

Censors as critics: To Kill a Mockingbird as a case study.

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## **Censors as Critics: *To Kill a Mockingbird* as A Case Study**

Jill P. May

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### **In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Censors as Critics: To Kill a Mockingbird as A Case Study by Jill P. May  
Censors in the United States have traditionally had problems when evaluating the merits of realistic fiction. Their inability to deal with another person's interpretation of real life issues has caused them to ban such diverse authors as Judy Blume, Robert Cormier, and Marie Twain. Often their accusations concentrate on language, racial groups, sexual scenes, anti-establishment attitudes which they deem somehow "un-American." These people do not deny an author's ability to tell a story. Instead, they wish to suppress cultural interpretations which they feel are harmful to "the moral fiber of America." The "critical" career of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a late twentieth century case study of how such censorship works in young adult literature. When Harper Lee's novel about a small Southern town and its prejudices was published in 1960 it received favorable criticism in professional journals and the popular press. Thus, though Booklist's reviewer called the book "melodramatic" and noted

"traces of sermonizing", Booklist recommended it for library purchase, commending its "rare blend of wit and compassion" (September 1960: 23). The early reviews did not suggest that the book was young adult literature or that it belonged in adolescent collections. And so their discussions never suggested that the book had strong language or unusual violence which was beyond the scope of a young reader. Instead, they praised *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a worthwhile interpretation of the South's then existing social structures. In 1961 the book won the Pulitzer Prize Award, the Alabama Library Association Book Award, and the Brotherhood Award of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. It seemed that Harper Lee's blend of family history, local custom, and restrained sermonizing was important reading. Since the narrator was an adult remembering events that happened when she was a young girl between the ages of six and nine, *To Kill a Mockingbird* rapidly moved into junior and senior high school libraries and classrooms. By the mid-sixties *To Kill a Mockingbird* had a solid place in junior and senior high school American literature studies. However, once its use was discovered by Southern parents, its solid place in the curriculum met with strong disapproval. Sporadic lawsuits arose. In most early cases, the complaint against *To Kill a Mockingbird* was voiced by conservatives. Probably they were objecting to the story's candid portrayal of Southern white attitudes. This was not the issue typically raised, however. Instead, censors criticized the book in general terms, objecting to the use of profanity, sex scenes, and immorality. In Hanover County, Virginia, for instance, the School Board declared the book "immoral" and sought to have it removed from county public schools. When the ruckus surfaced with national news coverage, the School Board withdrew its criticism, claiming that the incident "was all a mistake" (Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom, March 1966: 16). To these early censors the problem with Harper Lee's book rested in its entire immorality. If one looks at their claims, the censors seem to be accurately assessing the book. Indeed, every major censor's objection—that the book contained profanity, that the black/white relationships depicted implied that white bigotry was widespread in the south, that religious hypocrisy was suggested, that a rape case was explicitly detailed, and that there were several violent scenes throughout the story—can be corroborated. The scenes which Harper Lee chose to picture are not ones of carefree childhood. Even the playful activities of the children are not totally innocent. Often Lee shows the children busy trying to deceive or defy adult authority. In the end, however, these early censors were reluctant to deal legally with the real issues which concerned them. To conservative Southerners it seemed smarter to label the book and hope it would disappear from the schools than to legally confront the issues raised in Harper Lee's narrative. And so the book stood up against this first onslaught of criticism, without facing a major fight in the U.S. court system. The second round of criticism surfaced in the late seventies and early eighties. This time the censors came from...

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The "critical" career of To Kill a Mockingbird is a late twentieth century case study of how such censorship works in young adult literature. When Harper Lee's novel about a small Southern town and its prejudices was published in 1960 it received favorable criticism in professional journals and the popular press. Thus, though Booklist's reviewer called the book "melodramatic" and noted "traces of sermonizing", Booklist recommended it for library purchase, commending its "rare blend of wit and compassion" (September 1960: 23). The early reviews did not suggest that the book was young adult literature or that it belonged in adolescent collections. And so their discussions never suggested that the book had strong language or unusual violence which was beyond the scope of a young reader. Instead, they praised To Kill a Mockingbird as a worthwhile interpretation of the South's then existing social structures.

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The second round of criticism surfaced in the late seventies and early eighties. This time the censors came from the Midwest and the East. In Vernon, New York a minister threatened to establish a private Christian school because the public school libraries contained "filthy, trashy sex novels" such as The Red Pony and To Kill a Mockingbird. (Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom, May 1980: 62). And finally, blacks began to censor the book. In



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