

Duvall Readers Praise *To Kill a Mockingbird* Book Group Joins in 50th Anniversary of American Classic

Book clubs, libraries, schools, theaters and communities around the country have been taking part in celebrating the 50th anniversary of Harper Lee's seminal American classic, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This anticipated event was well received by the Duvall Reads book group last Thursday night.

The historic context and cultural significance of the novel was reviewed prior to starting the general discussion. Here are some of the interesting aspects surrounding the book. The Library of Congress ranks it as the number two book behind the *Bible* in books that make a difference in American lives. It is the top read book in the country in grades 9 - 12. In 1999 it was voted by the book industry as the top book of the 20th century. *To Kill a Mockingbird* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1961, in its 41st consecutive week on the best seller list. It has never been out of print.

Like many other accomplished authors, Harper Lee wrote what she knew. In her case, it was the small town in Alabama, where Truman Capote was the next door neighbor during childhood summers. It was where her father defended two black men accused of murder, who were then convicted and hung. And where a large house sat at the end of her street that was abandoned after a family tragedy kept its occupants inside before moving away. For those who have read this novel exploring tolerance in the face of hatred, compassion reflected through ignorance, and moral courage in an era of fierce prejudice, you know how Lee's life experiences were threaded into the layered story lines. "You never know a person until you walk around in someone else's skin, stand in his shoes and walk around in them," says Atticus Finch in the book.

The book's narrative voice is the daughter of the noble widower, attorney Atticus Finch, assigned the "unpleasant job" of representing an accused black man of raping the daughter of the town's white trash drunk. Over the three years covered in the book, Scout Finch goes from age five to eight, though she looks back as an adult in getting the story started, with occasional adult reflections. It is through the eyes of this innocent child that enables the power of the story to unfold in a credible fashion that pulls readers in so they care about the characters and their fates. It is this loss of innocence that makes us part of the story. We want to cheer people through their struggles. We are hopeful that good people in this world overcome those with ill intentions.

The book's title comes into play several times within the novel. "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to

enjoy ... they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." We know that the falsely accused black man has this moniker. But it's the mysterious, ghost-like, largely unseen guardian of the children, who emerges as another mockingbird in the last chapter. It's not until the final few pages that we learn his fate.

To Kill a Mockingbird earns and deserves every bit of acclaim and praise it has received. There are few works of any kind that illuminate character, dignity, compassion, and having the courage to do what's right instead of what's popular, that are fundamental truths in our culture.