

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee recommended by Ellen Crosby

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the “VABooks!” column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Ellen Crosby—Virginia resident and author of *The Chardonnay Charade* and *The Merlot Murders*—recommends *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. We hope that individuals, book groups, families, and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



I fell in love with *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee’s timeless, evocative classic, not as a book, but as a play—my high school senior class play, to be precise. To this day when I re-read the book, which tells the story of a young girl who witnessed her father’s act of moral heroism in segregated Alabama, I still hear the voices of my friends, Yankee accents flattened into what we believed sounded like respectable Southern drawls. My up-the-street neighbor, now a university professor in Oregon, played Atticus. My best friend, co-owner of a successful music company she and her husband started in L.A., was the terrifying Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose. Jem is now a lawyer in Atlanta. I was one of the townspeople who watched the trial of Tom Robinson.

In 1971 I attended a sprawling public high school in Stamford, Connecticut, one of the bedroom communities of metropolitan New York. A true melting pot of racial and ethnic cultures, we were Italian, Irish, Polish, German, Puerto Rican, African-American, and Caribbean. We had both Christian and Jewish holidays off from school. Our neighborhoods ran the gamut from affluent to working class. In many ways, my northeastern hometown in the 1970s was quite different from Lee’s fictitious Depression-era town of Maycomb, Alabama.

But 1971 was a mere three years after the ‘68 riots erupted in more than one hundred U.S. cities in the wake of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. Trenton, New Jersey, a hundred miles from Stamford, was the closest town affected by the violence. Washington, DC,

whose inner city was practically demolished, was a five-hour drive. Still, in those days that kind of destruction and rage seemed far from a place where kids hitchhiked home if they missed the school bus and hung out downtown with no particular plan—and no one’s parents worried.

My English teacher—also the drama teacher—was the one who chose *To Kill a Mockingbird* as our senior play. Tough and demanding, Mrs. Melzer was one of those rare life-changing teachers who was revered by her students. Because of her, I became a writer.

I remember that she pushed us hard during rehearsals, turning a group of 17- and 18-year-olds into the characters we portrayed—citizens of a town where racial intolerance and bigotry were as acceptable as breathing. Suddenly classmates who were friends were divided into two groups onstage—black and white—as we became people with ugly prejudices and victims with no voice or rights. Though we were only acting, I’ve often thought that the atmosphere of edgy uneasiness that settled over our rehearsals was Mrs. Melzer’s way of showing us that Trenton and Washington were closer to home than we realized.

Nearly forty years later, those memories are still with me each time I re-read Harper Lee’s wonderful novel. As Atticus told his young daughter Scout at the end of the story, you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them.

Even if you’re only walking around on a high school stage.