

Q&A with Marja Mills, author of *THE MOCKINGBIRD NEXT DOOR*

1. How did your friendship with the Lee sisters start?

The *Chicago Tribune* sent me to Monroeville in 2001 when the library chose *To Kill a Mockingbird* as the first selection in its new citywide reading program. I expected to write about the town that inspired Macomb; I didn't expect to meet either sister. But I did. They invited me to return and a friendship evolved.

2. Describe your first meeting with Harper Lee.

She knocked on my door at the Best Western on the outskirts of Monroeville, after a call in which she said, "You've made quite an impression on Miss Alice. I wonder if we might meet?"

She was on the tall side, and plainly dressed. Her initial reserve faded as we talked about the citywide reading program, and about Gregory Peck. She put me at ease that sweltering August day, and had a twinkle in her eye when she leaned toward me over the little motel room table, and said, speaking of Peck, "Isn't he delicious?"

3. What was the biggest surprise as you got to know the sisters?

Their sense of fun. Both loved to tell amusing stories, and Nelle, in particular, would throw her head back and laugh heartily. And how simply they lived. Material things weren't important to them. Books were.

4. What do you think is the biggest misconception people have about Harper Lee?

That she's reclusive. She stayed out of the spotlight, but she enjoyed her friends in Monroeville and New York.

5. In your opinion, what is the reason Harper Lee never published another book?

She cited two reasons in a conversation with a friend: that she had said what she had to say and that she wouldn't want to go through all the publicity again. Her sister, attorney Alice Finch Lee, said expectations were high. Alice asked me, "When you start at the pinnacle, wouldn't you feel as if you were competing with yourself?"

6. Did the sisters offer suggestions on what to include in the book?

Yes, they wanted to set the record straight on myths and rumors that had developed over the years, and wanted to capture family stories.

7. Why do you think Alice and Harper decided to open up after all these years?

I had already known them 3 years by the time I moved next door. I had time to "let the river flow" as Tom Butts—a Methodist minister and long-time Lee friend—described it. Their ages, 78 and 93 in 2004 when I moved there, meant family stories could be lost. And with two Truman Capote movies and a biography she wasn't happy about in the works, they wanted to share their own perspectives on some things.