

Plans for Harper Lee's hometown to get a museum to draw more tourists

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Nancy Rogers reads "Go Set A Watchman" by Harper Lee, in the old Monroe County Courthouse on the morning of the book's release in Monroeville, Alabama, July 14, 2015. Photo: Photo: AP/Andrea Mabry

Atticus, Jem and Scout Finch endeared themselves to readers worldwide while wandering the streets of Maycomb, Alabama.

Maycomb might exist only in fiction, but it was closely based on Monroeville, Alabama. The town, with about 6,500 residents, gave birth to two of America's most important writers: Harper Lee and Truman Capote. Lee returned in 2007 and remained until her death in February. Monroeville's streets, courthouses and banks appeared, albeit in a slightly fictionalized manner, in her 1960 novel "To Kill a Mockingbird."

From its old red brick, Federal-style courthouse to its unassuming streets, Monroeville has retained the qualities of the sleepy, quaint, Southern town that inspired Lee's timeless Pulitzer Prize-winning novel so long ago.

Museum Is Group's First Goal

Located well off the interstate, Monroeville isn't a popular destination for travelers. But that might soon change.

Tonja Carter, who was Lee's lawyer, as well as others, are planning to open the "Harper Lee Trail" hoping to draw hundreds of thousands of tourists there each year.

Included in the plans is a museum dedicated to Lee in the Old Monroe County Bank Building. Built in 1909, it was once home to the law office of Lee's father, who partially inspired her novel and its main character, lawyer Atticus Finch. The group also plans to build copies of three homes from "To Kill A Mockingbird."

Pete Black, a member of the board of the nonprofit Mockingbird Company, said the group plans to raise money to create the trail, particularly for what he called the "first step," which is creating the Lee museum by next spring.

"There's a bigger vision that we're working on in Monroeville," Black said. "With Ms. Lee's passing in February we've been working with leaders in Monroeville on how do we honor Ms. Lee, and our vision is, with some time, how do we create a Harper Lee Trail?"

Fears Of "Commercialization Of Lee's Legacy"

The idea has also been met with some criticism.

Sarah Churchwell, a literary critic and professorial fellow in American literature at the University of London, referred to the idea as the "commercialization of Lee's legacy."

Even worse, though, Churchwell said the trail has the potential to be misused. Lee's novel deals directly with racism. Churchwell feared that racists could use such a tourist destination as a kind of ground zero.

"The leaders of this project will need to be very careful that they don't end up just creating a Disneyland for racists," Churchwell said.

Quiet Controversy

It's all the more charged when one recalls the final years of Lee's life.

When the famed author died in February, she should have left behind an unblemished literary gift for future generations.

But the end of her life was filled with controversy. The conditions surrounding the release of "Go Set a Watchman," her second novel and a follow-up to "To Kill a Mockingbird," struck many as unusual.

As The Atlantic reported: "Harper Lee eventually published a second novel, but not until she was at the eve of her death and beset with a dementia that some say enabled her attorney to take advantage of her and publish 'Go Set a Watchman' against her wishes."

The book proved to be an instant financial success, selling more than 1 million copies in less than a week.

Lee Valued Privacy Above All

While it is impossible to guess how Lee would have felt about the trail, it is not a stretch to claim she likely would not have been pleased.

She was reluctantly famous and offered only one recorded interview about her important novel, allowing the book to speak for itself. For Lee, privacy was clearly paramount.

In 1993, she wrote a letter to a friend decrying the idea of a Monroeville as a tourist destination, mainly because she so valued her privacy.

The letter, obtained by the British newspaper, The Guardian, said that she did not like the "new holiday sport in Monroeville ... That of people bringing their visiting relatives to look at me."

It continued, "There is so little in the way of entertainment, looking at Harper Lee is something to do. Thanksgiving weekend was such hell that it got on (her sister) Alice's nerves as well – they came in VANS."

Classic Film Got Lee's Stamp Of Approval

When the town held a large festival for the 50th anniversary of the book, Lee was nowhere to be found.

That said, she also seemed to enjoy the story of the Finches reaching as many people as possible. After all, she granted the rights to for the classic film starring Gregory Peck and Robert Duvall, and she publicly said she was pleased with the results.

"I think it is one of the best translations of a book to film ever made," she said, according to Variety magazine. "In that film the man and the part met ... I've had many, many offers to turn it into musicals, into TV or stage plays, but I've always refused. That film was a work of art."

Meanwhile, fans of the fictional Maycomb might soon be able to trace some of their favorite character's steps. Perhaps they will even find some mint-flavored chewing gum buried in a knothole of an old oak tree.

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following details is most important to the development of the main idea?
- (A) Lee returned in 2007 and remained until her death in February. Monroeville's streets, courthouses and banks appeared, albeit in a slightly fictionalized manner, in her 1960 novel "To Kill a Mockingbird."
 - (B) Tonja Carter, who was Lee's lawyer, as well as others, are planning to open the "Harper Lee Trail" hoping to draw hundreds of thousands of tourists there each year.
 - (C) Sarah Churchwell, a literary critic and professorial fellow in American literature at the University of London, referred to the idea as the "commercialization of Lee's legacy."
 - (D) In 1993, she wrote a letter to a friend decrying the idea of a Monroeville as a tourist destination, mainly because she so valued her privacy.

- 2 The central idea of the article is developed by:
- (A) describing Harper Lee's role as a writer who famously valued her privacy
 - (B) showing how "To Kill a Mockingbird" has touched the lives of readers worldwide
 - (C) explaining how plans to develop tourism in Monroeville have had a mixed reception
 - (D) highlighting the role Monroeville played in Harper Lee's novel, "To Kill a Mockingbird"

- 3 Read the following sentence.

She was reluctantly famous and offered only one recorded interview about her important novel, allowing the book to speak for itself. For Lee, privacy was clearly paramount.

The author uses the word "paramount" to mean:

- (A) foremost
- (B) gratifying
- (C) solemn
- (D) insignificant

- 4 Read the sentence from the section "Quiet Controversy."

When the famed author died in February, she should have left behind an unblemished literary gift for future generations.

Which of the following words, if it replaced the word "unblemished" in the sentence below, would CHANGE the meaning of the sentence?

- (A) tarnished
- (B) flawless
- (C) distinguished
- (D) celebrated