for goodness' sake. But don't make a production of it. Children are children, but they can spot an evasion quicker than adults, and evasion simply muddles 'em.”

9

Atticus says this to Uncle Jack after Jack struggles to answer Scout's questions about curse words. This quote reveals Atticus's parenting philosophy: honesty and directness with children. He believes in treating children with respect and intelligence, fostering trust and clear understanding.

“As you grow older, you'll see white men cheat black men every day of your life, but let me tell you something and don't you forget it—whenever a white man does that to a black man, no matter who he is, how rich he is, or how fine a family he comes from, that white man is trash.”

23

Atticus says this to Jem after Tom Robinson's trial. This powerful statement condemns racial injustice and hypocrisy, emphasizing that true character is not determined by race or social standing, but by moral integrity. It's a harsh truth about the pervasive racism in their society.

“I think there's just one kind of folks. Folks.”

23

Scout says this to Jem, challenging his theory about different 'kinds' of people in Maycomb. This quote reflects Scout's innocent yet profound understanding of human equality, contrasting with the rigid social hierarchies and prejudices prevalent in her community. It highlights her developing moral compass.

“I'm beginning to understand why Boo Radley's stayed shut up in the house all this time... it's because he wants to stay inside.”

23

Jem says this to Scout after the trial, reflecting on the injustice and cruelty he witnessed. This quote marks a significant moment in Jem's maturation, as he begins to empathize with Boo Radley and understand his reclusiveness as a choice to escape the harsh realities and prejudices of the outside world.

“To Maycomb, Tom's death was typical. Typical of a nigger to cut and run. Typical of a nigger's mentality to have no plan, no thought for the future, just run blind into the nearest fence.”

24

This is a narrative passage reflecting the prejudiced mindset of the Maycomb community after Tom Robinson's death. It starkly illustrates the deep-seated racism and stereotypes that pervade the town, demonstrating how easily they dismiss Tom's humanity and justify his tragic end.

“It's not time to worry yet.”

10

Atticus says this calmly to Jem and Scout when a rabid dog, Tim Johnson, appears in the street. This quote demonstrates Atticus's composure and quiet strength in the face of danger. It also foreshadows his later courage in the courtroom, facing a different kind of 'madness' with dignity.

“There are just some kind of men who—who're so busy worrying about the next world they've never learned to live in this one, and you can look down the street and see the results.”

5

Miss Maudie says this to Scout, referring to the foot-washing Baptists who condemn her for gardening. This quote critiques religious hypocrisy and narrow-mindedness, advocating for a practical, compassionate approach to life rather than rigid, judgmental dogma. It highlights Maudie's progressive worldview.

“The one place where a man ought to get a square deal is in a courtroom, be he any color of the rainbow, but people have a way of carrying their resentments right into a jury box.”

23

Atticus says this to Jem after the trial, explaining the injustice of the verdict. This quote expresses Atticus's disillusionment with the legal system's failure to uphold its ideals when confronted with deep-seated prejudice. It underscores the pervasive nature of racism in Maycomb.

“People in their right minds never take pride in their talents.”

10

Miss Maudie says this to Scout, explaining why Atticus doesn't boast about his exceptional shooting skills. This quote emphasizes humility and modesty, particularly regarding one's abilities. It highlights Atticus's character, showing he uses his talents responsibly and without seeking recognition.

Questions & Answers

What is the setting of 'To Kill a Mockingbird'?

The novel is set in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama, during the 1930s, a period marked by the Great Depression and deeply entrenched racial segregation in the American South. The sleepy, old town with its slow pace of life and rigid social hierarchy provides a stark backdrop for the dramatic events of the Tom Robinson trial, highlighting the pervasive prejudice and social injustices of the era.

Who is Scout Finch?

Scout Finch, whose full name is Jean Louise Finch, is the narrator and protagonist of 'To Kill a Mockingbird.' She is a tomboyish, intelligent, and observant young girl who grows up in Maycomb, Alabama. The story is told from her perspective as she recounts her childhood experiences, particularly her father Atticus's defense of Tom Robinson, and her evolving understanding of justice, prejudice, and human nature.

What is the significance of the title 'To Kill a Mockingbird'?

The title is a central metaphor for the novel's themes of innocence and injustice. A mockingbird is a harmless bird that only sings beautifully, bringing joy to others. Therefore, 'to kill a mockingbird' symbolizes destroying innocence or harming those who are vulnerable and do no wrong. Characters like Tom Robinson and Boo Radley are considered 'mockingbirds' within the story, as they are innocent individuals who suffer greatly due to the prejudice and cruelty of others.

Why does Atticus Finch defend Tom Robinson?

Atticus Finch defends Tom Robinson because it is his moral duty and he believes in upholding justice and equality, regardless of race. He knows the case will be unpopular and difficult, but he feels he cannot face his children or himself if he doesn't try his best to defend an innocent man. His decision is rooted in his strong sense of integrity and his belief that everyone deserves a fair trial.

What is the outcome of Tom Robinson's trial?

Despite Atticus Finch presenting compelling evidence that proves Tom Robinson's innocence, the all-white jury convicts Tom of rape. The verdict is a devastating blow, highlighting the deep-seated racial prejudice prevalent in Maycomb. Tom is sent to prison, and later, while attempting to escape, he is shot and killed, a tragic outcome that underscores the profound injustice he faced.

Who is Boo Radley and what is his role in the story?

Boo Radley (Arthur Radley) is a reclusive neighbor who is the subject of much fear and speculation among the children and townspeople. He is initially portrayed as a mysterious, almost monstrous figure, but his true role is that of a benevolent protector. He leaves gifts for the children, mends Jem's pants, and ultimately saves Jem and Scout from Bob Ewell's attack, revealing his gentle and heroic nature.

How does Scout's understanding of Boo Radley evolve throughout the novel?

Scout's understanding of Boo Radley transforms from fear and childish fascination to empathy and profound respect. Initially, she sees him as a terrifying monster, fueled by rumors. As the story progresses, she begins to recognize his kindness through the gifts he leaves. By the end, after he saves her and Jem, she sees him as a gentle, protective, and misunderstood human being, finally 'climbing into his skin' and understanding his reclusiveness.

What is the main theme of 'To Kill a Mockingbird'?

The main theme of 'To Kill a Mockingbird' is the exploration of moral growth, justice, and prejudice in the American South during the 1930s. It delves into the destructive nature of racism and class bias, the importance of empathy and compassion, and the courage required to stand up for what is right, even when facing overwhelming opposition. The novel ultimately champions the idea of seeing the world from another's perspective.

How does Harper Lee portray prejudice in the novel?

Harper Lee portrays prejudice as a deeply ingrained and destructive force in Maycomb society, manifesting primarily through racism against African Americans and class bias. She shows how it blinds people to truth and justice, leading to the wrongful conviction and death of Tom Robinson. Prejudice is also evident in the town's ostracization of Boo Radley and the Cunninghams, demonstrating its pervasive impact on individuals and the community.

What is the role of Miss Maudie Atkinson?

Miss Maudie Atkinson is a wise, kind, and principled neighbor who serves as a significant moral guide and confidante for Scout and Jem. She offers them perspective, explains Atticus's actions, and challenges the town's prejudices with her own quiet strength and integrity. Her unwavering optimism and clear moral compass provide a contrast to the narrow-mindedness of many other Maycomb residents, reinforcing Atticus's values.

Why does Jem cry after the verdict of Tom Robinson's trial?

Jem cries after the verdict because he is deeply shocked and disillusioned by the injustice of the legal system. He had firmly believed that the jury, presented with clear evidence of Tom's innocence, would deliver a just verdict. The guilty verdict shatters his childhood idealism about fairness and equality, forcing him to confront the harsh reality of racial prejudice in his community and the world.

What happens to Bob Ewell at the end of the book?

Spoiler: At the end of the book, Bob Ewell, seeking revenge against Atticus and those involved in the trial, attacks Jem and Scout on their way home from the Halloween pageant. During the struggle, Boo Radley intervenes to protect the children. Bob Ewell is killed in the altercation, either by Boo Radley or by falling on his own knife, though Sheriff Heck Tate insists on the latter to protect Boo.

Spoiler: How does Boo Radley save Jem and Scout?

Spoiler: Boo Radley saves Jem and Scout by intervening when Bob Ewell attacks them in the dark on their way home from the Halloween pageant. Boo emerges from his house, wrestles Ewell away from the children, and ultimately kills Ewell with Ewell's own knife. He then carries the unconscious Jem back to the Finch house and stays with them until Sheriff Tate arrives, ensuring

their safety.

What does Atticus mean by 'real courage'?

Atticus defines 'real courage' not as a man with a gun in his hand, but as fighting for what is right even when you know you're licked before you begin. He illustrates this through Mrs. Dubose's struggle to overcome her morphine addiction, showing that true bravery lies in perseverance, moral integrity, and facing difficult challenges with dignity, rather than physical strength or aggression. It's about sticking to your convictions.

How does the novel explore the idea of justice?

The novel explores justice through the lens of both legal and moral frameworks. It exposes the severe flaws in the legal system when racial prejudice overrides truth, as seen in Tom Robinson's trial. However, it also presents moral justice through characters like Atticus, who champions fairness, and Heck Tate, who makes a pragmatic decision to protect Boo Radley. The book suggests that true justice often transcends legal rulings and requires empathy and integrity.

What lessons does Scout learn about empathy?

Scout learns profound lessons about empathy, primarily through Atticus's guidance. She learns to 'climb into another person's skin and walk around in it' to understand their perspective. This lesson is applied to various characters, from Miss Caroline to Mrs. Dubose, and culminates in her understanding of Boo Radley. By the end, she can literally stand on Boo's porch and see the world through his eyes, demonstrating her full grasp of empathy.

What is the significance of the mad dog incident?

The mad dog incident, where Atticus calmly shoots a rabid dog named Tim Johnson, is significant for several reasons. It reveals Atticus's hidden talent as an expert marksman, challenging the children's perception of their father as merely an intellectual. More importantly, it serves as a metaphor for Atticus's role in the Tom Robinson trial: he is the only one willing and capable of confronting the 'madness' of racial prejudice in Maycomb.

Who is Dolphus Raymond and what is his purpose in the story?

Dolphus Raymond is a wealthy white man who lives with a black woman and has biracial children. He pretends to be a drunkard by sipping from a paper bag, which actually contains Coca-Cola. His purpose is to offer a critique of Maycomb's societal norms. He explains that his pretense allows the townspeople to rationalize his unconventional lifestyle, as they cannot comprehend someone choosing to live outside their rigid social and racial boundaries without an 'excuse' like alcoholism.

How does the community of Maycomb react to Atticus defending Tom?

The community of Maycomb reacts with significant disapproval and hostility to Atticus defending Tom Robinson. Many residents, deeply entrenched in racial prejudice, criticize him, call him a

'nigger-lover,' and ostracize his family. However, a smaller, more progressive segment of the community, including Miss Maudie and some members of the black community, silently supports him, recognizing his courage and moral stand. The reaction highlights the deep divisions within Maycomb.