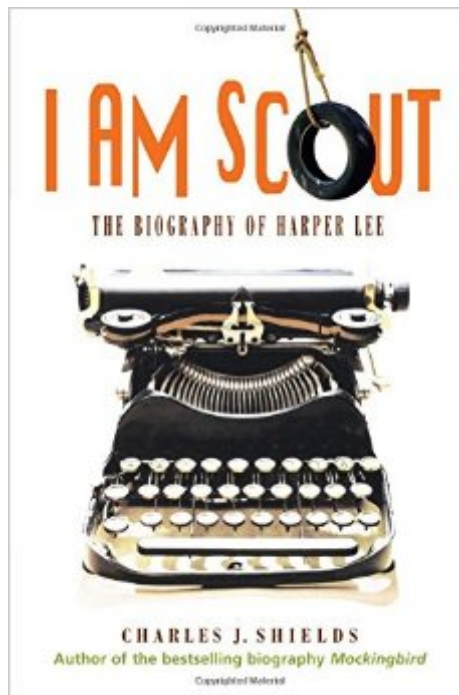


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# I Am Scout: The Biography Of Harper Lee



## Synopsis

To Kill a Mockingbird is one of the most widely read novels in American literature. It's also a perennial favorite in highschool English classrooms across the nation. Yet onetime author Harper Lee is a mysterious figure who leads a very private life in her hometown of Monroeville, Alabama, refusing to give interviews or talk about the novel that made her a household name. Lee's life is as rich as her fiction, from her girlhood as a rebellious tomboy to her days at the University of Alabama and early years as a struggling writer in New York City. Charles J. Shields is the author of the New York Times bestselling biography *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee*, which he has adapted here for younger readers. What emerges in this riveting portrait is the story of an unconventional, high-spirited woman who drew on her love of writing and her Southern home to create a book that continues to speak to new generations of readers. Anyone who has enjoyed *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Go Set a Watchman* will appreciate this glimpse into the life of its fascinating author, which includes photographs of Harper Lee, her family, and the film version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* starring Gregory Peck. *I Am Scout* is a 2009 Bank Street - Best Children's Book of the Year.

## Book Information

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Age Range: 9 - 12 years

Grade Level: 7 - 12

## Customer Reviews

This could very well be the most serious children's biography I've ever read. Saying that probably runs the risk of making *I Am Scout* sound stuffy, but that's not what I mean at all. Charles J. Shields

does not write down to kids. Period. *I Am Scout* bears every hallmark of a solid, respectable biography for any audience: no fluff, no sensationalism, no invented conversations for entertainment's sake, and no dodging of sensitive issues -- like Truman Capote's sexuality, for example, or Lee's mother's mental illness. Matter of fact, now I'm extra curious to read the adult version of this bio, to see just how and where he trimmed it down for young'uns. (I've read *In Cold Blood*, so I'm particularly hoping for more on Lee's role in how that work came to be.) In essence, the parallels between Harper Lee's life and her characters' are striking, and her response to fame and fandom made me cheer. Learning about Harper Lee from Charles Shields made me want to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* all over again, and that, my friends, is the sign of a good piece of non-fiction. Plus, I can't help loving a guy who writes non-fiction for kids that includes a heap of endnotes. The only potential downside to this biography is that it's a bit context-bound. Shields seems to write with the assumption that his readers are already familiar with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. But seriously, if you weren't familiar with *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the first place, why on earth would you be reading a bio on Harper Lee?

I first read *To Kill a Mockingbird* in ninth grade and it has influenced me for my entire life, especially the character of Atticus Finch. And, not surprisingly, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is still one of the most widely read books of all time (I continue to read it at least once every six months or so!). But I never knew a whole lot about Harper Lee, the author, because she never wrote any other novels and was a complete recluse. So I was totally excited to see this book when I was browsing through the library. Surprisingly, this book was in the young adult section and was, perhaps, one of the most serious, most well-written of the young adult biographies that I have ever read. Now, that doesn't mean that it's written for adults or that teens and young adults won't get it or that they'll be bored by it. Absolutely not! While there isn't any fluff or sensationalistic reporting about Nelle Harper Lee's life, it's still a magnificent and well written, entertaining book about a wonderful, brilliant woman! He also doesn't sugar coat things - like how Ms. Lee's mother was so mentally ill, that she tried to kill Harper when Harper was 2 or Truman Capote's sexuality. I learned new things in this book too - I didn't know that Truman Capote and Harper Lee were so close or that Harper Lee had helped Truman Capote with his book - *In Cold Blood*. I loved how the author was able to fully sketch Harper Lee's life in ten short chapters, chapters that show us the striking parallels between the author's life and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This is totally worth the read!

As an educator who teaches "*To Kill a Mockingbird*", I have read both "*Mockingbird*" and "*I Am*

Scout". "Mockingbird" is an excellent read and offers good background material for the teaching of Harper Lee's novel. "I Am Scout", on the other hand, is an excellent book for young people; as the author intended it to be. Mr. Shields, the author of both biographies, was kind enough to meet with and speak to my students recently. He spent the day speaking to four classes of Pre-AP, AP, Journalism, and Creative Writing students who had all read "To Kill a Mockingbird". Students were extremely interested in what Mr. Shields had to say about both books and about the writing process, and, he graciously answered any and all questions. We were very honored to hear him speak. To better ready our students for the AP English exam, we at FMHS are trying to incorporate more non-fiction into the curriculum. I feel that my students will greatly benefit from using "I Am Scout" as a companion piece to "To Kill a Mockingbird". What better way to incorporate an interesting non-fiction read for young adults than with "I Am Scout"!

Sometimes it's best not to start a book with a high sense of anticipation because you may be setting yourself up for disappointment. This isn't the case 100% of the time (thank goodness!) but the few times it happens it is SUCH a bummer. This is precisely what happened with I Am Scout. I've been curious about Harper Lee for a while now as her name (and novel) are such a big deal for my home state of Alabama (and the world if I'm being honest). Therefore, when I heard praise for a young adult biography on this esteemed author I knew it had to be added to my wish list right away (it's been on my wish list since the fall of 2011). I expected to get an in-depth story about an author that seemed to be synonymous with civil liberty and the South. What I got instead were anecdotes from former classmates who admitted they weren't even close to Lee. I have to give Shields credit where credit is due because he certainly did his research as best as he could with the resources that he had available to him. It is well known fact that Harper Lee is not in the habit of giving interviews and even when she does they are short and impersonal affairs. She wrote one of the most influential novels of the 20th century and then seemed to adopt the life of a recluse. If you're picking up this book in the hopes that you'll find out more about the woman who penned To Kill a Mockingbird then I'm afraid you'll be dissatisfied with the outcome.

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