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Bitter in the Mouth: How a Mockingbird Gave Birth to a Little Canary

The epigraph for *Bitter in the Mouth* is an exchange between Scout and her father Atticus Finch, which appears on the last page of the closing chapter of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Here's why.

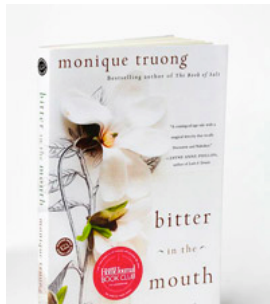
By Monique Truong

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"An' they chased him 'n' never could catch him 'cause they didn't know what he looked like, an' Atticus, when they finally saw him ... he was real nice...." His hands were under my chin, pulling up the cover, tucking it around me. "Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them."

For Scout, "him" is a reference to a character in *The Gray Ghost*, a favorite book of Scout and her brother Jem, which Atticus is reading to ease her into sleep. For us, "him" is also Boo Radley, the sequestered subject of the Finch siblings' childhood curiosities and fears who had emerged to save them from the very real evils that inhabit their town. "Him," in addition, could be a myriad of characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird* who are occluded by heavy lies



just beginning to recognize them as the novel ends.

+ ENLARGE IMAGE

When I first read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I was 11 years old, a little older than Scout and not as old Jem. I don't think I read the book for a school assignment. I was a voracious reader and probably picked it out on my own from the library. My family was living in Centerville, Ohio, by then. I can still remember my father boasting to my mother that our new, solidly middle-class neighborhood was once home to Erma Bombeck and Phil Donahue. What my father meant was *look how far we've come!* And we really had.

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