

A reprint of
"Alabama Bound:
Reading Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* While Southern"
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*The Timeless Classic of Growing Up and
the Human Dignity That Unites Us All*

TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

Harper Lee



To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee (New York: Warner Books, 1982 reprinting.)
Image courtesy of McCain Library and Archives (de Grummond Children's Literature
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Alabama Bound: Reading Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* While Southern

JAN SUSINA

*Proud of the glory, stare down the shame
duality of the Southern thing
—Drive-By Truckers (“The Southern Thing”)*

When I was nine years old—which is the same age as Scout Finch at the beginning of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*—my family packed into our Studebaker and headed south on the Dixie Highway from the suburbs of Chicago to our new home in the suburbs of Birmingham, Alabama. Just outside of Indianapolis, we merged on to US Highway 31 taking us down through Louisville, Kentucky; Nashville, Tennessee; and eventually crossing over the Alabama state line, where a billboard announced “Welcome to Alabama, the Heart of Dixie”—a motto that appeared on standard issued license plates beginning in 1955. As the Lead Belly song goes, I was “Alabama Bound.” Arriving in the heart of Dixie, we slowly made our way through Athens, Cullman, and finally into Birmingham, nicknamed The Magic City. The two-lane highway that we traveled on for years now has been replaced by an multi-lane expressway, but in many places, Highway 65 runs concurrent with old Highway 31. Things change, but they often stay the same.

When I teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* in my college-level young adult literature course, I bring in James Agee's and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), the nonfiction account of three families of white sharecroppers living in the same area of Alabama in the 1930s as the setting for Lee's novel. Evans's haunting, black-and-white photographs of the families and their homes serve as the introduction to Agee's prose. The

photographs provide a historical visual companion to the poverty of the lives of the Cunninghams and the Ewells in Lee's novel. After showing students the photographs from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, I then share the photographs from Dale Maharidge's and Michael Williamson's *And Their Children After Them* (1989), which revisits the locations and families that Agee and Evans interviewed and photographed in 1936. Between 1986 and 1988, Maharidge and Williamson were able to locate twelve of the original twenty-two individuals who were featured in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (257). Williamson frequently pairs Evans's earlier photographs with his more recent images of the same places and people. The children that Agee and Evans met have become adults. While trailers have replaced simple cabins, rural poverty remains a constant.

Two years after Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published and awarded a Pulitzer Prize in Literature in 1960, my family moved to Alabama. It was the year of the release of Robert Mulligan's popular film adaptation of the novel. The film went on to win three Academy Awards, including "best actor" for Gregory Peck, who played Atticus Finch. The roles of Scout and Jem Finch were played by the ten-year-old Mary Badham and the thirteen-year-old Philip Allford, both child actors from Birmingham; neither had much previous acting experience prior to the film. Badham was the youngest actress to ever be nominated for the best supporting actress role, but she lost that year to sixteen-year-old Patty Duke (who played Helen Keller, another Alabamian, in Arthur Penn's *The Miracle Worker*). Mulligan's film adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, with a screenplay by Horton Foote, is a rare example of a critically acclaimed novel being successfully translated to the movie screen. Taken together, the novel and the film have probably done more to help change and improve race relations in Alabama than any other literary work. While *To Kill a Mockingbird* appears to some contemporary readers and literary critics as dated and less progressive in its racial politics when viewed in light of contemporary attitudes toward racial justice, it was—and remains—an influential and enduring first step. Even before the publication of *Go Set a Watchman* (2015), in which Harper Lee presents the aging Atticus Finch as a racist, critics had begun to question the protagonist's attitudes and his weak defense of Tom Robinson. Malcolm Gladwell in "The Courthouse Ring: The Truth about Atticus Finch," published in *The New Yorker* in 2009, argues that Atticus is "about accommodation, not reform" (28) and that Lee's novel informs readers of "the limitation of Jim Crow liberalism in Maycomb, Alabama" (32). However, in 2012, when John Grisham, the lawyer turned successful novelist, was asked to name the best book about the law in the "By the Book" section of *The New York Times Book Review*, he promptly responded, "*To Kill a Mockingbird*" (7).

In “It’s a Sin to Kill a Mockingbird: The Need for Idealism in the Legal Profession,” published in the 2016 *Michigan Law Review*, law professor Jonathan Rapping observed that in 2010 the American Bar Association named Atticus Finch as America’s favorite lawyer and that long after the novel’s publication, Atticus remains an inspiration for many progressive lawyers (852). While acknowledging Atticus’s flaws, Rapping argues that readers, including lawyers, “should continue to hold him up as a role model for the profession” (849). President Barack Obama, a former law professor, also invoked Atticus Finch as an inspirational figure in his “Farewell Address,” given in Chicago on January 10, 2017. Obama said:

But laws alone won’t be enough. Hearts must change. It won’t change overnight. Social attitudes oftentimes take generations to change. But if our democracy is to work the way it should in this increasingly diverse nation, then each of us needs to try to heed the advice of a great character in American fiction, Atticus Finch, who said “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.” (Obama)

While *To Kill a Mockingbird* is frequently taught and discussed in law schools as well as high schools, it is a novel that works on the reader’s emotions rather than by the force of the argument. The novel sets out to change an attitude toward race, rather than to promote specific laws about race. President Obama recognized that the goal of the novel is to change hearts. That goal has been enormously successful in evoking empathy and encouraging readers to see the world as others do. Lee shows readers the actions and attitudes of adults as viewed from the point of view of three young children—Scout, Jem, and Dill—who transition from innocence to experience. In a similar manner, I came to understand Alabama through the eyes of a young person.

The year after we moved, George Wallace was elected governor of Alabama for the first time. I can still remember asking my father how historians were able to recognize and separate the many ordinary and fleeting daily events from those that would be subsequently recognized as significant and form a lasting part of history. He walked over to the coffee table and picked up a copy of *The Birmingham News* featuring a headline about a march from Selma to Montgomery and explained, “This is history.” Until then, I had always assumed—based on my textbooks that I was provided in school—that American history was a series of events that had occurred many years ago and took place elsewhere, generally somewhere in New England.

I had assumed that history was never local, but that assumption was about to be challenged.

My family moved to Alabama after my father had accepted a faculty position at the Pharmacy School at Samford University, a Baptist college in Homewood, Alabama, a suburb just “over the mountain,” or the other side of Red Mountain. At the time, Birmingham was a steel town. The Sloss Furnace was in operation and made an impressive, if not frightening sight, especially at night. You could view it up close if you drove past the huge furnace on First Avenue in downtown Birmingham. We could also see the rows of company houses that Walker Evans had photographed in the 1930s for the Farm Security Administration that were still being occupied by steel workers. Atop Red Mountain, overlooking the city was the impressive fifty-five-foot statue of Vulcan, the symbol of Birmingham, the largest iron ore statue in world.

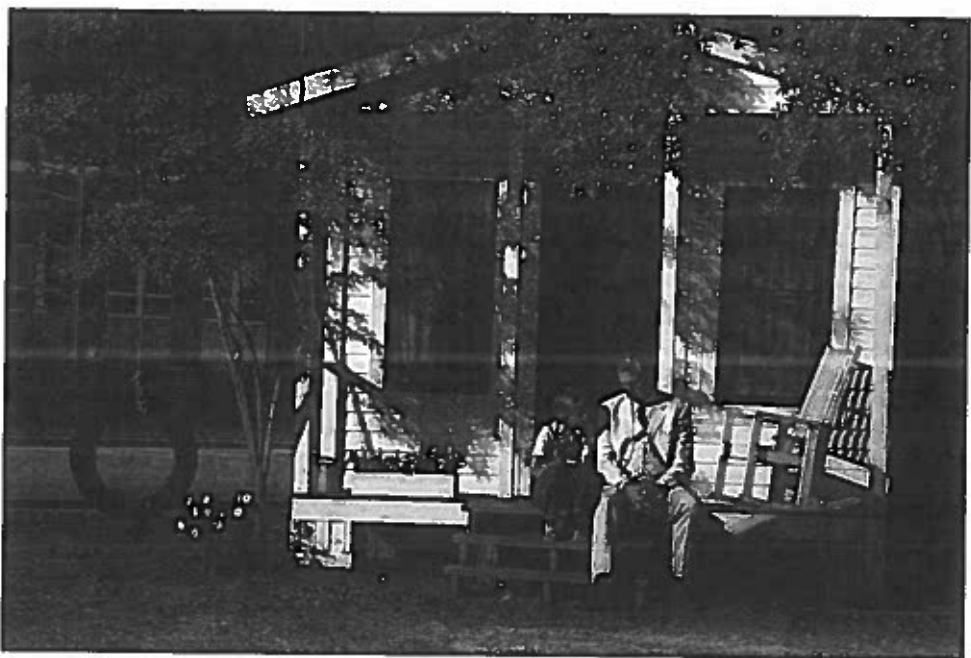
Birmingham was famous for being the Pittsburgh of the South, or the Magic City, although its reputation would quickly change with the civil rights movement and subsequent events, not the least being the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in 1963.

I first read *To Kill a Mockingbird* when I was in high school. I don't recall the novel being assigned in any of my English classes, so I must have found a copy in the library. It has always been a popular—although rather controversial—book in Alabama. Harper Lee was a beloved, but somewhat reclusive figure, within the state. She had once stated her ambitions as, “all I want to be is the Jane Austen of south Alabama” (Blackall 19). As a careful observer of a select group of families in the country, with a keen eye and a wicked ear for social satire, Lee was amazingly successful. Referring to her by the name she used with those close to her, Lee's childhood friend Truman Capote—the model for Dill—said, “Most of the people in Nelle's book are drawn from life” (qtd. in Shields 127). For readers who have lived in Alabama, one of the most striking things about the novel is how accurately Lee captures the sense of place and people who live there. She gets the little details right. If you grew up in Alabama, when you read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, you can smell the pine trees, the azaleas, and the magnolias; you can see the red dirt and feel the oppressive, damp summer heat. Anyone who has spent quality time in Birmingham's Botanical Gardens or Mobile's Bellingrath Gardens has overheard extended conversations of older women exhibiting their vast knowledge of gardening and the Old Testament, just like Miss Maudie Atkinson in the book.

Monroeville, Alabama, didn't have a public library when Lee was child. *Alabama: A Guide to the Deep South* (1941), the Works Progress Administration (WPA) guide for Alabama, makes little mention of

Monroeville, other than it having a modest population of 1,355 people (Jackson 363). The 1975 revised version of the WPA guide for Alabama does include a brief reference to Lee in the "Books, Arts and Crafts" section of the volume: "Harper Lee, who won national acclaim for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is an Alabamian" (Walker 113). But "The Official Travel Site of Alabama" website has since made up for that oversight and features Alabama Road Trip No. 10: *Monroeville: The "To Kill a Mockingbird" Experience*. Alabama now celebrates Monroeville as the "Literary Capital of Alabama," since it is the hometown of Harper Lee, Truman Capote, and Mark Childress, the author of *Crazy in Alabama* (Parten). Since 1990, the Monroeville County Courthouse has been transformed into a museum, and a theatrical version of the novel is performed there in the summers in which members of the audience can be selected to become members of the jury.

Capote received a slightly longer mention in the 1975 WPA guide for Alabama, which noted that he is a native of New Orleans, but "widely known in Alabama" (Walker 113). One of the most impressive readings that I attended as an undergraduate at Samford University was witnessing Capote read in the early 1970s at the University of North Alabama in Florence. He was clearly drunk, and it looked like the reading was going to be bust.



A scene from the play *To Kill a Mockingbird*, performed in Monroeville, Alabama, 23 April 2010. Photographed by Carol M. Highsmith. Image courtesy of the George F. Landegger Collection of Alabama Photographs in Carol M. Highsmith's America, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-highsm-07105..

But once he began reading “A Christmas Memory,” his short story set in Alabama about a young boy who makes fruitcakes with his elderly cousin, an astonishing transformation occurred. Capote sobered up and gave—clearly from memory—one of the most impassioned and moving readings I have ever witnessed. Alabama is the home of such different and larger-than-life artistic personalities, such as Hank Williams, Sun Ra, and Zelda Sayre and its citizens are a bit more diverse than is often assumed. Harper Lee is part of the constellation of creative people from Alabama.

Like Monroeville, Hoover (the suburb south of Birmingham where I grew up) didn’t have a library. Once a week, my family waited for the bookmobile to arrive in the parking lot near my elementary school. As fun as a traveling library can be to a young child, the book selection was limited. Eventually, my parents decided it would be better to drive to the Birmingham Public Library, an impressive four-story building adjacent to Woodrow Wilson Park. Built in 1902, the library features beautiful WPA murals of famous literary figures by Ezra Winters in its reading room on the first floor and fairy tale murals in its children’s department. We would drive Highway 31 on Saturdays, passing under the statue of Vulcan watching over Birmingham, and spend the afternoons in the library, wandering in a park, and visiting the nearby Birmingham Art Museum. It was on one of those trips that I first came across *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

But as a child, I never realized that Kelly Ingram Park and the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church—the epicenter of the civil rights movement in Birmingham—were only four blocks away from the Birmingham Public Library. Even though we drove by the area on our trips to the library, it remained a separate world. In 1992, the Civil Rights Institute opened next to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church; the area has been designated as the Civil Rights District and has become a popular tourist destination.

My first recognition of segregation in Birmingham occurred when we visited Birmingham’s Jimmy Morgan Zoo. It was there that I saw water fountains marked “Colored” and “White.” I had assumed that the colored water fountains featured multicolored water and was disappointed when they did not. I quickly learned the actual meaning behind the two signs.

Scout, Jem, and Dill go through a similar experience as they observe the trial of Tom Robinson. Jem is confident that his father has successfully presented the facts of the legal case and convinced the jury of Robinson’s innocence. But what Jem and the other children have not taken into account is that the members of the jury (like Mr. Cunningham, who had previously led the mob to the jail to lynch Robinson before the trial) have, “blind spots along with the rest of us” (Lee 179). After Tom’s conviction, Jem is forced to re-evaluate members of his hometown: “I always thought Maycomb folks were the best folks in the world, and least that what they seemed like” (246).

Like Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* could have only been written by someone who grew up in the South and eventually left. Lee wrote the novel in New York City, but it clearly reflects her knowledge and appreciation of Alabama. I suspect most white readers of *To Kill a Mockingbird* from Alabama prefer to identify with Atticus Finch, or perhaps Scout or Jem, but readers from outside of the state are more likely to assume Alabamians are versions of Bob Ewell or Miss Gates. The truth is more likely found somewhere in-between. As Lee would suggest, Alabama is full of all sorts of folks. Jem disagrees with Scout when she announces, "I think there's just one kind of folks. Folks" (Lee 259). Lee clearly reveals that, "There was indeed a caste system in Maycomb" (149) and it makes deep and lasting divisions by race, social class, and gender. But is also a community made up of a range of folks who resemble Miss Maudie, Miss Stephanie Crawford, Mr. Cunningham, Mr. Underwood, Bob Ewell, and Dolphus Raymond. It is both a highly racist community and a place where, "Neighbors bring food with death and flowers with sickness and little things in between" (320).

When I began third grade at Shades Creek School, the class would begin each day by standing next to our desks and singing. We would start with folk songs such as "I've Been Working on the Railroad," "Erie Canal," and "Oh Susanna" and then move on to more patriotic tunes such as "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and, of course, "Dixie." These were the songs that Pa sang to Laura in Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* books, and the songs that Carl Sandburg collected in *The American Songbag* in the 1920s. It was a clever way to calm down a classroom of hyperactive third-graders. That year, the class was introduced to Alabama history, which included memorizing the names of all the previous governors. But it is also when I learned to sing and appreciate folk songs and develop my interest in local history. During my childhood, it seems to me that whenever my family traveled, we would stop at every historical marker that appeared along the road. There were quite a few historical landmarks in Alabama. My parents kept a copy of the state WPA guide in the car and read it out loud to entertain the three fidgeting children in the back seat as we drove through a seemingly countless series of small towns. It was a habit that I would later adopt as an adult, and I now own my parents' well-used copy of *Alabama: A Guide to the Deep South*.

My third-grade teacher was charmed by my Yankee accent and frequently called on me to read aloud to the class. After a few weeks, I wised up and managed to acquire a passing Southern accent and was no longer asked to read aloud. The ability to turn a Southern accent on and off is a skill that many Southerners who have left the South have learned. One quickly realizes that a Southern accent outside of the South is often viewed as a liability and a negative marker. Like Calpurnia, many transplanted Southerners cultivate

“a modest double life” (Lee 142) when it comes to accents. I noticed that my Southern accent reappeared whenever I returned to visit my parents in Alabama.

While the reading list of young adult literature is constantly in flux, I try to include a few historical texts such as *The Catcher in the Rye* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* to show students the evolution of the genre. I am not alone in using *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a classroom text. Lee’s novel remains one of the most frequently taught novels in public high schools. Claudia Durst Johnson reports that between 1895 and 1975, it was the third best-selling novel in the United States (13). Johnson also mentions that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one the top ten books taught in high school. According to a study by the Library of Congress Center for the Book in 1991, it was second only to the Bible as the book most cited as making a difference in people’s lives (Johnson 14). While the publication of Lee’s *Go Set a Watchman* in 2015 has caused a re-evaluation by many readers of their feelings toward Atticus Finch, *To Kill a Mockingbird* remains one of the favorite books of students enrolled in young adult literature courses.

While some readers and critics have found fault with Lee representing Atticus as a white savior figure, I think those criticisms overlook some events in the novel. Atticus loses in court; in fact, he knows he will lose, even before the case begins. His client, Tom Robinson, loses faith in the justice system and in Atticus as his lawyer and is killed attempting to escape from prison. Atticus cannot even defend his own children. It is Boo Radley who saves them from the vicious attack by Bob Ewell. While Atticus is no great white savior, he is a man trying to do the right thing by challenging and changing some of the racist attitudes of his community. In doing so, he becomes a role model for his children. This is no small thing. In many ways, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is as much a novel about the relationships between parents and children—Atticus and Scott and Jem; Dill and his disinterested parents; Mayella and her abusive father; Boo Radley and his controlling father and uncle—as it is about the law. Nevertheless, Lee, like most of the characters in her novel, has her own blind spots. Her African American characters—Calpurnia, Tom Robinson, the mixed race children of Dolphus Raymond—are stereotypes, and their own attempts to gain equality and justice are limited. They tend to be followers rather than leaders in the struggle for equality and look up to Atticus. After reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I have students read John Lewis’s *March: Book One* (2013), the first of the three-volume graphic novel adaptation of Lewis’s autobiography, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (1998). As an African American male growing up in Alabama in the 1950s and 1960s, Lewis became an active participant and leader in the civil rights movement. He was one of the speakers at the historic 1963 March

on Washington when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. He later participated in the 1965 "Bloody Sunday" March when he led peaceful protestors across the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama (Lewis, *March* n. pag.). Lewis's *March* makes a useful companion volume that helps fill in some of the gaps in Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

As an undergraduate, one of my favorite professors was Wayne Flynt, the author of *Poor but Proud: Alabama's Poor Whites* (1990) and *Alabama in the Twentieth Century* (2004). He was one of a group of faculty members who team-taught an interdisciplinary, four-semester course on Western culture, which I took as a freshman and sophomore at Samford University. Flynt later relocated to Auburn University, where he continued his career as a distinguished Southern historian. He also befriended Harper Lee, who lived nearby in Monroeville, and over the years became a trusted companion. When I read the 2016 *New York Times* article about Lee's private funeral in Monroeville, which was attended by about forty people, I was not surprised to learn that Flynt was asked to give the eulogy. *The New York Times* article mentioned that Lee had requested Flynt only speak of her art, rather than her life (Howard, Webb, and Kovaleski). The article also quoted Hank Conner, Harper Lee's eldest nephew, as saying that Flynt's eulogy was "the most concise, accurate and fair assessment of *To Kill a Mockingbird* I've ever heard."

Flynt's eulogy was a slight revision of an introduction he had previously given in 2016 when Lee was honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Birmingham Pledge Foundation at the University of Alabama in Birmingham. After the event Lee wrote Flynt, "Hang on to 'Atticus's Vision of Ourselves' because I want you to read it at my memorial service, should I die in Monroeville" (Flynt 101). He only added a sentence that addressed *Go Set a Watchman* five years later (198). Flynt published *Mockingbird Songs: My Friendship with Harper Lee* in 2017 in which he discusses his twenty-five-year friendship and correspondence with the author; the appendix includes his "Eulogy for Nelle Harper Lee: *Atticus's Vision of Ourselves*" (201-10). In fifteen minutes, Flynt focused on what he felt were the five major truths that readers over the years have taken from *To Kill a Mockingbird*: Racial Justice, Class, Differences, Community, and Values Education. Flynt concluded Lee's eulogy by observing:

In one of the fine moments of irony for which Alabama is renowned, a novel written by a woman, a woman from the tiny town of Monroeville, on the southern edge of the state's infamous and violent Black Belt, has become the primary literary instrument worldwide for teaching values of racial

justice, civility, reconciliation, and tolerance for people different from ourselves, and the necessity for moral courage to confront community prejudice and ostracism. (210)

The Drive-By Truckers are a progressive, alternative country/Southern band founded by Patterson Hood and Mike Cooley, who grew up in Florence and Muscle Shoals, Alabama. Hood is the son of bassist of David Hood, a member of the legendary Muscle Rhythm Shoals section. Greg ‘Freddy’ Camalier’s 2013 documentary *Muscle Shoals* shows the astonishing range of diverse popular music that has been produced by both at Rich Hall’s FAME Studio and its breakaway competition, the Muscle Shoals Sound Studio. The house studio musicians would be name-checked as “Swampers” in Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Sweet Home Alabama,” a song written in response to Neil Young’s “Alabama” and “Southern Man” (Whitley 65-66). Hood and the Drive-By Truckers released their most ambitious and perhaps best-known album—*Southern Rock Opera*—in 2001. It is a two-CD concept album that was recorded in Birmingham, and it combines the story of the rise of Lynyrd Skynyrd in the 1970s with a fictional Southern band named Betamax Guillotine.¹ In *Southern Rock Opera* and subsequent albums, Hood and the Drive-By Truckers attempt to come to terms with growing up in Alabama after the civil rights movement. In his essay, “The South’s Heritage is So Much More Than a Flag,” published in 2015 in *The New York Times Magazine*, Hood explains that *Southern Rock Opera* was his attempt to express the multiple contradictions of the Southern identity. He writes, “The album wrestled with how to be proud of where we came from while acknowledging and condemning the worst parts of our region’s history.” In many ways, Harper Lee was attempting to do the same thing with *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

One of the most striking and troubling songs on *Southern Rock Opera* is “Three Alabama Icons,” which is more of a spoken word piece than a typical rock song. Hood lists and describes the three great Alabama icons of his Alabama childhood in the 1970s: George Wallace, Bear Bryant, and Ronnie Van Zant. The first icon (George Wallace) was the Alabama governor best remembered for announcing in his 1963 inaugural speech, “segregation tomorrow, segregation forever” (McWhorter 311) and, later in the same year, for his “Stand in the Schoolhouse Door” when he tried to prevent the enrollment of African American students at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa (McWhorter 460-1).

Hood’s second icon (Paul “Bear” Bryant) was the hound’s-tooth hat-wearing head football coach at the University of Alabama who led his teams to six national championships and thirteen conference championships (Barra

viii). Football comes as a close second to religion as the major obsession in Alabama. Lee, who attended the University of Alabama as an undergraduate, understood this intense devotion to football. On the opening page of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lee explains that Jem “couldn’t care less” that one arm was slightly shorter than the other as a result of a broken arm caused by Bob Ewell’s attack “so long as he could pass and punt” (3).

Hood’s third icon (Ronnie Van Zant) was the lead singer and songwriter for the popular Southern rock band Lynyrd Skynyrd whose best-known song —“Sweet Home Alabama” and “Free Bird”—celebrates the Southern redneck way of life.¹ Growing up in Alabama in the 1970s as did Hood, I don’t question his choice of figures who cast a long shadow on Alabama, but I only wish he had added a fourth: Harper Lee. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is as much an exploration of the duality and contradictions of the Southern thing as is the Drive-By Truckers’ *Southern Rock Opera* or Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Sweet Home Alabama.” With its combination of sweet and painful notes, *To Kill a Mockingbird* still sings for many readers, especially those readers who have grown up in the South.

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NOTES

¹ In the spirit of full disclosure, in the early 1970s I worked with the concert promoter, Peace Concerts, which organized rock concerts in Birmingham, including some by Lynyrd Skynyrd. I met the band, hung out back stage, and was responsible for making sure that there was enough alcohol for the band—no easy matter. Based on my limited interaction with them, I feel confident in suggesting that most stories about Lynyrd Skynyrd are probably accurate. They were an extremely hard-partying, heavy-drinking, but talented, bunch of musicians.

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