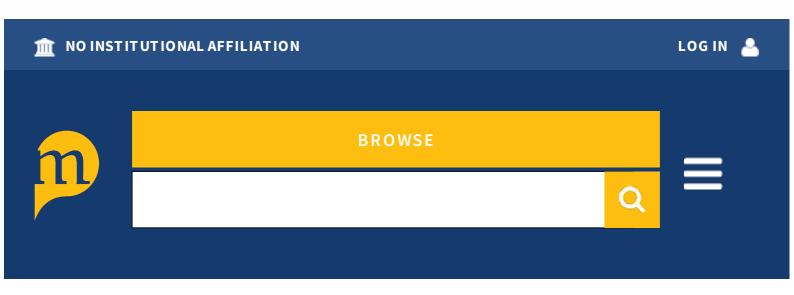
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Censors as critics: To Kill a Mockingbird as a case study.



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

Jill P. May

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<u>In lieu of</u> an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Censors as Critics: To Kill a Mocking bird 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-establs hment 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 Mocking bird is a late twentieth century case study of how such censorship works in young adult literature. When Harper Lee's novel about a smaR 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 coRections. 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 Mocking bird 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 Mocking bird rapidly moved into Junior and senior high school libraries and classrooms. By the mid-sixties
To Kill a Mocking bird had a solid place in junior and senior high school American literature studies. However,
once its use was discovered by Southern parents, its soHd place in the curriculum met with strong
disapproval. Sporadic lawsuits arose. In most early cases, the complaint against To Kl a Mocking bird 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
$terms, objecting\ to\ the\ use\ of\ profanity, sex scenes, and\ immorality.\ In\ Hanover\ County, Virginia, for\ instance, and\ immorality.$
the School Board declared the book "immoral" and sought to have ht removed from county pubic schools.
When the ruckus surfaced with national news coverage, the School Board withdrewits 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 explcitiy 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 care free childhood. Even the playful activities of the ChHdren are not totally
innocent. Often Lee shows the chHdren busy trying to deceive or defy adult authority. In the end, however,
these early censors were reluctant to deal legaly 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 legaly 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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