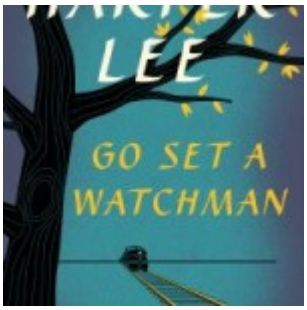
My Favorite World #32



Count me among the gaggle that is looking forward to the new Harper Lee like a 5-year old anticipating Christmas morning. Release date is this coming Tuesday. I will be at the nearest bookstore at opening time to grab my copy.

PBS recently broadcast a new American Masters episode about Harper Lee as part of the run-up to the new book. It's well worth the time, especially the interviews with the adult Mary Badham (Scout in the movie) and with Lee's elder sister, Alice, an embodiment of what Southerners call *a real character*. But the best to me was the interweaving of guests reading favorite passages that faded across to the movie where the dialogue was straight from the page.

I've read *Mockingbird* at least six times, the last couple alongside the kids as they read it for school. It remains magnificent. Lee somehow managed to render every character in the story – including the Ewell family – with depth and warmth. Even the villains are recognizable as *people*, people that she knew. Because in towns like Maycomb, everybody knew everybody else.

> *I sought once more for a familiar face, and at the center of the semi-circle I found one.*
>
> *"Hey, Mr. Cunningham."*
>
> *The man did not hear me, it seemed.*
>
> *"Hey, Mr. Cunningham. How's your entailment gettin' along?"*

Mr. Walter Cunningham's legal affairs were well known to me; Atticus had once described them at length. The big man blinked and hooked his thumbs in his overall straps. He seemed uncomfortable; he cleared his throat and looked away. My friendly overture had fallen flat.

Mr. Cunningham wore no hat, and the top half of his forehead was white in contrast to his sunscorched face, which led me to believe that he wore one most days. He shifted his feet, clad in heavy work shoes.

"Don't you remember me, Mr. Cunningham? I'm Jean Louise Finch. You brought us some hickory nuts one time, remember?" I began to sense the futility one feels when unacknowledged by a chance acquaintance.

"I go to school with Walter," I began again. "He's your boy ain't he? Ain't he, sir?"

Cunningham was moved to a faint nod. He did know me, after all.

"He's in my grade," I said, "and he does right well. He's a good boy," I added, "a real nice boy. We brought him home for dinner one time. Maybe he told you about me, I beat him up one time but he was real nice about it. Tell him hey for me, won't you?"

Atticus had said it was the polite thing to talk to people about what they were interested in, not about what you were interested in. Mr. Cunningham displayed no interest in his son, so I tackled his entailment once more in a last ditch effort to make him feel at home.

"Entailments are bad," I was advising him, when I slowly awoke to the fact that I was addressing the entire aggregation. The men were all looking at me, some had their mouths half-open. Atticus had stopped poking at Jem: they were standing together beside Dill. Their attention amounted

to fascination. Atticus's mouth, even, was half-open, an attitude he had once described as uncouth. Our eyes met and he shut it.

"Well, Atticus, I was just sayin' to Mr. Cunningham that entailments are bad an' all that, but you said not to worry, it takes a long time sometimes . . . that you all'd ride it out together . . ." I was slowly drying up, wondering what idiocy I had committed. Entailments seemed all right enough for livingroom talk.

I began to feel sweat gathering at the edges of my hair; I could stand anything but a bunch of people looking at me. They were quite still.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

Atticus said nothing. I looked around and up at Mr. Cunningham, whose face was equally impassive. Then he did a peculiar thing. He squatted down and took me by both shoulders.

"I'll tell him you said hey, little lady," he said.

Then he straightened up and waved a big paw. "Let's clear out," he called. "Let's get going, boys."

As they had come, in ones and twos the men shuffled back to their ramshackle cars. Doors slammed, engines coughed, and they were gone.

That does it. Reckon I'm about to read it again to ramp up to *Watchman.* Hold all my calls, please.

Bonus: I'm on jury duty tomorrow, which means I'll be reading the greatest courtroom drama in an actual courtroom.

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