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The Redemption of Atticus Finch

It's been some time since an essay has provoked as much debate around here as Joseph Crespino's "The Strange Career of Atticus Finch" [from the Summer 2000 issue of *Southern Cultures*]. In his essay Mr. Crespino questioned whether Atticus Finch, given current racial attitudes and mores, still ought to be considered a hero, and concluded that he shouldn't—that today we should instead view *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s protagonist as a paternalist. He was, after all, a white man helping a black man, which certainly did little to upset the traditional racial power dynamic in the South.

Our readers found this to be a narrow and inaccurate portrayal of Harper Lee's most famous creation. To be sure, Mr. Crespino was taking on a southern icon. An outcry was to be expected, and we're indebted to Mr. Crespino for provoking such a spirited debate. We're also indebted to those readers who took time to write us with their thoughts about "The Strange Career of Atticus Finch." We publish three of these letters below. The first is from Marcus Jimison, an attorney currently serving as Director of Litigation for the Land Loss Prevention Project, and who formerly served with Prisoners Legal Services. Over the course of his legal career many of Mr. Jimison's clients have been minorities. The last two letters are from teachers who regularly assign *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Wayne Flint, who teaches history at Auburn University, and Jewell Knotts, who teaches middle school in Brandon, Florida, both bear witness to the appeal of Atticus Finch's values to students today. We close with Joseph Crespino's response to these letters.



"Fictional characters like Harper Lee's Atticus Finch do not exist in a vacuum, and this particular character, the literary archetype of the hero, is no mystery. He stands for Equality. He stands for Justice. We know this because Lee allows the reader to judge Atticus by his response to the extraordinary circumstance of having to defend a wrongfully accused black man, Tom Robinson, on the fabricated charge that Robinson raped a white woman in Jim Crow's South. The heroics of Atticus, a white Southerner, steadfastly defending his client in the face of extreme racial prejudice justly has caused many Americans to proclaim Atticus Finch a symbol of equal justice. This interpretation has endured, and rightfully so, ever since the publication of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

left: Our Summer 2000 issue featured Joseph Crespino's controversial essay "The Strange Career of Atticus Finch."

“Unfortunately, Joseph Crespino ascribes a different meaning to Atticus Finch, and in so doing Crespino falls flat on his face. To quote Crespino: ‘The secondary school teachers who assign *To Kill a Mockingbird* in their classes year after year should let Atticus come down from his perch as an emblem of American racial heroism.’ In Crespino’s rambling and somewhat unfocused overview of the events leading up to the creation of *TKAM*, including a poor attempt to psychoanalyze its author, Crespino concludes that Atticus Finch is a paternalistic white man with a superiority complex who does good things for his black client not because he thinks his black client is his equal, but because he believes only a white man can save blacks. Sadly, Crespino adopts the tired, old conservative mantra to discredit white liberals who dare work for greater racial equality. Such whites, according to the conservatives, are not motivated by principled beliefs, but are instead driven by selfish paternalism. Other conservative code words which are designed to have the same effect of discrediting the motives of liberal whites come to mind: ‘elitist,’ ‘social engineer,’ and ‘limousine liberal’ (my personal favorite).

“To this reader, though, Lee’s Finch is none of these. He stands up to a lynch mob because of the principle that *all* men are entitled to a fair trial. He vigorously defends his client by exposing the flaws of the prosecution’s case, which means exposing a white woman as a liar (not an easy or safe thing to do during Atticus’s day). Furthermore, Atticus delivers an indictment of southern segregationist culture in his summation to the jury when he strongly pronounces that his client’s only ‘crime’ was to ‘take pity on a white woman.’ Finally, Atticus displayed the principle of non-violent resistance, years before Martin Luther King Jr., when he refused to respond violently after the racist Maycomb spat in his face. Lee has drawn Atticus Finch as a symbol of quiet strength, devotion to the law, and devotion to the principle that *all persons are equal* before the

law. Paternalists, even if they might try, do not hold *true* equality in their hearts, and as a result cannot *truly* defend equality. Herein, perhaps, lies the true purpose of Crespino’s revisionism, to discourage whites from participating in the racial healing process out of fear of having their motives questioned and being branded a paternalistic elite.

“At bottom, Crespino’s analysis of Atticus Finch is nothing more than a poor attempt to deconstruct an American hero into something he is not—a threat to racial equality and the notion that racial healing is the province of only one race. In this sense, Crespino’s revisionist interpretation of Atticus Finch must be politically motivated, because it certainly is not based on the text.”

Marcus Jimison
Raleigh, North Carolina

“In addition to bringing a substantial load of presentism to his analysis, Crespino ignores the reason for the enormous popularity of *TKAM* in Europe, Australia, and elsewhere in the world (where Atticus’s alleged racial paternalism has little appeal). Indeed sales abroad have exceeded sales in the U.S. The fact that the book is so frequently assigned overseas has much to do with a theme that Crespino ignores: Atticus Finch’s admonition that one person should not judge another until he or she has stood in that person’s place. Harper Lee’s enduring friendship with Truman Capote seems as relevant here as the race question.

“When my son taught conversational English in Krems, Austria, he discovered that his Austrian supervising teacher always assigned *To Kill a Mockingbird* as both a way for students to obtain insight into American race relations and as a way of dealing with rising anti-Semitism and nativism in Austria. Similar reports come from British, Irish, and Australian friends.

“Crespino argues that in our enlightened multicultural society we ‘can no longer hold up as a racial hero’ a person as compromised

as Atticus Finch and that it is not clear what any individual hero looks like anyway. I have a suggestion. A hero or heroine is a person flawed in some way like the paternalist Atticus Finch, who still has the moral capacity to understand right from wrong and the moral courage to act on such assumptions despite great personal risk. Martin Luther King, Jr. comes to mind. So does Virginia Durr. And a long list of paternalistic, courageous southern white ministers who gave up jobs and professions because of their moral convictions, something I suspect Mr. Crespino has not experienced on behalf of a cause in which he believes. For many of these southerners, Atticus Finch did embody flawed but noble values. And as for paternalism, with all its flaws it is still a first step toward a more humane society. If you don't believe that, just ask any liberal faculty member trying to enlighten the benighted minds of his or her fundamentalist, conservative southern students. Having long believed myself to be a liberal minded historian, I am constantly amazed at the paternalistic way in which colleagues dismiss any paternalist other than themselves.

"In my history classes, where I routinely use *TKAM*, I find Atticus's values still appeal to my most idealistic and brightest students. And I find that the novel also constitutes the most unifying common literary experience for the current generation of college students. Frankly, that is more comforting than disturbing to me.

"Crespino also misses an intriguing irony involving Harper Lee and *TKAM*: that a woman novelist from Alabama, a state renowned for its sexism and racism, should have authored a book now used worldwide to educate students about tolerance toward people who are not like themselves, about the necessity of drawing one's moral values from sources other than one's own peers, and the occasional necessity to risk one's reputation and standing in a community for the moral values in which one believes. Perhaps these

are old-fashioned virtues. But I think I will not deconstruct old Atticus just yet. In a lifetime of involvement in social justice causes in the South, most of the volunteers that I have worked with, both black and white, were produced by values a good deal like the ones Harper Lee attributes to Atticus Finch."

Wayne Flynt
Auburn, Alabama

"Be very careful with us gentle readers, as Mr. Watson refers to us in his 'Front Porch,' if you are going to have one of your writers question English teachers' decisions to continue to teach *TKAM* to their students! I've taught English to middle-school boys for thirteen years now. I know that my focus each year with *TKAM* has been different from the focus Mr. Crespino seems to think that English teachers have when teaching this classic. Though an obvious part of teaching this book, the racial issues are not where the students' discussions lead; instead, it's to the idea encapsulated by Atticus first telling Scout, 'You never really understand another person until you consider things from his point of view.' Whether it is from Jem's not wanting Scout to kill a bug or Boo's desire to stay in his home until he *has* to come out, the eighth grade boys in my school discover many people and instances within the story that they can relate to in their lives: getting along with teachers in general; a live-in grandparent's opinion of them; not torturing lizards; or the kid who's a little different—and how we are treating him. In fact, in recent years since it has become common knowledge that Dill was based on Truman Capote, and the boys are even intrigued that Lee's best friend is a gay writer. The actor who plays him was also gay, and issues of tolerance are broached in ways I wouldn't have thought of ten years ago.

"I realize that Mr. Crespino probably doesn't care about my challenges in the classroom, but any book that lets me talk about the above mentioned issues (and many others, trust me) and then talk about Columbine, for

instance—well, I'll keep it in my curriculum for a long time.”

Jewell Knotts
Brandon, Florida

Mr. Crespino responds:

“I would like to thank those who took the time to write letters regarding my essay. The response only confirms what other evidence has already shown: Atticus Finch remains a figure of enormous resonance in contemporary America.

“Mr. Jimison is right in saying that I am critiquing white liberals in this piece, but it is not from the perspective of the right but the left. I certainly would not want to discourage anyone from participating in the ‘racial healing process,’ as he suspects that I might. My intention was only to focus on one of the pre-eminent racial heroes as a way of examining the peculiarities of this healing process in modern day America. No matter how much we respect the basic decency and moral perspective of the character Atticus Finch, we must note Harper Lee’s failure to conceive of heroism in terms other than a white man saving a black man, particularly given the novel’s continuing popularity today.

“Both Mr. Flynt and Ms. Knotts offer helpful correctives to my piece by pointing out that the novel’s range of influence is not limited to questions of race. Mr. Flynt is also right that I have not had to risk my profession because of a moral conviction in which I believed. But, of course, neither did Atticus Finch. Atticus, or more rightly Atticus’s children, did suffer an attack from the Ewells for the stand he took, but then the Ewells are the very characters the novel teaches us to dislike. Certainly he did not lose prestige

among those whose opinion the novel tells us we should respect—among his children, the sheriff Heck Tate, his next-door neighbors, or the balcony full of admiring African Americans in the courthouse. Of course, Virginia Durr advocated racial justice in the South for decades, yet history is much clearer than Harper Lee’s fiction about the calumny that Durr and her husband suffered. Southern Christian ministers who lost jobs because of stands for racial justice are heroes to me personally and should be heroes to us all, but undoubtedly the setting for their inspiration ran more towards first-century Galilee than Depression-era Alabama.

“What racial liberalism meant in 1930s America is different from what it meant in 1960s America and is different from what it means in contemporary America. There is much to gain from Atticus Finch’s example, but to do so uncritically would be to betray the values of fairness and open-mindedness that Atticus’s defenders so rightly ascribe to him.”

Joe Crespino
Palo Alto, California

Ed. note: *If you’ve missed our Summer 2000 issue, featuring “The Strange Career of Atticus Finch,” you can still order it by calling (919) 966-3561, ext. 256, or by emailing UNC Press at uncpress_journals@unc.edu.*

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