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A 50th Birthday Party for “To Kill a Mockingbird”

By Gerry Furth-Sides

How do you celebrate the 50th birthday of a beloved Pulitzer prize-winning book that remained required reading in English classes around the world, has sold over 10 million copies, been translated into more than 40 languages, and is listed as a book everyone should read before they die?

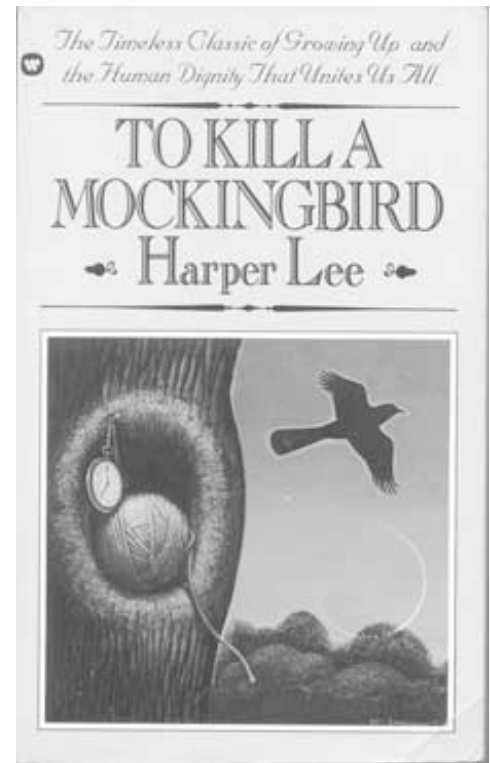
Recently on the east coast, New Yorkers celebrated at the Symphony Space arts center on the Upper West Side with a discussion by a panel of cultural high brows, including Steven Colbert.

Closer to home at the Ojai Valley Inn & Spa, the book’s admirers celebrated California- style as clumps of families and friends all snuggled up in shawls and blankets to watch the film version outdoors under a full moon. An old-fashioned concession stand was the perfect small town touch, albeit one at one of the most beautiful and elegant resorts in the world.

The special treat was Mary Badham introducing the book and the film. The actress played the character “Scout” in the 1962 film. She was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her work, the youngest person ever nominated at that time.

Badham told how she was a tomboy growing up in Macomb, Alabama, the town where Harper Lee lived and set the story, when producer Alan Pakula and Director Robert Mulligan arrived in 1960 to cast the film. With a mother who had a brief turn on the stage and a brother (John Badham, then at Yale and later a noted film director), Mary proved so natural at auditions, “just sort of fooling around instead of performing a set piece,” that she won the part.

“At that time the town hadn’t changed since the book was written,” she said. “My



mom had to have her hat and gloves on when she went to the store.” The same kind of meticulous manner went into the film. “The set designer, the venerated Henry Bumstead, found period houses in the town about to be demolished, and had them dismantled and shipped to L.A. to make authentic sets,” she recalled.

During the filming, Mr. Mulligan would squat down and talk to us kids when he laid out the scenes so we felt a part of the film,” Badham remembered. The moving proved magical as well as iconic and the cast stayed in close touch “even though we filmed for only five months,” she mused.

Badham tours the country as part of a National Endowment of the Arts project, “The Big Red,” which encourages reading by everyone in one city sharing the same read. When it is “Mockingbird” Badham often comes and speaks.

“Mockingbird” is a story that can be passed down from generation to generation,” she summed up.

“I encourage everyone here to buy books that you enjoy and read them with your family,” she told the audience. “You’d be surprised at what thought-provoking things can come up. She laughed, “Atticus Finch showed me what I wanted in a husband. And I stayed married.”

“To Kill a Mockingbird” tells the story of a moral lawyer, his two children, and his courageous quest to defend an innocent black man in the depression era South told through the eyes of his six year-old daughter, Scout.

The book's title comes from Atticus Finch's warning to his daughter, Scout, and her friend about using an air-rifle. “Shoot all the blue jays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird. Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy.”

Besides the moral lessons in the book ? racial justice, respect, tolerance and love ? it’s a great read.

An idea of “Mockingbird’s impact is how prominent Lee remains although she never published another book. Her friend and neighbor Truman Capote (also a character in the book) never wrote a story about their town. In his words, “It’s already done.”

Badham shared her experience of visiting the reclusive Harper Lee, who greeted her with the utmost southern hospitality. “And I met Harper’s sister, Mary Alice, who still practices law at the age of 99!”

The next film from a book in the Ojai Valley Inn & Spa series is one that terrifies me in each form, (even in my own snug bed and on a TV screen): Dame Daphne du Maurier’s brilliant, “The Birds” on October 30. Guests are encouraged to come in

costume. Actress and animal activist Tippi Hedren will introduce the film and do the Q and A.

For information, please see: <http://www.ojairesort.com/blog>

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