

# Opinion Exchange

REACTIONS AND DIALOGUE ON THE ISSUES OF THE DAY

## A book's winding journey from author's hand

● Some books are more precious than others, and it's not just the autograph that distinguishes this copy of "To Kill a Mockingbird."

By KATE STANLEY  
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Some months back, the redhead returned from a babysitting job rather perplexed.

"Can you believe," she asked (as if no one could), "that those people have hardly a book *anywhere*?"

To her, the notion was beyond blasphemy — and beyond comprehension. She can't recall a time when she couldn't read, but she remembers quite well the promise her parents made when she was small: Any book you really want, they said, we will find for you.

She's invoked the pledge with vigor over the years, and now her room is brimming with books. So is every room in the house, but the books collected by the nearly grown girl speak of her own childhood's changing fascinations.

Tucked on a high shelf are stories she no longer revisits but will never forget — "Heidi," "The Secret Gar-

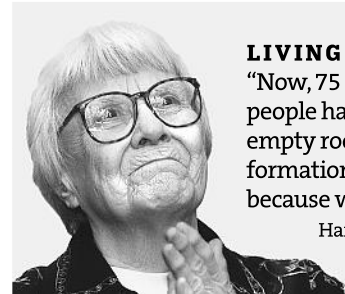
den," "Matilda," "The Chronicles of Narnia." And close within reach are books she'll never outgrow — some reflecting abiding interest, others simple reverence. There's a pristine copy of "To Kill a Mockingbird," for instance — one of the few books she owns with the author's signature inside.

She loves the tale of its arrival nearly as much as the book itself. Many of her friends share her yearning for the childhood escapades of Jem and Scout in 1930s Alabama; many admire as she does the integrity of small-town lawyer Atticus Finch.

But no one else, the redhead knows, has acquired Harper Lee's lovely book quite as she did.

It came a few years ago by slow post wrapped in brown paper, accompanied by a letter from someone she'd never met.

The sender turned out to be a small-town newspaper editor in Alabama — a friend of her mother's — who'd heard of her fondness for



### LIVING WITH BOOKS

"Now, 75 years later in an abundant society where people have laptops, cell phones, iPods and minds like empty rooms, I still plod along with books. Instant information is not for me. I prefer to search library stacks because when I work to learn something, I remember it."

Harper Lee, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "To Kill a Mockingbird," in a letter in the July edition of "O" Magazine.

"Mockingbird." He knew a great deal about Harper Lee — "Miss Nelle," he called her — and his letter dispensed the details:

"You probably know the fictional town of Maycomb is really Monroeville, Ala.," the fellow wrote, "where Nelle Harper Lee grew up. She spends part of her time in New York and part of her time in Monroeville, where nobody bothers her and she blends in well. She looks like any other crusty old broad at the Piggly Wiggly.

"A woman who runs a gift shop asked her if she would sign a few copies of 'To Kill A Mockingbird' so she could sell them in her shop. Miss Nelle agreed, and I got her to sign one for me with a personalized note. It's a really cool thing to have.

"Later Miss Nelle found out somebody was selling one of her autographed books on eBay, and that bidding had reached about \$700. She threw a hissy fit and wouldn't sign any more books, and soon they were all gone.

"Well almost," continued the letter-writer. One Saturday when he happened to be in Monroeville, he explained, he came upon a man selling butter beans and various bits and pieces out of the back of his old Ford pickup. "He reached into a crumpled grocery sack and pulled out a book," recalled the editor. "It was an autographed copy of 'the book,' the last one he had — the last one I've seen since — so I bought it from him."

So that was that, her correspondent explained: "When your mother

told me how you liked the story," he wrote, "I decided to send it to you."

The coming of the book was a miracle in its way, and yet almost ordinary. At least the redhead thinks so: When you love books, she tells herself, you can't help but share them. One story leads to another — just as Miss Nelle's enduring tale enlivened a young girl's mind and ultimately moved a stranger-never-seen to drop a precious book in the mail.

Readers are like that, muses the now-older girl: They can't keep their delight to themselves.

Which is why she wasn't at all surprised to learn that the reclusive Harper Lee — now 80 years old — had written a letter to Oprah Winfrey about the joys of reading. She hasn't yet run out to buy the July copy of "O" Magazine, for she's pretty sure she knows what Miss Nelle's letter has to say. Just like the letter from the Alabama editor, she imagines, it tells of the blessings that come from words on paper bound into books.

It's a story the redhead knows well.

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