

BOOKS

REVIEW

America still needs Atticus

Two books take different angles on 'Mockingbird'

Charles Finch
Special to USA TODAY

In 1880, a man named Amasa Coleman Lee was born in rural Alabama. In 1926, he and his wife, Frances Finch Lee, had a daughter, Nelle. (It was her maternal grandmother's name spelled backward.) When she grew up, Nelle began work on a novel that was centered, in part, on a character based on Amasa Lee. For fictional purposes, she renamed him Atticus Finch.

The book, which was published in 1960, was, of course, "To Kill a Mockingbird." It took 80 years to get there, but neither America nor its literature would ever be the same.

In his lucid, accomplished, eminently readable new book "Atticus Finch: The Biography" (Basic Books, 184 pp., ★★☆☆), Emory historian Joseph Crespino lays out the journey of those 80 years. The first half of the book is a fascinating biography of A.C. Lee, the second a description of how his daughter transmuted him into Atticus Finch — into America's father.

Harper Lee's father (Harper was her middle name) was a garrulous, bright young man, "ambitious and high-minded," prominent in politics, journalism and law. His racial views were complex, neither radical nor retrograde. Early in his career, he defended a black father and son accused of murder, though they were judged guilty and hanged. Still, he saw himself as essentially a proponent of incremental change.

His fiery, farther-seeing daughter considered that little better than appeasement. (Amasa seems much closer to the pragmatic Atticus of "Go Set a Watchman" than the idealized one of "Mockingbird.") Nevertheless, Crespino makes clear that A.C. Lee had two crucial traits that Atticus Finch would inherit: First, he was a wonderful, imaginative father; and second, while of his ugly time, he possessed a profound instinct for basic decency.



Actor Gregory Peck and novelist Harper Lee share a moment in 1962 on the set of "To Kill a Mockingbird." © CORBIS/SPLASH NEWS

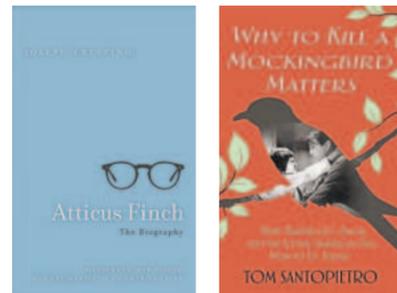


Authors Joseph Crespino, left, and Tom Santopietro offer different takes on "To Kill a Mockingbird."

"Atticus Finch," a blend of Southern history, literary criticism and group biography, probably is the best book about Harper Lee to come out since her death in 2016. It is, though, undeniably academic in tone and approach.

A more accessible new work by Tom Santopietro, "Why To Kill a Mockingbird Matters" (St. Martin's Press, 238 pp., ★★☆☆), illuminates the Lees' legacy from a different, pop-culture-driven angle.

Santopietro's metier is film — he has written about "The Sound of Music" and



Doris Day — and he glides quickly over Nelle Lee's background in his rush to get on set. "Why To Kill a Mockingbird Matters" (thank heavens for that last word) is primarily a book of cinematic history, filigreed here and there with the borrowed significance of "Mockingbird."

For readers who want to know about the film, it's a success, absorbing and full of beguiling detail. The father of the actress (Mary Badham) who played Scout disliked movies. On the shooting script of her onscreen father, Gregory Peck, there are four words "scrawled in his distinctive hand: Fairness Courage Stubbornness Love." How Atticus.

Birmingham, Alabama, theater owners "refused to show" the movie, Santopietro writes; in the same month that Peck won an Academy Award for it, April 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. was composing his "Letter From a Birmingham Jail."

Lee's book appeared at a time of overwhelming complexity and managed at that vital moment to be many things at once: a masterpiece, a fantasy, a sally against racism, a tale of childhood. She herself called it — very beautifully — "a love story pure and simple."

In different ways, these two books, particularly Crespino's, unknot the immense tangle of racial and personal and regional issues that Lee reflected and defined. They are with us still, obviously. As I write this, "To Kill a Mockingbird," 138 years after Amasa's birth, remains on USA TODAY's Best-Selling Books list week after week.

Charles Finch is the author of "The Woman in the Water."

REVIEW

You'll be better off if you don't know 'Jack'

Patty Rhule
Special to USA TODAY

By now, the legend that was Camelot has been revealed in a less magical light.

John F. Kennedy was a charismatic politician and president who inspired a generation to public service, got the Soviet Union to back down from a nuclear threat and launched the United States on a trajectory to the moon. He also was a flawed human being, as most of us are, and a serial philanderer.

There are no new revelations in Michelle Gable's novel "The Summer I Met Jack" (St. Martin's Press, 448 pp., ★☆☆☆). But it seems particularly crass to market a book on the enduring appeal of the Kennedy family and then spend more than 400 pages denigrating them.

In 1950, young Congressman Jack is a faithless and forgetful lover, but Alicia Darr, a Polish immigrant working as popcorn girl at a movie theater in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, is smitten.

Darr is another name used by real-life actress and socialite Alicia Corning Clark, who claimed to have given birth to Kennedy's love child.

Movie-star gorgeous Alicia longs for the better life that Jack seems to offer, until Papa Joe Kennedy gets wind of her past. Alicia's parents sent her to a convent to escape the Nazis, so the reader is primed to sympathize with her. But there's not much about the social-climbing Alicia to admire.

When Jack breaks off their engagement, Alicia heads to Hollywood, where she survives as a party girl and actress, linked to lovers such as Gary Cooper and Hugh O'Brien. (Her on-again, off-again liaison with JFK continues for years, even through his marriage to Jackie.) She befriends Kate Hepburn — "a dyke," Gable writes. That's one of her nicer turns of phrase.



John F. Kennedy and his clan are at the center of a new novel. CBS



Family matriarch Rose Kennedy is "shrill and slight." Bobby is "shifty and ratlike." A key character claims to have proof the Kennedys killed Marilyn Monroe, and Gable suggests one of Jack's closest chums "services" him when no women are available.

A thin modern-day plotline about an errant envelope links past to present in an attempt to reel the reader through to the book's conclusion.

I wouldn't bother. This is the cynical hate-read of the summer.

REVIEW

'Traveling Feast': Fill up on food and life morals

Ashley Day
USA TODAY

Defeated from a divorce and searching for meaning in middle age, a renowned writer seeks answers through travel, cooking and community.

In "The Traveling Feast: On the Road and at the Table with My Heroes" (Little, Brown, 288 pp., ★★☆☆), Rick Bass brings his writing apprentices to the homes of his own mentors and well-known writers he admires, to offer a meal, express gratitude and connect generations in the industry.

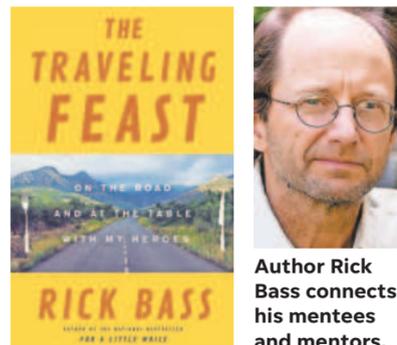
Bass, 60, an accomplished writer and teacher, is emerging from years of relative isolation in Montana while in the midst of a divorce. Keenly aware of time passing and age advancing (his own and that of his contemporaries), he's eager to glean wisdom from his favorite writers — Gordon Lish, Joyce Carol Oates and David Sedaris among them — while he can.

Over the course of three years, he flies and drives to whomever is available to accept a meal, with four or five aspiring writers in tow.

Bass brings frozen cuts of an elk he hunted in Montana, along with whatever he and his travel companions can prep in advance, to serve a meal of meat and seasonal accompaniments in each host's kitchen, "something ceremonial beyond the unimaginative twenty-first-century gesture of picking up the damned tab."

Bass and nearly ever writer featured prove to be astute cooks, borderline food snobs in their own local ways (Bass forages and hunts at home while a New Jersey writer prefers fine restaurants), and the conversations tend to revolve around food and life lessons more than writing.

Each chapter retells one visit to a



Author Rick Bass connects his mentees and mentors.

writer, whether for a picnic or dinner party, and each experience is brief and to the point.

Some end abruptly without a mention of what the writer shared with the younger visitors, but we learn something at each stop.

Bass finds almost every friend has a neat and organized private writing space, and less expectedly, many face away from scenic windows while working. On a deeper level, each host's approach to life, love, nature or time is revealed with quotes that will stick with you.

"Traveling Feast" is a series of stories about travel and food, as each menu is meticulously detailed, and the adventurous and challenging aspects of road trips (and travel abroad) inevitably are explored. But it becomes more a story of life morals.

Bass is collecting advice and credos from each host in search of inspiration to move forward in his life and career.

Bass is admittedly running, unraveling and procrastinating in this attempt to process or cure his pain and perhaps redefine his identity. Is his intention to help other writers or leave a legacy to his own? Only time and literature will tell if either effort succeeds.