Lee's Inspirations

Harper Lee, known locally as Nelle, based her only published novel on the people and places with which she was familiar. Many of her childhood experiences in a sweltering small town in Alabama in the Depression era were incorporated into To Kill a Mockingbird, written some 30 years later.

The setting for To Kill a Mockingbird, Maycomb, was based on the author's hometown of Monroeville, a sleepy Bible-Belt community surrounded by red dirt and cotton fields. Lee's father, like Atticus, was a lawyer, and in his only criminal case he defended two African-American men accused of robbery and manslaughter. Both were hanged. Lee never took another criminal case and remained a real-estate lawyer for the rest of his life. The story of Tom Robinson and Mapella Ewell was undoubtedly inspired by a case tried in the Monroeville court when Harper Lee was about Scout's age. An African-American man was found guilty of raping a white woman and sentenced to death. Leading citizens of the town, presumably including Lee's father, came to have doubts about the facts of the case, but the prisoner suffered a breakdown while awaiting execution and later died in custody.

The author has confirmed that she based the character of Dill on a young boy who came to live with his cousins in the house next door to hers. His name was Truman Steckfuss Persons, later known as Truman Capote, author of Breakfast at Tiffany's and In Cold Blood. He was a great friend and playmate of Lee's. Boo Radley's character was undoubtedly inspired by a local boy who had broken the law and was kept virtually isolated in the family home out of shame for a quarter of a century.

Rumours and superstition grew up around the elusive figure and children crossed the road to avoid imagined evil vapours emanating from the house. Apparently, Lee did speak to the recluse on one occasion and found nothing too strange about him.

Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it. In rainy weather the streets turned to red slats. Grass grew on the sidewalks. The courthouse sagged in the square. Somewhere it was better then.

JUDY BROAD and JILL DIEDRICH explore the places that inspired Harper Lee.

The Old Courthouse

The lines between fact and fiction blur when you visit Monroeville, because you can help see it through the eyes of both a young Harper Lee and the fictional Scout Finch. The Old Monroe County Courthouse, a red brick building with an octagonal clock tower, dominates the Town Square. The unusual oval-shaped courtroom has been restored to look exactly as it did in the 1930s. Timber stairs lead to the curved 'coloured' galleries, from where the judge, lawyers, and, when not only Lee and Capote played there, but also as Maycomb would have been when Jem, Scout, and Dill lived and played there, too. Points of interest include a monument erected by the Alabama State Bar, paying tribute to the fictional Atticus Finch's lawyer-hero who knows how to see and to tell the truth, the building where Lee's father practised law, and the jail outside which Atticus faced down a lynch mob.

Lee's childhood home has been demolished and is now the site of an ice-cream shop. Mel's Dairy Dream. The house next door, where Capote lived with his cousins, was destroyed in a fire. Only the remains of a stone wall, fish pool and historical plaque mark the place where two future writers played in a tree house and wrote stories about local people on an old Underwood typewriter given to them by Lee's father. Over the road, a service station has replaced a store, the church has been torn down, and the school building has been replaced by a new one. But the courthouse, with its red windows, is still standing, just like the courthouse in the novel.

To Kill a Mockingbird, which is performed every May, takes place on the Courthouse grounds in front of small facades of the homes of the Finchs, Boo Radley, Mrs Dubose and Miss Maudie. These sets now stand permanently under the spreading oak and pecan trees in the Town Square. The actors and audience move inside to the courtroom for Act 2, where the trial of Tom Robinson is recreated. The judge, lawyers, witnesses and audience all occupy the positions they would in a real trial, and the African-American cast members are confined to the balconies, as they were in the 1930s. Appropriate members of the audience are selected to form the all-white male jury which decides the fate of Tom Robinson. Tickets go on sale on the first business day of March each year and quickly sell out.

Walking the Town

A museum brochure details a self-guided walking tour exploring Monroeville as it was in the 1930s, when not only Lee and Capote played there, but also as Maycomb would have been when Jem, Scout, and Dill lived. The tour will allow you to see points of interest such as the courthouse, the library, and the former home of the 'Literary Capital of Alabama'.