

# Oh for the love of...



Well here we are again, a gaggle of bible thumpers declaring victimhood because a book threatens the very ground of their beliefs.

It's bad enough when a parent helicopters into a school to protect his little precious from bad words and strange ideas. But now we have college students sheltering themselves from the horror of a broad education. Assigned a graphic novel<fn>In my day, we called them comic books, and we liked it.</fn> for summer reading, freshman enrollee Brian Grasso, Duke University Class of '19, took a look at Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and declared that he would not read it because of the book's "graphic visual depictions of sexuality".

*I feel as if I would have to compromise my personal Christian moral beliefs to read it," Grasso wrote in the post.*

FWIW, the so-called "graphic visual depictions of sexuality" are all icky gay stuff. Naturally. To wit:



Look away! Look away!

Another student wrote in an email that:

*The nature of 'Fun Home' means that content that I might have consented to read in print now violates my conscience due to its pornographic nature."*

It's hard to tell, but I think this means he would have been okay with reading a steamy sex scene, but a pen and ink illustration of same would threaten his mortal soul. The grammar and theology behind the email make for a tough nut, crackwise. Perhaps it has to do with the confusion this book might create in re: a beloved children's book:

...OTHERS AS PORNOGRAPHY. IN THE HARSH LIGHT OF MY DAWNING FEMINISM,  
EVERYTHING LOOKED DIFFERENT.



Roald Dahl would probably approve

I must lead a sheltered life, but I had not heard of this book before today. Now, thanks to the squeamish guardians of morality in Duke's Class of '19 – and, to be honest, this *intermède de pêche juteaux* – it has risen to the top of my to-read pile.

There's a bit of a skewed parallel between this kerfuffle and last week's tempest over *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*. Is a skewed parallel even a thing? Geomathematically, perhaps not, but I'm kind of loving the challenge of visualizing one, so a thing it is, says I. If this offends, you can either write your own blog or organize a protest against my invocation of such an abomination to Euclidean purity. In that case, it was busybody parents invoking their right to "raise their children as they see fit" while not so incidentally depriving the children of less hysterical parentage the opportunity to grapple with new ideas.

In this week's episode in willful ignorance, it is the busybodies' spawn invoking the right to remain unsullied by ideas that are new or unusual.

School-wide book assignments for incoming freshmen are a staple of college curricula these days. It provides a nexus

for the entire incoming cohort to discuss, debate, and argue the merits/cons of a specific work. It does not ask that anyone abandon their faith or accept a new idea that offends them.

It does, however, ask that students at least consider a perspective that may be new to them. It asks them to begin to think for themselves, to analyze information that is new and challenging. And that, alas, seems to be the core of the offense that these tender lads and lasses cannot bear.

Exposure  $\neq$  indoctrination. Is their belief set so tenuous that a comic book would cast it asunder?

*"I thought to myself, 'What kind of school am I going to?'"*  
*said freshman Elizabeth Snyder-Mounts.*

You're going to Duke University, child, source of 8 Nobel laureates, 3 Turing Award winners, and 25 Churchill scholars. These are not honors that typically accrue to people who are afraid of a comic book. Duke has no religious affiliation. It has ranked in the top ten US universities for the past 20 years.

*Duke did not seem to have people like me in mind,"*  
*Grasso said. "It was like Duke didn't know we existed, which surprises me."*

More likely, Duke knows people like Grasso exist and they don't care about catering to their narrow minds. Universities exist (at least in theory) to expand the minds of its students, to give them access and exposure to information that falls outside the experiences they bring to campus. If a student does not wish to have his tender feelings bruised from an encounter with new ideas, there is a simple solution: stay home. Get a job or go to a trade school. Or go to one of the bible-based schools where the mission is to keep you

safely cocooned inside your ignorance.</fn>

The student is asked to read a book, not adopt it as a how-to-live manual. The student is asked to bring a sense of skepticism to the exercise, to read with critical awareness, and to come to some conclusions about what they do/do not believe. Until the next book, and then it happens again, believing something new, discarding something old, re-believing something old, and so on. In the end, the student arrives at some semblance of understanding herself – what she believes, what she is willing to fight for, what she holds dear.

“In the end.”

I suppose I should reveal the deep, dark secret around this: there is no “end” to all this. It lasts a lifetime. This may be the most wonderfully maddening aspect of being an alive, alert human being. Exposure to a range of ideas in the course of one’s education is a terrific foundation for this kind of rich, multi-layered life.<fn>Of course, this D.D. secret might be terrifying to some, to those who want an answer now that will confer certainty and foundation to every challenge that will come their way. These are the people who wish to protect themselves from strange new ideas. Those things shake the earth beneath our feet. Scary stuff.

I will give the frightened flowers of Duke’s Class of ’19 this much: They are not trying to impose their fear of learning on anyone else. They just want to be able to close their senses to something that scares them. And the powers at Duke are letting them have their way. That’s probably as it should be. You can lead a horse to water.<fn>Or you can lead a horticulture &c.</fn> But somewhere, somehow, a strange idea is going to sneak through and these students will be utterly unprepared for the shock.

By the same token, students who invoke the recently-

minted *trigger warning* concept should also receive consideration. If someone really, really objects to certain kinds of material – for whatever sincerely held reason – she should be allowed to opt for an alternate curriculum. Perhaps that student should reconsider his field of study if this happens too often, just as those who feel that religion makes them incapable of fulfilling their professional duties should consider a different line of work.<fn>Mennonite airline pilots, perhaps?</fn> But in no case should the sincerely held beliefs of one, or a few, or even of a majority, be used to interfere with the rights of everyone else to learn what the school offers to teach them. And if your school insists on teaching you about knowledge you'd rather not deal with, go somewhere else.<fn>I'm pretty sure I would not appreciate the curriculum at Bob Jones University.</fn> And it's way past time our society stopped privileging complaints based on religion over other kinds of objections. If a student really wants out, let her out, whether it's because of religion or gluten or an objection to the teacher's cologne. And everybody else goes on with their business.

As it happens, as I was writing this lament about how some kids these days are wasting their opportunity to learn and to embrace their humanity in full, I was alerted to a new opinion piece in our local fishwrap in which one of the local students affected by the *Curious Dog* kerfuffle lamented the loss she felt from the affair. This is a young woman whose curiosity for new ideas is undampened.

Here's a point J.W. makes well:

*Telling students to avoid books containing "wayward beliefs" implies we are incapable of thinking for ourselves. The removal did not give parents the freedom to parent, but instead attacked freedom of thought."*

That's the story in a nutshell. The fear of ideas and the

attempt to run away from them, to pretend they don't exist, leads to nothing good. Suppressed ideas become alluring, forbidden fruit, suffused with the aura of being "naughty" or "bad". The refusal to grapple with them in the light gives them greater power. And when the time comes – and you bet your last dollar it will – when the time comes that the sheltered innocents are forced to face the world as it is, the ground will shake and the walls will crumble. This story is as old as time.

I worry about the students who are supposedly 'getting an education' when all they are really getting is a piece of paper that says they hung around for 4 years or so. These people are a danger to themselves and to our society's ability to govern itself.

But then again, students like J.W. and all the others like her – curious, awake, alive – just might give this cynical old coot cause for optimism. <fn>For real.</fn>

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## Who Will Rid Me of This Meddlesome Meddling?



A little over a year ago, Daughter was assigned Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore* for her high-school literature class. I love this book.<fn>Heck, I pretty much dig all of Murukami's work.</fn> So I was excited about reading along with her and hearing about how the book was discussed in class and what she thought about it all. But about halfway through the book, one of the parents discovered that the book "offended" her, so she pressured the school administration to

stop teaching the book. And just like that, the kids were told that it was no longer part of the class syllabus and the teacher was admonished to please not discuss it with the students.

Sure, I was annoyed at the bible banger who kicked up a fuss and short-circuited a group of intelligent kids from exploring a really great book. But to be honest, I was more irritated that the school caved so easily.

The bitter twist? The kids had just read a section that is truly upsetting, and this decision to halt the teaching of the book left the kids in limbo with no guidance to help them put the reading into context. Instead of “saving” these poor innocents<fn>Note: 17 year olds are not all that innocent. Just saying.</fn> from the trauma of so-called “inappropriate” material, the crusaders left them at its mercy.

Well dammit, according to the local fishwrap, it’s happened again. One of the local high schools assigned *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* as the summer reading. Our intrepid education correspondent<fn>Who is doing some very good work. And hooray that we actually have someone on that beat.</fn> reports that “...the f-word is written 28 times, the s-word 18 times, and the c-word makes one appearance – in Britain that word is less charged than it is in the U.S. A few characters also express atheistic beliefs, taking God’s name in vain on nine occasions.”<fn>I had no idea that *cunt* was less offensive in Britain, but it’s in the paper, so it must be true! Personally, I love the blunt (rhymes with..) impact of the triple consonant / single vowel sound, much like that other favorite word of mine, but with the ultra-hard opening consonant that makes the word more of a punch than the relatively gentle *fuck*. But I accept that its misogynist freight makes it unsuitable in all but the most extreme instances, at least here in the colonies. Alas.</fn>

And thus it was that one eagle-eyed defender of purity decided

that the book was inappropriate for her child's tender sensibilities.

*"I am not interested in having books banned. But to have that language and to take the name of Christ in vain – I don't go for that. As a Christian, and as a female, I was offended. Kids don't have to be reading that type of thing and that's why I was asking for an alternative assignment.*

*"I know it's not realistic to pretend bad words don't exist, but it is my responsibility as a parent to make sure that my daughter knows what is right or wrong.*

I understand, I do. I live in mortal terror of the day my kid wanders in and declares, "Hey, we have to read this thing called *Atlas Shrugged*. Ever heard of it?" But not because it is a terrible piece of so-called literature in every particular.<fn>Though it is.</fn> It's not that it is brimful with ideas and concepts that offend me to my very core.<fn>It does.</fn>

No. My terror is this: If one of my kids has to read it, then so do I. And then I have to be prepared to talk with her or him, to explain my thoughts. And I have to be prepared to listen when one of them says, "Gosh, Dad, that Ayn Rand had some pretty great ideas!"

Here's where Outraged Mom missed a huge opportunity. Given that her child will certainly hear/face this kind of language and thinking as she journeys out of her cocoon<fn>As if she has not already. Please.</fn>, this was Outraged Mom's chance to engage her child's critical thinking. She could have learned more about how her child thinks and who she is on the way to becoming. O.M. could have explained – even though she "is not interested in having books banned" – exactly why she effectively had this book banned. What was so important about this book, exactly? Why, exactly, was she "offended" as a "Christian, and as a female"? She might even have asked her

daughter what she thought and felt about it all. And listened.

Instead, she prefers her child to remain ignorant about the book's contents and to the basis of O.M.'s objections. And to remain ignorant herself about her daughter's ability to reason and think in the face of new ideas.

Some of the comments on the article hailed this woman for getting involved in her daughter's education, for monitoring her reading material. But let's be real: if O.M. actually read *Curious Incident* start to finish, I'll eat a copy. This is not engagement; it's reactive hysteria.

When Daughter read Murakami, I read along with her and we talked about it. When Son was assigned *The Dubliners* this summer, I was thrilled to re-read it. But there have been some rough moments, too. They both read *The Alchemist*, a perfectly terrible little parable about placing your faith in magical thinking and an all-powerful god. I bought it in an airport and read it during a long day of travel. And I hated every word, comma, and period. Daughter and I talked about the book, and I asked her thoughts, and it turned out that she didn't care for it, either. She's read *Hamlet*, *Tartuffe*, *Americanah*, *Metamorphosis*. She's read *Mrs. Dalloway* (she hated that one), *The God of Small Things*. She's read tons of Emily Dickinson and some EM Forster and Kate Chopin and the boy has read *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Some of the themes and ideas they have dealt with through school assigned readings are what we euphemistically refer to as *mature*. Hell, *Scarlet Letter* is about adultery for crying out loud. They both read *The Great Gatsby*, and really, it is just one long debauch. With adultery! They've read *Romeo and Juliet* <fn>Sex between minors before marriage, murder, suicide, lying to their parents(!).</fn> and *The Hunger Games* <fn>Kids killing each other in horrific ways and revolution against the government. Plus, sex.</fn> and *Homer's Odyssey* <fn>Murder, rape, incest, kidnapping, adultery, cursing the gods. But no

“dirty” words! *Win!* and *Macbeth* Murder and dabbling in the occult!. They’ve dealt with violence and profanity and duplicity and religious fervor and rank heresy. They’ve managed to compile one hell of a catalog of books read. And each one has offered an opportunity to learn something.

I dunno. I always took it for granted that that’s what reading was all about.

*“I know it’s not realistic to pretend bad words don’t exist, but it is my responsibility as a parent to make sure that my daughter knows what is right or wrong.”*

Exactly! This book was a perfect opportunity for O.M. to teach her daughter what “right and wrong” actually means, and to learn from her daughter why she agrees or not. It was a chance to demonstrate how humans can apply critical thinking to analyze ideas and situations to make moral choices beyond simply trying to “pretend bad words don’t exist”, which in fact is exactly what her objection to the book amount to. One of the objections from the puritans towards this kind of reading in the school is that it should be up to the parents to teach their children about “such things”. The school gave this woman and her gaggle a golden opportunity to do just that. They swatted it away.

The school board and principal wish to pretend that this is not really a banning, but is something not quite that bad.

*But it wasn’t a part of the true curriculum. We use summer reading as a way to keep kids engaged over the summer. The book will remain on the media center shelves and is not being banned.”*He went on to explain, *“We have always been at war with Oceania!”*

Just as with the Murakami, the school folded like a cheap lawn

chair when they saw the godbotherers prepping their torches and pitchforks. Even worse, they pretended that, since this was “just” summer reading, it was not *really* part of the curriculum, so no harm, no foul. Oh, well alrighty then.

OK, step into the principal’s shoes for a minute. School is two weeks away. There are a million details to attend, and the thought of wrangling with a bunch of Carrie Nations smells like living hell. So he throws them a bone and hopes they’ll go away. But feeding these jackals does nothing but make them hungry for more. They’ll be back, ready to dine on precedent.

We read on:

*School Board member Alva Striplin is now recommending the removal of “Curious Incident” from the district’s approved reading list.*

*“We are simply listening to parents’ concerns,” Striplin said. “We’ve got a million books to choose from and this one should not be on the district approval list.”*

And just why the shit-flinging monkey fuck not? As it turns out, two other schools in town – one private, the other part of the public system – assigned this book for the summer and have had no problems, no complaints. But now, because one Outraged Mom has complained, our school leadership is ready to go even farther than O.M. asked for. Jesus H Christ burning a scroll, what the hell comes next? This quisling quiescence<fn>That’s called alliteration. I learned that in high school lit class. Thanks Ms Coker.</fn> puts all those books I listed above on line for the chopping block.

(Fittingly, both of our kids also read *Fahrenheit 451* as part of their curriculum, so they are familiar with the kind of thinking that lies beneath the urge to stop people from reading “dangerous” ideas, even if the danger is something as simple as a dirty word. They may even be familiar with the

fact that *451* has been the target of banning attempts for decades, due to its language and “un-Christian” ideas. This is how one learns about irony, I imagine.)

If all it takes to get a book yanked is a handful of bible banging meddlers, no book is safe. If this is the model, then teaching actual biology, actual climate science, actual history...all these subjects are up for bid to the loudest whiners. I don't hold the whiners responsible for this. It's up to the educators to say, “No, this bullshit stops right here.” Those exact words would suit me just fine.

If a parent wants to pull his child from a class for certain subjects or assignments, so be it. If they find themselves doing this fairly regularly, they may wish to consider that they are in the wrong school, and might wish to investigate opportunities at the nearest madrassah or parish school.<fn>Pro tip: Avoid the Jesuits if real science offends you.</fn>

In the meantime, teachers and administrators need to belt up and tell these people, “Sorry, but the rest of us have no obligation to try to sooth your feelings just because you are ‘offended’. At the risk of further offending...go pound sand.”

Well, a boy can dream.

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## **The Atticus of My Life**



*In the book of love's own dreams  
Where all the print is blood  
Where all the pages are my days  
And all my lights grow old  
– Attics of My Life, by Robert Hunter*

**THIS POST IS FULL OF SPOILERS:**

If you hate spoilers and plan to read *Go Set a Watchman*, skip this post for now.

But please, come back when you're done.

**A piece of free advice:**

If you have not read *To Kill a Mockingbird* recently, read it before you read

*Go Set a Watchman*. You'll be glad you did.

I'm one of those peculiar people who take literature too seriously. I've never doubted the power of a good writer to create worlds that are as real as our own and, at the same time, to conjure reflections and echoes of a reality we haven't quite earned yet.

Characters in books become as real to me as my friends and family, my banes and enemies. I grant that this is a sign of deficient mental health, but I hope I'm not the only one who, for example, bursts into tears when Gavroche Thénardier dies on the barricade or when Edgar Derby is executed for pocketing that damned teapot he found in the rubble. I guess most times for most people, characters remain on the page where they belong and don't much interfere in our day to day. Lucky them?

But some characters escape the page and grow larger than life,

become icons. Some, like Atticus Finch, become moral exemplars and redeemers of collective wrongdoing. And if there's anything we can't stand, it's for someone to reveal the flawed man behind the myth.<fn>See also, Huxtable, Cliff.</fn>

So let's cut to the chase. Atticus Finch is a standard issue Southern gentleman – a man I recognize well in several of my Deep South forbears – a genteel fellow of manners and decency who also happens to hold racist views that are extreme enough to make the daughter who once idolized her Perfect Father literally throw up when she discovers his true nature.

It's easy to see why so many long-time Harper Lee fans are outraged.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lee created *the* Great White Father, the man of infinite patience, rectitude, and sense of fairness who could redeem our (White folks, that is) sense of guilt and discomfort over racial injustice. In *Go Set a Watchman*, she pulls the curtain back to reveal that Atticus, the Great and Powerful, is just another worn out, cranky uncle forwarding conspiracy emails and ranting about Those People. Once again, hero worship turns out to be a sucker play.

At the end of *Mockingbird*, we were given permission to tut-tut the horror of Tom Robinson's predicament and to feel joy at the progress we've made, pass the chicken please. The white trash Ewells excelled in the Judas role in this passion play, lowly creatures who took welfare and kept their kids out of school and couldn't be bothered to shift for themselves. Our own hands were never dirtied like the coarse and common Ewells. They were the evil in our midst, and if only we *better* whites could follow the shining example of Atticus Finch, the world would be our Nirvana, and hallelujah, pass the gravy, if it's not too much trouble.

*Watchman's* Chapter 17 is one of the most painful reading experiences I've ever suffered. Even knowing ahead of time

that Lee was going to reveal a “dark side” of Atticus, I was unprepared for the casual, genteel, typically Southern bigotry coming out of his mouth. And Lee wrote this exchange with no wiggle room: Atticus is basically a disgusting racist. He laughs at Jean Louise’s arguments, he taunts her for her naivete.

There’s no turning away: the Great White Father is a son of a bitch. The revelation of Atticus’s repellent attitudes hits as hard as if a sequel to the gospels revealed that Jesus and Judas were the same character. Everything you know is wrong.

A few days before GSAW hit the stores, I re-read *Mockingbird* for the first time in years. I was surprised at the extent to which the movie depiction replaced the book itself in my memory.<fn>Like I said: re-read TKAM before you read GSAW.</fn> *Mockingbird* the movie revolves around the trial of Tom Robinson; everything else that happens travels in orbit around that event. In the book, the trial is critical, but the book as a whole explores the curve of small-town childhood in the South with fondness and wit. (White children, naturally.) As with so many movies/books/tv shows about race, actual black folks are pretty much in the margins.<fn>With the notable and long overdue exception of the movie *Selma*, though it too has its own issues of Great Father drama and hagiography.</fn> And this gets to one of the key problems with *Mockingbird* – on the one hand, it asks us to empathize with the ‘poor, poor Negro’, even while bestowing upon us a glimmering savior to make us all feel okay again. That nice (hell, impossibly perfect) Atticus washes our sins away.

While theories abound as to *Watchman*’s origin, I readily accept that this was an early shot at Lee’s Maycomb chronicle; after reading *Watchman*, Lee’s editor told her go back and tell the tale from Young Scout’s perspective. It took her two years to re-write, and the result was the structurally and stylistically superior *Mockingbird*.

The *Watchman* version is clearly unfinished; it lacks the cohesion that extended editing and re-writing would have instilled.<fn>It is also unmistakably the work of Harper Lee. This is no hoax, and it sure as hell is not Capote.</fn> But I can also see how this might have become, later on, an effective sequel. In fact, it takes great effort to read this as anything other than a sequel or amplification of the original: the same characters, 15 years later on the fictional timeline, in a book published 50+ years later. It's of a piece, and it provides an essential corrective element that turns the saga into something other than a happy fairy tale, albeit one where that poor Tom Robinson &c., pass the black eyed peas.

*Mockingbird* gave us a feel-good fantasy. *Watchman* fills in the blanks and gives us a truth that does not encourage happy mealtime discussion.

*Mockingbird* is still a great novel. Lee's depictions of the rhythms and rhymes and smells of Southern life are as good as anybody else, Faulkner, O'Connor, Percy, you name your favorite. But Harper Lee is not a great novelist.<fn> For the same reason the John Kennedy Toole and Joseph Heller are not; the body of work is just not there to justify such a judgement.</fn> She spread a dusting of fiction over the people she knew growing up, the place she knew. She had a story worth telling, and perhaps even recognized that the time had come for white southerners to address race in a different way. But she had one good story, told it, and went silent. Wondering whether she could have become a great novelist is no better than a parlor game along the lines of could Wilt Chamberlain outplay Michael Jordan and such.

While *Watchman* is not a great novel by any stretch, it's probably not fair to judge it too harshly given that it never even made it to galleys until its rediscovery. But it is an important piece of work for two key reasons. First off, it sheds light on the author's struggle, the process of taking a

work from idea to paper to woodshed to completion. This alone would make GSAW a worthy curiosity for literary scholars and a fun what-if exercise for *Mockingbird* devotees. But more important than this: *Watchman* uses the Freudian/Oedipal device of *kill the father* to allow Jean Louise to become an adult in her own right. And in so doing, Lee strips the mask from a false idol that has captivated her fans for several generations. And that shit comes with some heavy dues.

So first: The similarities between TKAM and GSAW are evident and plenty, with several paragraphs that describe Maycomb life appearing in both without so much as a comma's difference. But the divergences are where we get a glimpse at the evolution of a book that has been read by millions of people over the past half century.

Famously, Tom Robinson is convicted and then killed trying to escape prison; everybody knows that. But in *Watchman*, the "trial" is dealt with in a paragraph or two, with the throwaway reference that Tom was acquitted. And a more disturbing suggestion that Atticus fought hard for Tom only to sustain the fiction of equality under the law. More later. In the retelling, the "trial" transformed from a mere trifle to the centerpiece of one of the nation's great moral fables.

Then there's the fiance in GSAW, Henry, who Jean Louise describes as her oldest and dearest friend, a boy who lived across the street at the same time the trial and the adventures with Jem and Dill and Boo played out. This character does not exist in *Mockingbird*. Perhaps even more revealing, Boo Radley does not exist in the *Watchman* universe, and there is no mention of Bob Ewell's attack on Jem and Scout, the event that provides the bookend beginning/ending of the entire *Mockingbird* narrative.

And of course, there is Jean Louise's discovery and outrage that the Father and her fiance are, if not card carriers, at

the very least fellow travellers of the White Citizens Councils who made damned well and sure that Jim Crow remained the law of the land and kept Those People from getting above their station. Not to be outdone, Jean Louise reveals herself to be a states rights fanatic of the first degree, and declared herself angry and outraged that the Supreme Court would force people to do the right thing when they would certainly get around to it in their own good time and why are they rushing things so. Between the two of them, you have the complete package of racial oppression. And they're both so damned reasonable about it.

The heart of *Watchman's* ultimate importance lies in that last disparity between what might be viewed as the canon of TKAM and the heresy of GSA, lies in Harper Lee's forcing us to squarely face the myth of the Great Father, to see the truth of the complexity and the ugliness and duplicity, and to, well basically, grow the fuck up. Look, she says – you worshipped this False Idol, you used him to absolve your sins, and you've been a dupe the whole time. And by the way, your stand-in Scout ain't all that either, what with her love of states rights and eventual acceptance of *the way things are*. To be sure, the ending of the book feels hurried and undeveloped, something I feel would have been addressed in re-write/editing. But Lee said publish it warts and all, so this is the text we have to unpack, to use a term that I hate but why not at this point, my god, the world is in tatters and the Great Father is dead. Cut me some slack.

Lee created *the* Perfect Father, the man who could resolve any argument, cure any scratch or scrape. And Gregory Peck made that character flesh. Go ahead, try to imagine any other actor of the past 100 years in that role. None of them will stick. One stupid internet poll after another has put Atticus near the top of the "perfect father" sweepstakes. People name their children after Atticus. He's a goddamned monument.

And this is exactly where *Watchman* delivers the blow that

makes it an important contribution to this corner of the literary world: Lee shows us that our Savior is a fraud, tells us to wake up and be adults in our own right. Lee shows us the essential error of putting our faith in mythical heroes and asks us to stand on our own. Sure, it's tough when we discover that the pleasing fairy tales of our childhoods are fictions that cover up a more complex and disappointing set of truths. Step up and deal.

*Watchman* comes along at a particularly fraught moment in our 400 year struggle with the wages of America's original sin. Any pretense to having arrived at a post-racial moment withers with the first serious investigation. No matter how "good" we whites think ourselves, no matter how much we congratulate ourselves on how far we've come<fn> Guilty as charged. Mea culpa.</fn> – the fact remains that we live in a segregated society, and it is primarily White America's obligation to ensure that the structural changes necessary to allow this issue to reach resolution are squarely in our own laps. (Like it or not, Blacks have no obligation to *make things better*; we shit this bed and it's ours to clean.) Unlike TKAM, *Watchman* does not offer any bromides to make that pill any less bitter. In fact, by making Atticus' noble defense of Tom Robinson an act of expedience rather than principle, Lee drives home a disturbing and cynical point: good deeds may not quite be what they appear. Even your own, so stay awake and question, question, question.

Another heartbreaker in *Watchman*: Jean Louise pays a visit to Calpurnia, the Negro woman who essentially raised her and Jem. In TKAM, Calpurnia was for all intents the only Mother Jem and Scout knew. Now long since retired and removed from the White world, Calpurnia barely acknowledges Jean Louise, and certainly display no affection. Jean Louise is deeply hurt, but also outraged: how dare she not remember me, how dare she turn her back on how good we were to her, how we treated her *as though* she were just like family, etc. Jean Louise has

not found the maturity to accept her own complicity in racial oppression. It's too much for her to take. In this, she is the perfect representation of too many "enlightened" whites on the question of race, with our plaintive whines of "can't they see how much we/I have done for them already?", largely blind to the overwhelming privilege we claim as our birthright without even recognizing it even exists.

In the end, I find myself at this: despite the fact that *Mockingbird* is likely to remain the preferred version of Lee's Maycomb tales, it is dishonest to ignore the details of *Watchman* in our overall view of what Maycomb means in its literary context. Memories are imperfect, and stories told over time shift and morph to reflect new experiences, changed attitudes, or something as simple as wish fulfillment. When Lee wrote *Watchman*, she told a story of a young woman's disillusionment about her once revered father; when she rewrote the story from the young Scout perspective, she transformed Atticus into the perfect father, the perfect man.

This is not necessarily a contradiction. But the fuller portrait that emerges from the combined tellings – even though it is a real heartbreaker – brings us closer to an understanding that is probably more useful and true in the long run: we are none of us perfect – even/especially the people you've placed on a pedestal – and you can bet there's a dark side to your own character that needs serious work, some whining cling to privilege that we mostly don't even see. And there is no Great Father who can fix everything for us; it all depends on our own imperfect efforts. It is surely impossible to bear, to go on without our Great Father; but the alternative – giving up and throwing in the towel – is even worse.

I'm not sure Harper Lee intended anything of the sort. It may be that she truly felt the story delivered in *Mockingbird* is the "way it is", and I've no doubt many will hold to that reading. But I'll hold to this one: Harper Lee knew what was

in the earlier manuscript, and she allowed its publication as a favor to us all. *Watchman* delivers a harsh but necessary message: Give up the fantasy and face the world as it is. Shit's too damned serious for anything else.

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## Your Electric Picture Radio Box Matters #2: Don Draper and the Flitcraft Parable



MAD MEN & MALTESE FALCON SPOILER ALERT!!!

Dashiell Hammett was one hell of a writer, wrongly denigrated as a “genre” scribbler.<fn>As were/are PK Dick, Raymond Chandler, Walter Mosley, &c.</fn> His most famous work likely is *The Maltese Falcon*, which is itself probably better remembered as a great movie starring Humphrey Bogart, Peter Lorre, Sidney Greenstreet, and Mary Astor and directed by John Huston.



The stuff dreams are made of

But one of the great passages of the book never made it into the movie. It's become known as the Flitcraft Parable, a little story Sam Spade tells Brigid O'Shaughnessy to pass the time while they await the arrival of the oily Joel Cairo.

Flitcraft was a successful Tacoma banker, family man, well-respected man about town doing the best things so conservatively. And one day, on his way to lunch, he passed a construction site.

*A beam or something fell eight or ten stories down and smacked the sidewalk alongside him. It brushed pretty close to him, but didn't touch him, though a piece of the sidewalk was chipped off and flew up and hit his cheek. He felt like somebody has taken the lid off life and let him look at the works."*

Awakened by this near-death episode, Flitcraft kept walking<fn>"He went like that," Spade said, "like a fist when you open your hand."</fn>, leaving work behind like Don Draper fleeing a Miller Lite meeting, just chucked it all and took to

the road, wandering and drifting and looking for whatever. And then he finally settled in Spokane, just a few hundred miles away from his first family where he became a successful car dealer, family man, well-respected man about town doing the best things so conservatively. And pace Don, under a new name.<fn>The name? Charles Pierce! I am slain.</fn>

*He wasn't sorry for what he had done. It seemed reasonable enough to him. I don't think he even knew he had settled back naturally into the same groove he had jumped out of in Tacoma. But that's the part of it I always liked. He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling."*

It's not as though he forgot the falling beam, the sense of the thin line between life and death. He just got used to it.

So about Don/Dick. All along he has told himself that the things that came before, no matter how traumatic, don't matter, that all he needs to do is move ahead, determined. Recall when Peggy gave birth to a son that she would never know, Don told her in the hospital, "Peggy, listen to me, get out of here and move forward. This never happened. It will shock you how much it never happened."

It's been pretty easy to see how untrue that's been for Peggy, and how, as a life strategy, it's been pretty much disastrous for Don. Even in this final episode, he's trying that line out on Anna Draper's niece, Stephanie. But where Peggy tried so desperately to live Don's advice, Stephanie was having none of it, and she soon left our 'hero' stranded in the Esalen simulacrum to face his past alone.

And face it he did. There was no near-death experience here a la Flitcraft. Instead, it was Don/Dick coming face to face with himself, or his many selves, and seeing pretty clearly how badly he'd screwed the pooch.

*I messed everything up. I'm not the man you think I am... I broke all my vows. I scandalized my child. I took another man's name. And made nothing of it.*

And despite it being completely true, Peggy tries to prop up her crumbled hero the way he did years earlier. With a lie.<fn>Note that Peggy's late redemption in the show followed upon her confiding in Stan about the child she gave up. Facing the truth, and not changing much as a result...but just enough to make space for her and Stan to finally get together.</fn>

And then Don, in what may have been the hardest realization of all – that Peggy had been a true and devoted friend for years, a fact he had often not appreciated in the least – Don barely gets out this last comment:

*I only called because I realized I never said goodbye to you."*

This is not Don having a brush with death. This is a man experiencing internal annihilation. This is his Flitcraft moment.

But soon after, we see this:



## Serenity Now!

Don has stayed at EsalenWorld long enough to find his bliss. His moment with the invisible man in group therapy was the falling beam. He is truly a changed man. This is perhaps the most human and humane moment we've seen from Don in the entire series.



We just want to be loved. Is that so wrong?

But like Flitcraft, he'll be back to the same old same thing soon enough.

There's been some Internet squabbling about what the quick cut from blissful Don to this Coke ad meant. My take is that Don truly *has* changed, that he has had an insight into his nature and the ways he's fucked everything up, and that he is on his way to forgiving and accepting himself in a way he never has before, and resolving to do better from here on. *And that his experience sitting cross-legged on the ocean cliffs has given him the insight he needed to create one of the most legendary advertisements ever.* And please note: I do not view his little grin as a moment where he cynically realizes that he can convert this moment of personal growth into a great ad. At that moment, he's just grooving with the moment. And later, when he appropriates that genuine moment for an inherently *inauthentic* commercial moment, he likely has no inkling of the inherent cynicism of the conversion. It's just who he is.<fn>Refer to the parable of the monkey and the scorpion

crossing the river. Nature!

So what?

One of the ongoing themes of *Mad Men* has revolved around the question of "Can people ever change?" And I think the show has come squarely down on the same answer Hammett offered in the Flitcraft parable: Absolutely. Sort of.

I'd go with this. As with Flitcraft, Don experienced a true, honest, gut-wrencher of a life-altering experience, and I'm willing to accept that he has changed, maybe even for the better; maybe not. And that, like Flitcraft, he gets used to the after-effects of his epiphany, and slowly resumes the life he knows: ad man, probably re-married somewhere near where he once lived, subtly altered, somehow, but still the same Don/Dick as ever. The only difference now is that he is willing to admit – to himself, to others – his failings, and to remember them. And rather than deny the past – the identity theft, the affairs, &c. – he acknowledges it and accepts it as part of himself, and then gradually gets used to the beams not falling any more.

Because I think that's how it works for most of us. I accept that there are people who radically alter their lives and habits and everything about themselves, either as a response to experience or as an act of pure will. If you are one of these, I suspect you are one in a (b)(m)illion. The rest of us muddle ahead as best we can. We experience these *moments*, these transformative events, and swear that we will never forget the lesson learned, the way we feel, the glimpse of truth. And we mean it, absolutely, but over time, the comfortable rhythms resume, and we are still pretty much who we were before.

Changed? Yeah, you bet, just as everything we experience makes an impression on our psychology, our exchange with and understanding of our world. But are we any different? I'm not

so sure.

To borrow from another Bogart moment, I'm not sure any of this blathering amounts to a hill of beans in this crazy world. I believe that the stories we read in books and on the screen and stage and on the electric picture radio box matter because, at best, they reflect something back our way that helps us understand ourselves more clearly, or maybe to understand other people differently. That our effort to *read* the stories tills fertile ground for that urge we (some of us!) have to know ourselves better, and to, perhaps, find a way to incrementally change over time, perhaps even for the better.

My thought? Mistrust the epiphany! It's too grand. But the little glimmers of a-ha? Gather them like a squirrel gathers nuts.

Or not. Not for nothing, after Spade relates the Flitcraft story, femme fatale and murderess Brigid is utterly unimpressed. "How perfectly fascinating," she says, eager to turn the conversation back to her favorite subject: herself.

Some people just don't do self-reflection. And sometimes, I envy them. But not often.