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## Lee's Atticus Finch Represents a Will to Change

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# Lee's Atticus Finch represents a will to change

**DELAWARE VOICE**  
MARY ELLEN MAATMAN

Last week, Harper Lee's "Go Set a Watchman" revealed a startlingly bigoted Atticus Finch. Understandably, some lament that Atticus is not the man they thought they knew. They should take comfort in remembering that "To Kill a Mockingbird," not "Watchman," was Lee's final, definitive version of Atticus Finch.

The definitive Atticus also had his flaws. As we knew and loved him, "Mockingbird's" Atticus was a plaster saint. This fictional hero let real lawyers (actually, all of us) off the hook. As law professor Steven Lubet said: "Be not too hard on lawyers, for when we are at our best we can give you an Atticus Finch." In reality, as psychiatrist Robert Coles once wrote, "his friends in the civil rights-era South had 'yet to meet this kind of lawyer.'"

The Atticus in "Watchman" is the reality Coles' friends encountered. We have forgotten, or blinded ourselves to, that reality. "Watchman" reminds us that throughout the south "White Citizens Councils" defied the Supreme Court's 1954 school desegregation decision. A Mississippi judge named Tom Brady started this movement. Similarly, businessmen, state legislators, and lawyers founded Alabama's citizens' councils. The movement was widespread: in May 1957, the Alabama Association of Citizens Councils had at least 80,000 members.

In "Watchman," Lee perfectly captured council rhetoric. A council speaker relentlessly used the word "mongrelize." He echoed actual pamphlets self-describing councils as "the south's answer to the

mongrelizers." The "Watchman" speaker likewise referred to "Black Monday." This was what the councils called the day the Supreme Court decided *Brown v. Board of Education*. It was also the title of Tom Brady's shrill anti-Brown screed that was the movement's founding document.

The "Watchman" council speaker also claimed that "God made the races . . . nobody knows why but He intended for 'em to stay apart." His argument echoed Alabama Judge Walter Jones' editorial, reprinted in the April 1957 bar journal mailed to every Alabama lawyer, that declared humankind had "three main divisions: White, Mongoloid, and Negroid, each created by God with different qualities, instincts, and characteristics, transmissible by descent." Jones, like the fictional Finch, was a highly regarded member of his community: a Bar Association president, Alabama Bible Society president, a bank board director, and a fine art museum vice president.

Our revulsion over "Watchman" council rhetoric coincides with the discovery that propaganda from the council's modern-day offshoots inspired Charleston, South Carolina, killer Dylan Roof. The rhetoric's appearance in "Watchman" and manifestation in Charleston demonstrates that homegrown hate has long roots in this country that will yet take some pulling to destroy.

How can these roots be pulled? In "Mockingbird," the repugnant Mrs. Dubose says to Jem, concerning the camellias he tried to destroy: "Next time you'll know how to do it right, won't you? You'll pull it up by the roots, won't you?"

Harper Lee did just that when she transformed

the Atticus of "Watchman" into the hero of "Mockingbird." In so doing, she mapped a path for our nation's continued journey to true acknowledgement of, reconciliation with, and transcendence beyond, our racial history.

To create "Mockingbird" from "Watchman," Lee reportedly spent two years painstakingly reworking her text. Thus, "Mockingbird" Atticus represents a will literally to rework one's character, no matter the effort.

Comparing the two books is instructive. In "Watchman," grown-up Jean Louise discovered her father's ugly views by eavesdropping on a citizens' council meeting from a courtroom balcony. In "Mockingbird," Lee once again puts Scout on that balcony, replacing "Watchman's" ugly invective with Atticus's closing argument in defense of Tom Robinson. After the guilty verdict, Reverend Sykes tells the children to "stand up. Your father's passin." In that moment, the Atticus of "Watchman" is fully reborn as the Atticus of "Mockingbird." Likewise, deceased Jem in "Watchman" breathes again in "Mockingbird" as a boy who hopes for justice.

Together, the two books teach us that confronting history can be powerfully transformative. Looking at one Atticus, and then the other, we know which one we embrace. Now we can appreciate "Mockingbird's" Atticus not as a plaster saint but as a product of Lee's sustained, hard work. Through that work, Harper Lee gave us a hero and path to emulate.

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