

Books of The Times

By HERBERT MITGANG

ALL the magic and truth that might seem deceptive or exaggerated in a factual account of a small town unfold beautifully in a new first novel called "To Kill a Mockingbird."* At a time when so many machine-tooled novels are simply documentaries disguised behind a few fictional changes, it is pleasing to recommend a book that shows what a novelist can accomplish with quite familiar situations. The author, Harper Lee, is a woman in her early thirties; even though she seems to be recapturing the fleeting memories of childhood, clearly she is working harder to create a pointed story for the reader. Here is a storyteller justifying the novel as a form that transcends time and place.

She calls her Alabama town Maycomb, and it is so Deep South that it appears to be a vestige of the Confederacy. At least some of the children are still named after generals who fought under the Stars and Bars. But the time is 1935 (you would hardly notice it); as Miss Lee says, "a time of vague optimism for some of the people: Maycomb County had recently been told that it had nothing to fear but fear itself." This is cotton country, a land of foot-washing Baptists, where the white people are tradition-bound and the others Know Their Place.

The Heart of the Story

The story begins quietly. The narrator is a 9-year-old tomboy named Scout, a pixie and minor troublemaker. Her brother, Jem, 12, is just starting to break out in their small world. The author eases the reader into the life of the town with warmth and good humor. The reader builds what the children call the first Negro "snowman," rolls crazily down the street in a somersaulting old tire, sits in a consolidated classroom in a hilarious scene where the back-country kids unhinge a new teacher from an alien "north" county of Alabama. The children's phrases, the slang of Southern poor white and Negro, and the language of the more educated people have a regional charm.

But he also is being led into the heart of the story—the opening of the eyes of Southern childhood to the dreary facts of Negro-white injustices. The children's father is a lawyer, Atticus Finch, and he is one of the most decent members of his profession found in fiction. He is, more than that, a gentle widower deeply concerned with imparting a sense of justice to his children. The occasion for their introduction into the realities of the Southern way of life—of accepted injustice—is a rape case in which Atticus is defense counsel.

The defendant is a young Negro, his accuser a white girl, and the town angry and fearful. To the wise judge who appoints Atticus as counsel, it is obvious that something is strange about the girl's story. Nevertheless, the mere fact of defending a Negro seriously is frowned upon by the lowlife of Maycomb, Ala. And, inevitably, this attitude is brought home to Scout and Jem, who sud-



Michael Brown

Harper Lee

denly discover that they are the children of a ridiculed father.

"Atticus," I said one evening, "what exactly is a nigger-lover?"

"Scout," said Atticus, "nigger-lover is just one of those terms that don't mean anything—like snot-nose. It's hard to explain—ignorant, trashy people use it when they think somebody's favoring Negroes over and above themselves. It's slipped into usage with some people like ourselves, when they want a common, ugly term to label somebody."

"You aren't really a nigger-lover, then, are you?"

"I certainly am. I do my best to love everybody * * *."

Trial Proves Exciting

The trial itself is exciting and strangely hopeful despite what the all-white jury's decision is expected to be. The events after the trial, the barter payments given by the Negroes of the community to the defense lawyer, the dignified scenes as the Negroes welcome the two children to their church, the town's reaction to the post-trial events—all are related with a wonder that is often marvelous. There are some improbable and sentimental moments in the story, but there are also great moments of laughter that belong to memory and a novelist's hand.

"To Kill a Mockingbird" opens the chrysalis of childhood quietly and dramatically. Harper Lee's novel turns a reader's thoughts to Carson McCullers' "The Member of the Wedding," whose 12-year-old Frankie might be an older sister of 9-year-old Scout. But even without Miss McCullers' fineness, the meaning in this novel runs even deeper because of the subject of injustice in the South. Miss Lee's original characters are people to cherish in this winning first novel by a fresh writer with something significant to say, South and North.

*TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD. By Harper Lee. 296 pages. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company. \$3.95.