

Great Books Discussion Questions

To Kill a Mockingbird

Note: *To Kill a Mockingbird* was voted as the best novel of the twentieth century by librarians across the country.

1. Who is the hero/heroine of this novel?
2. Atticus defines courage as “It’s when you know you’re licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what.” How does this concept of courage play out in the balance of the book?
3. Mr. Raymond, during the lunch recess at Tom Robinson’s trial, says to Dill that he (Dill) should “Cry about the simple hell people give other people—without even thinking. Cry about the hell white people give colored folks, without even stopping to think that they’re people too.” Does this statement, coming from a man who is seen as a grafter, seem surprising in the context of the novel?
4. Atticus says that the people in the town, when looked at as individuals, are all decent, law-abiding citizens, but when they form groups, something changes. “Those are twelve reasonable men in everyday life, Tom’s jury, but you saw something come between them and reason. You saw the same thing that night in front of the jail. When that crew went away, they didn’t go as reasonable men, they went because we were there. There’s something in our world that makes men lose their heads—they couldn’t be fair if they tried.” Knowing this, why did Atticus take Tom Robinson’s case?
5. When Aunt Alexandra asks Miss Maudie about her brother’s involvement in Tom Robinson’s trial, Miss Maudie replies “Be quiet, they’ll hear you,” said Miss Maudie. “Have you ever thought of it this way, Alexandra? Whether Maycomb knows it or not, we’re paying the highest tribute we can pay a man. We trust him to do right. It’s that simple.” Does everyone in the town share Miss Maudie’s assessment of Atticus?
6. At the end of the story, Mr. Tate, the town sheriff, does not want to involve Arthur (Boo) Radley in Bob Ewell’s murder. Mr. Tate reasons that Arthur’s privacy would be violated if he was implicated in defending the Finch children. Is this breach of the law justified within the context of the novel?

7. One of the major themes of the novel is the law, and Harper Lee sets-up a tension between the “letter of the law” (i.e. Tom’s trial versus the “proof” of his wrong-doing), and the “spirit of the law” (not reporting Boo’s involvement in defending the Finch children) within the novel. Is this tension effective, and does Harper Lee give any clues as to which side of the argument she favors?