

Historical Background for *To Kill a Mockingbird*

By Harper Lee

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“ I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. ”

Dr. Martin Luther King

“Jim Crow” Laws



- From the 1880s to the 1960s most states enforced segregation through the “Jim Crow” laws named after a black-faced character in minstrel shows.
- Through these laws legal punishments could be imposed on people for having contact with members of another race.

Jim Crow Guide

1. A Black male could not offer his hand (to shake hands) with a White male because it implied being socially equal. Obviously, a Black male could not offer his hand or any other part of his body to a White woman, because he risked being accused of rape.

2. Blacks and Whites were not supposed to eat together. If they did eat together, Whites were to be served first, and some sort of partition was to be placed between them.

3. Under no circumstance was a Black male to offer to light the cigarette of a White female -- that gesture implied intimacy.

4. Blacks were not allowed to show public affection toward one another in public, especially kissing, because it offended Whites.

5. Blacks were introduced to Whites, never Whites to Blacks.

6. Whites did not use courtesy titles of respect when referring to Blacks, for example, Mr., Mrs., Miss., Sir, or Ma'am. Instead, Blacks were called by their first names or by "boy" or "girl" (regardless of age). Blacks had to use courtesy titles when referring to Whites, and were not allowed to call them by their first names.

7. If a Black person rode in a car driven by a White person, the Black person sat in the back seat, or the back of a truck.

8. White motorists had the right-of-way at all intersections.

DRINKING FOUNTAIN
↙ ↘
WHITE **COLORED**
MONTGOMERY, ALA. 14 JULY 31

**COLORED SERVED
IN REAR**

NO **DOGS
NEGROS
MEXICANS**

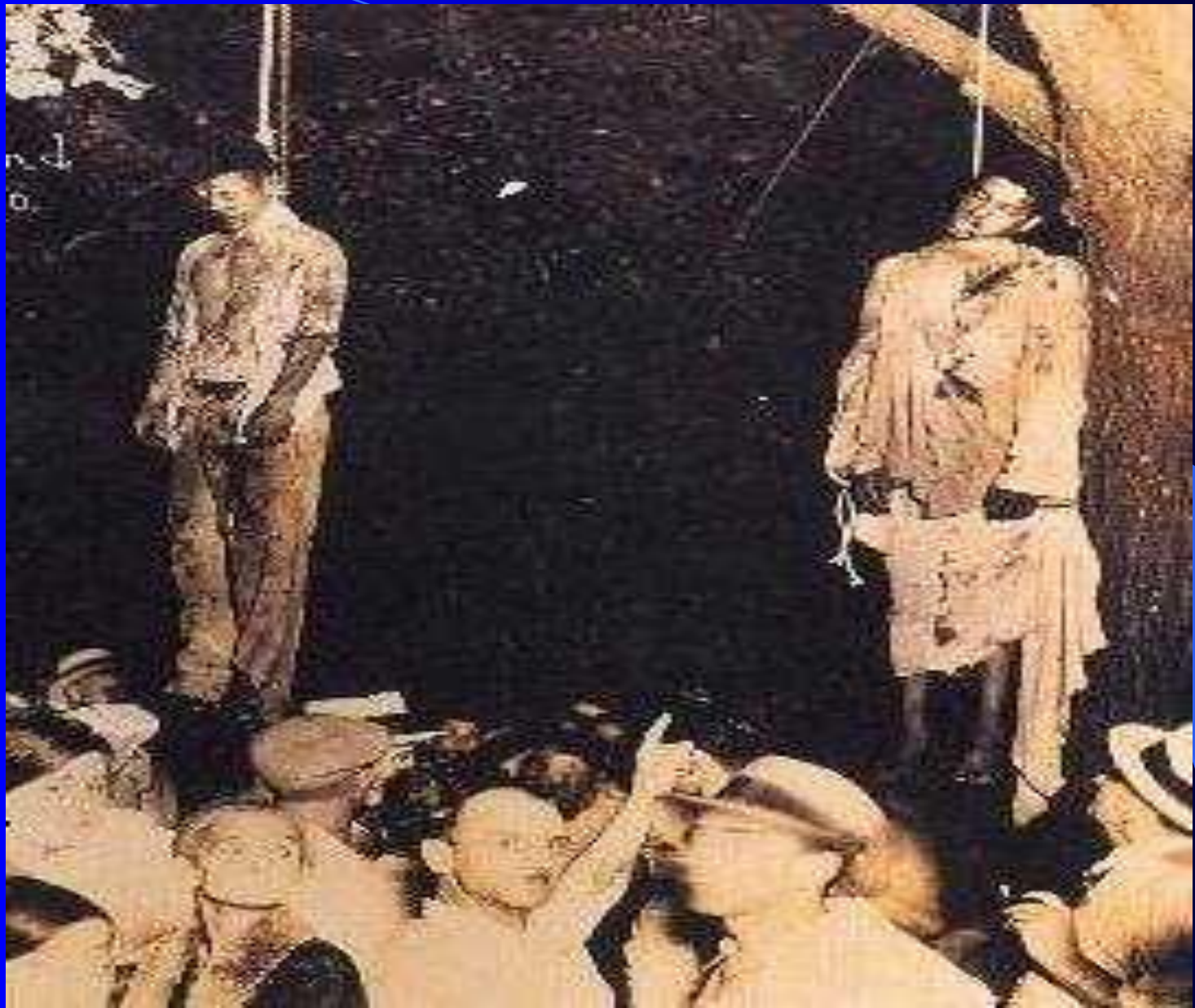
KKK

- After the Civil War, The Ku Klux Klan was formed as a secret society that promoted white supremacy using violence and terrorism to undo the gains that former slaves had made.
- However, after the 1920s the KKK was no longer secretive about their work and public violence against Blacks, including lynching, became common occurrences.











After WW1



- Even though Blacks had fought bravely for the US in WW1, they returned home from Europe to find the same, if not worse, discrimination and segregation.
- The economic struggles of the 1930s seemed only to worsen the situation.



“Will V-Day Be Me-Day Too?”

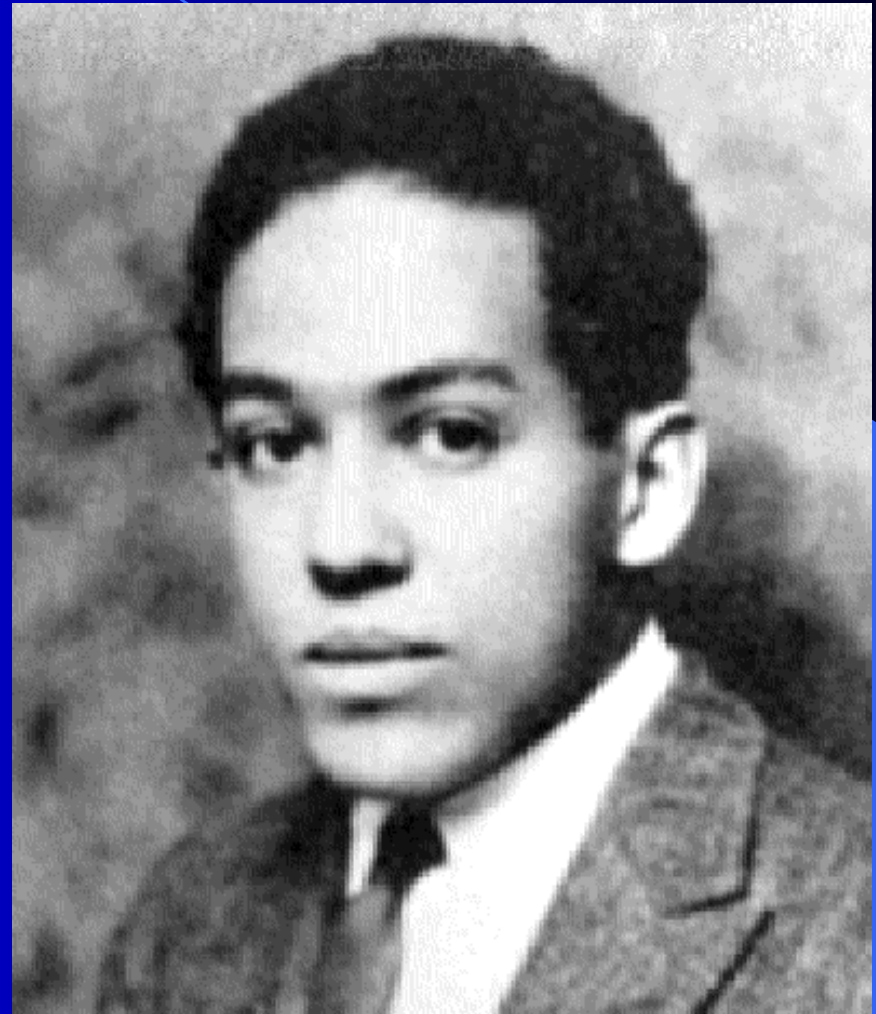
...I am a Negro American
Out to defend my land...

I've seen my buddy lying
Where he fell.
I've watched him dying
I promised him that I would try
To make our land a land
Where his son could be a man –
And there'd be no Jim Crow birds
Left in our sky...

So this is what I want to know:
When we see Victory's glow,
Will you still let old Jim Crow
hold me back?

...will Dixie Lynch me still
When I return?...

Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

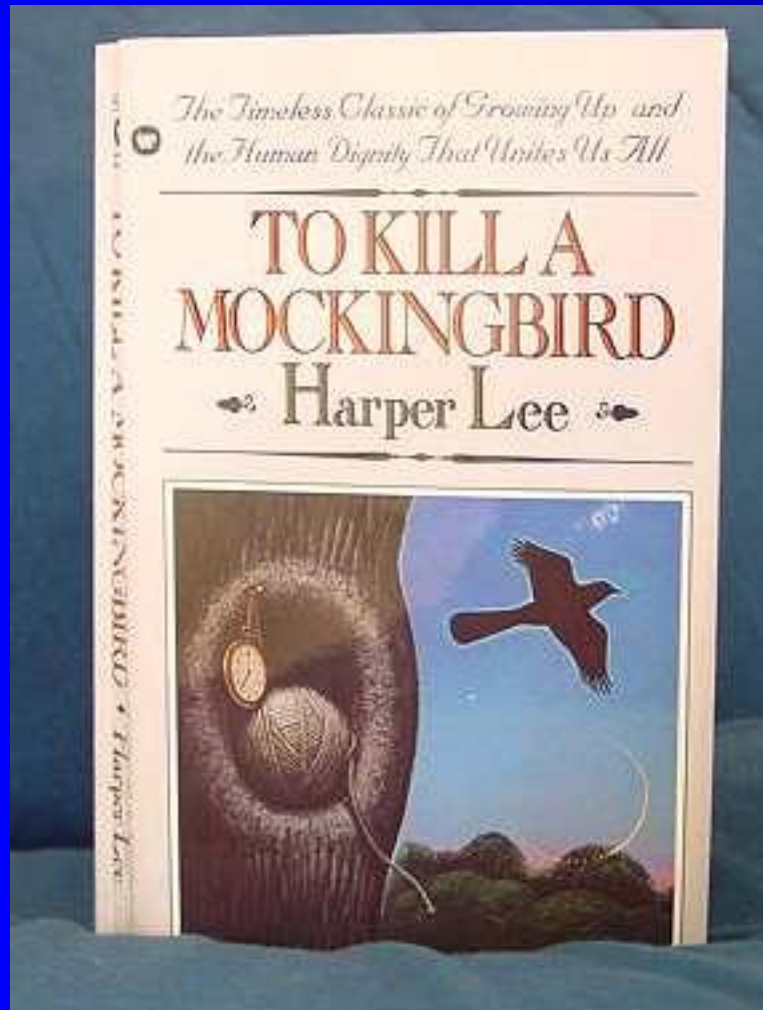


The Great Depression (1930s)

- The Depression hit the South especially hard
- Everyone, seemed to be living in poverty
- Americans turned away from the rest of the world and away from each other
- During these years of turmoil, discontent started to grow in the minds of Whites and Blacks alike.



To Kill a Mockingbird



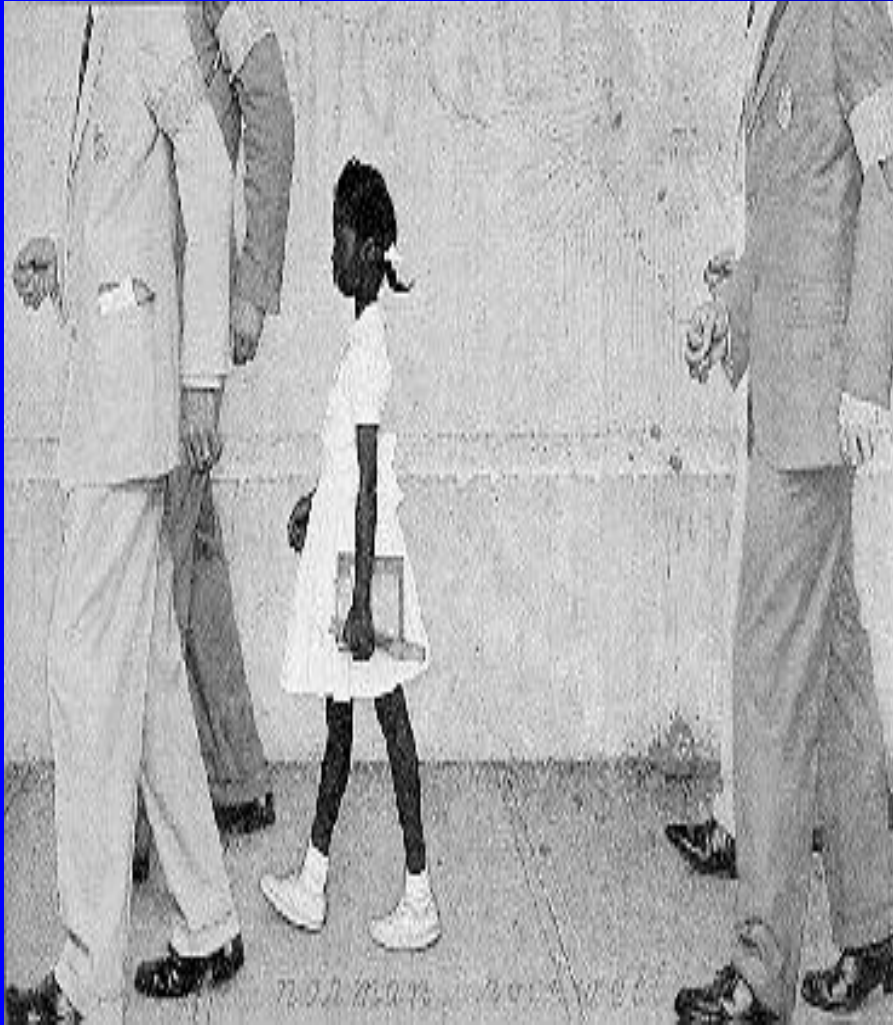
- It is in this setting that the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* takes place.
- In a small town, in the deep South, in the early 1930s

Harper Lee (1926-)

- To add to the complexity of the story, Harper Lee wrote it during a time of even greater social turbulence in the United States.
- In the 1950s the winds of change began to blow and Black Americans were no longer willing to be treated as lesser human beings.



Brown vs. Board of Education



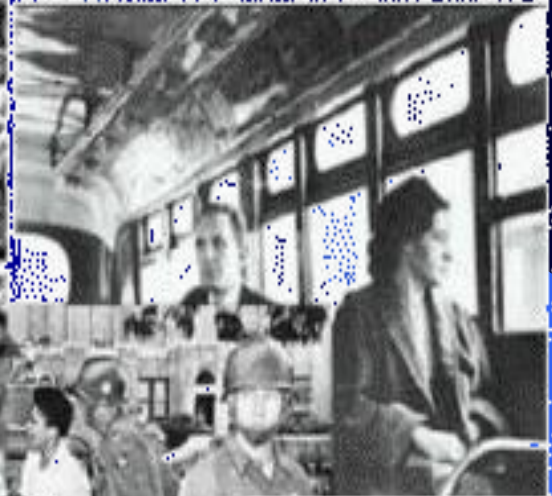
- In 1954, after 2 years in court, the nation was shocked by a landmark decision to grant Linda Brown, a Black fifth-grader, admission into a white elementary school in Topeka, Kansas.
- The decision engendered feelings of triumph and outrage across a country that had lived under the weight of racial segregation and discrimination for over 100 years.

The Winds of Change

- Soon, average Black citizens across the country began speaking out against oppression and demanding equal rights. This was the beginning of America's Civil Rights Movement.



Free At Last



The Civil Rights Movement
in the United States

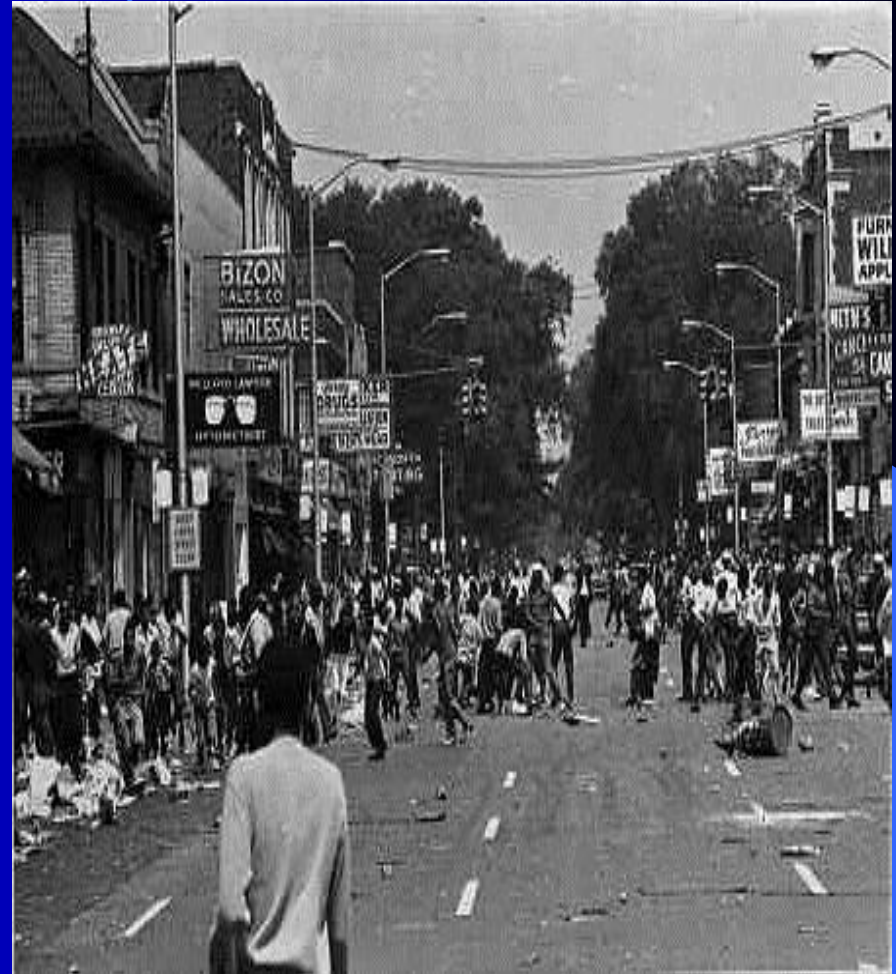
Rosa Parks (1913-)

- In 1955, after a long day of work, 42-year-old Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery County bus
- This set off peaceful and violent protests throughout the South.



Television Changes Everything

- By this time, many families had televisions and as images of Southern race riots and violent protests reached into American homes the magnitude of Southern racism began to sink into the American consciousness.
- Moreover, the rest of the world began to frown upon America's treatment of Blacks, and segregation, like slavery, became a national embarrassment for a country who had fought in two world wars as great liberators of the down-trodden masses.





Dr. Martin Luther King (1929-1968)

- Black Hero-Leaders began to rally together Black Americans in order to fight oppression and for a country where all men were truly treated as equals.

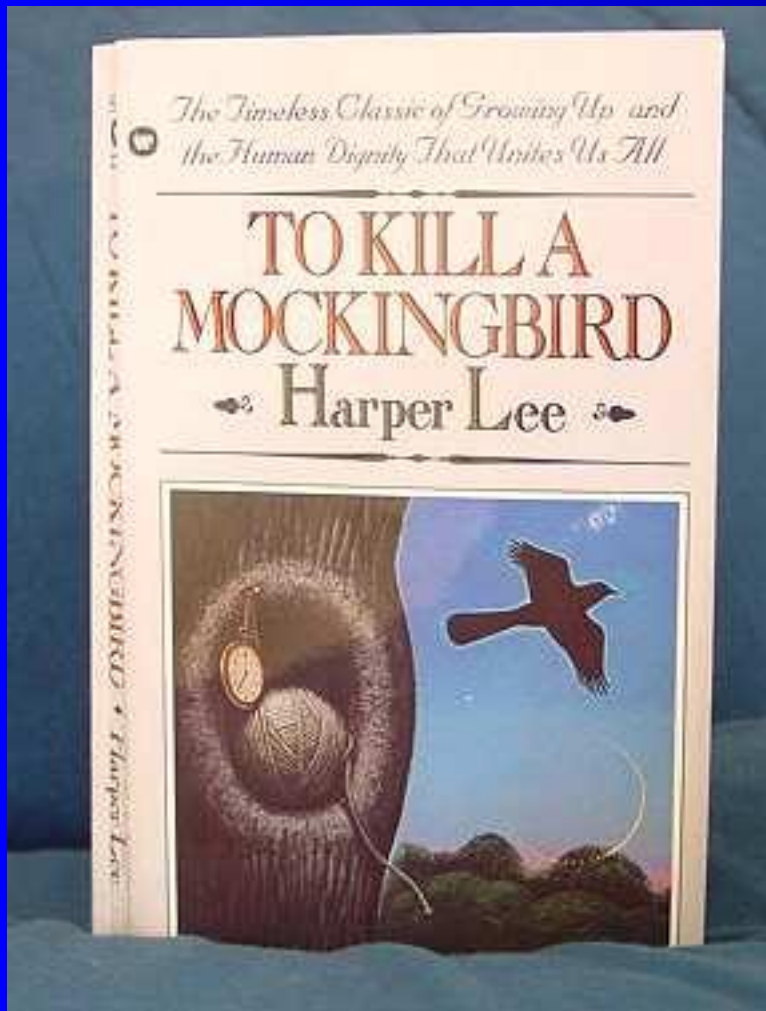


Desegregation

- A national and international call for desegregation of the South rang out and Blacks and Whites all over the country started putting pressure on governments to amend the segregation laws.
- Those individuals, both Black and White, who fought for Civil Rights were under constant attack from White Supremacists who were unwilling to accept Black Americans as equals
- Many freedom-fighters died for their efforts



To Kill a Mockingbird



- In the Fall of 1960, in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published.
- It shot to the top of the New York Times best seller list.
- A country was finally ready to listen to the story of segregation and open their minds to the possibility of an America where Whites and Blacks could live together as equals.

The image features a solid blue background. A white arc starts from the top left and curves towards the right. A white triangle is positioned on the right side, with its hypotenuse following the curve of the arc. The text "The End" is centered in the middle of the image.

The End