To Kill a Mockingbird
by Harper Lee
Review by Rodman Philbrick

I've never been to Alabama, but novelist Harper Lee made me feel as if I had been there in the long, hot summer of 1935, when a lawyer named Atticus Finch decided to defend an innocent black man accused of a horrible crime. The story of how the whole town reacted to the trial is told by the lawyer's daughter, Scout, who remembers exactly what it was like to be eight years old in 1935, in Maycomb, Alabama.

Scout is the reason I loved this book, because her voice rings so clear and true. Not only does she make me see the things she sees, she makes me feel the things she feels. There's a lot more going on than just the trial, and Scout tells you all about it.

A man called Boo Radley lives next door. Very few people have ever seen Boo, and Scout and her friends have a lot of fun telling scary stories about him. The mystery about Boo Radley is just one of the reasons you want to keep turning the pages to find out what happens in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Scout and her big brother, Jem, run wild and play games and have a great time while their father is busy with the trial. One of their friends is a strange boy called Dill. Actually Dill isn't really so strange once you get to know him. He says things like "I'm little but I'm old," which is funny but also pretty sad, because some of the time Dill acts more like a little old man than a seven–year–old boy.

To Kill a Mockingbird is filled with interesting characters like Dill, and Scout makes them all seem just as real as the people in your own hometown. Here's how Scout describes Miss Caroline, who wore a red–striped dress: "She looked and smelled like a peppermint drop."

Dill and Boo and Jem are all fascinating, but the most important character in the book is Scout's father, Atticus Finch. You get the idea that Scout is writing the story down because she wants the world to know what a good man her dad was, and how hard he tried to do the right thing, even though the deck was stacked against him.

The larger theme of the story is about racial intolerance, but Scout never tries to make it a "lesson," it's simply part of the world she describes. That's why *To Kill a Mockingbird* rings true, and why it all seems so real.

The trial of the wrongly accused Tom Robinson takes place during the time of segregation, when black people were not allowed to socialize with white people. In that era, when a white man said a black man committed a crime, the black man was presumed to be guilty. The law required that they have a trial, but everybody knew the defendant was going to be convicted.

Atticus Finch, the quiet hero of the book, tries to persuade the jury that bigotry is wrong. His words are eloquent and heartfelt. He demonstrates that Tom Robinson couldn't possibly have assaulted the victim. Atticus even reveals the identity of the real villain, which enrages a very dangerous enemy. This act of courage endangers not only Atticus Finch but his family as well. They become the target of hate mongers and bigots.

Even though the story took place many years ago, you get the idea that parts of it could happen today, in any town where people distrust and fear each other's differences.

In a just world an innocent man should be found not guilty. But if you want to know what this particular jury finally decides and what happens to Scout and Jem and Dill and Boo Radley and the rest of the people who live and breathe in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, you'll have to read the book!

IQ by Roland Smith

From *School Library Journal*

Grade 5–8—When Quest (Q for short) Munoz's songwriting mom marries rock star Roger Tucker, he and new stepsister Angela join the sensational duo on the road for a national concert tour. Life on the bus goes from boring to bedlam as an old roadie named Boone and his dog, Croc, come aboard, and Dirk Peski, an appropriately named paparazzo, stalks their every move. Boone's preoccupation with the teens' safety and whereabouts and Angela's suspicions about being followed lead her to tell Q about her dead mother's connection to the Secret Service. Alternating chapters of italicized dialogue between a mystery man named Eban Lavi and an international cast of shady characters alert readers that this parallel action will somehow impact Q and Angela when they reach Philadelphia, the city where Angela's mother was killed in the line of duty. Speculation that she may have survived and become a terrorist fuels Angela's determination to find the truth. The pair uses natural tech savvy and Q's magician tricks to elude their followers and comb the city for clues. Preoccupied adults and bumbling spies provide a convenient plot contrivance for the sleuthing teens, but sheer numbers of extraneous characters muddle the story. The best-developed character, Boone, steals the show as the paternal, James Bond-loving intelligence officer whose crime-solving dog is a sidekick. Action lovers will find just enough substance to keep them coming back for future episodes.—*Vicki Reutter, Cazenovia High School, NY*

Peak by Roland Smith

From *Booklist*

Starred Review Fourteen-year-old New Yorker Peak ("It could have been worse. My parents could have named me Glacier, or Abyss, or Crampon.") Marcello hones his climbing skills by scaling skyscrapers. After Peak is caught climbing the Woolworth Building, an angry judge gives him probation, with an understanding that Peak will leave New York and live with his famous mountaineer father in Thailand. Peak soon learns, however, that his father has other plans for him; he hopes that Peak will become the youngest person to climb Mt. Everest. Peak is whisked off to Tibet and finds himself in the complex world of an Everest base camp, where large amounts of money are at stake and climbing operations offer people an often-deadly shot at the summit. This is a thrilling, multifaceted adventure story. Smith includes plenty of mountaineering facts told in vivid detail (particularly creepy is his description of the frozen corpses that litter the mountain). But he also explores other issues, such as the selfishness that nearly always accompanies the intensely single-minded. A winner at every level. For more mountaineering adventures, suggest Edward Meyers' *Climb or Die* (1994) and Michael Dahl's *The Viking Claw* (2001), both for a slightly younger audience. *Todd Morning*

Cryptid Hunters by Roland Smith

From *School Library Journal*

Grade 5-8–When their parents disappear, twins Marty and Grace, 13, are taken in by their Uncle Travis, who searches the world for supposedly mythical creatures. After a parachute fall from an airplane, the kids find themselves in the middle of the Congo, where a surviving dinosaur may still exist. While their conservationist uncle tries to rescue the children, an evil cryptid hunter who kills species rather than saving them pursues the creature. Marty and Grace each have distinct, if not terribly complex personalities, and their adventures are quite absorbing. The first part of the story moves fairly slowly as the characters and the concept of cryptozoology are introduced. Once the twins hit the jungle, though, things get exciting. Along with the atmospheric setting, narrow escapes, and ruthless villains, a couple of neat personal revelations are woven into the tale, affecting nearly everybody involved. Both kids show courage and ingenuity as they try to survive the wild and avoid being captured. Marty's photographic memory provides a vehicle for presenting many facts about the environment without detracting from the tale. Grace is more introverted as she conquers her fears and discovers a life-changing revelation about her past. With the intriguing plot and plenty of well-paced action, this novel has fine booktalk potential and makes a good choice for adventure fans.–*Steven Engelfried, Beaverton City Library, OR*

Fever 1793 by Laurie Halse Anderson

From *Publishers Weekly*

The opening scene of Anderson's ambitious novel about the yellow fever epidemic that ravaged Philadelphia in the late 18th century shows a hint of the gallows humor and insight of her previous novel, Speak. Sixteen-year-old Matilda "Mattie" Cook awakens in the sweltering summer heat on August 16th, 1793, to her mother's command to rouse and with a mosquito buzzing in her ear. She shoos her cat from her mother's favorite quilt and thinks to herself, "I had just saved her precious quilt from disaster, but would she appreciate it? Of course not." Mattie's wit again shines through several chapters later during a visit to her wealthy neighbors' house, the Ogilvies. Having refused to let their serving girl, Eliza, coif her for the occasion, Mattie regrets it as soon as she lays eyes on the Ogilvie sisters, who wear matching bombazine gowns, curly hair piled high on their heads ("I should have let Eliza curl my hair. Dash it all"). But thereafter, Mattie's character development, as well as those of her grandfather and widowed mother, takes a back seat to the historical details of Philadelphia and environs. Extremely well researched, Anderson's novel paints a vivid picture of the seedy waterfront, the devastation the disease wreaks on a once thriving city, and the bitterness of neighbor toward neighbor as those suspected of infection are physically cast aside. However, these larger scale views take precedence over the kind of intimate scenes that Anderson crafted so masterfully in Speak. Scenes of historical significance, such as George Washington returning to Philadelphia, then the nation's capital, to signify the end of the epidemic are delivered with more impact than scenes of great personal significance to Mattie. Ages 10-14. (Sept.)
 *--This text refers to the **Hardcover** edition.*

Schooled by Gordon Korman

From *Booklist*

Starred Review Homeschooled on an isolated "alternate farm commune" that has dwindled since the 1960s to 2 members, 13-year-old Cap has always lived with his grandmother, Rain. When she is hospitalized, Cap is taken in by a social worker and sent—like a lamb to slaughter—to middle school. Smart and capable, innocent and inexperienced (he learned to drive on the farm, but he has never watched television), long-haired Cap soon becomes the butt of pranks. He reacts in unexpected ways and, in the end, elevates those around him to higher ground. From chapter to chapter, the first-person narrative shifts among certain characters: Cap, a social worker (who takes him into her home), her daughter (who resents his presence there), an A-list bully, a Z-list victim, a popular girl, the school principal, and a football player (who unintentionally decks Cap twice in one day). Korman capably manages the shifting points of view of characters who begin by scorning or resenting Cap and end up on his side. From the eye-catching jacket art to the scene in which Cap says good-bye to his 1,100 fellow students, individually and by name, this rewarding novel features an engaging main character and some memorable moments of comedy, tenderness, and reflection. Pair this with Jerry Spinelli's 2000 Stargirl (the sequel is reviewed in this issue) for a discussion of the stifling effects of conformity within school culture or just read it for the fun of it. Phelan, Carolyn --*This text refers to the **Hardcover** edition.*

Waiting for Normal by Leslie Connor

From *Booklist*

We've seen this situation before: a parent neglects a child, while the child seeks a wider community to find support. Here that child is 12-year-old Addie, who lives with Mommers in a trailer on a busy street in Schenectady after her adored stepfather and half-sisters move upstate. Mommers has lost custody of the "littles" because of neglect, and though she and Addie can laugh together, once Mommers hooks up with Pete, she is not much for good times—though she brings the bad times home. Addie finds solace in occasional visits to her sisters and in her neighbors, especially Soula, ill from her chemotherapy treatments. Connor takes a familiar plot and elevates it with smartly written characters and unexpected moments. Addie starts out being a kid who thinks she has to go along to get along, but as Mommers' actions become more egregious, her spine stiffens. And though Addie loves her time upstate, she is willing to forgo it when the normality she has there is more painful than positive. This is a meaningful story that will touch many. Grades 5-7. --Ilene Cooper --*This text refers to the **Hardcover** edition.*

Every Soul a Star by Wendy Mass

From *Booklist*

Three young teens witness a total solar eclipse and are changed forever in this novel, told in alternating narratives, that weaves exciting astronomy facts into the teens' personal lives. Ally, 13, is fascinated by the scientific event, as are 1,000 other people from all over the world who come to view the Great Eclipse at her family's wilderness site. Glamorous teen Bree has an opposite view and is appalled that her parents, both physics scholars, want to move to the site: how can she manage without the mall? Then there is Jack, who loves art and science fiction but is a failure at science and is brought to the site by his teacher. The anticipation building up to the great event brings thrilling changes in all three young lives. Bree's hilarious account of her experience as a glamour queen in the wilderness is right-on, but she moves beyond total stereotype and allows herself to release her inner geek, at least for a while, while Ally and Jack bond and also break their rigid character roles. The contemporary voices ring true, and readers will want to read more about the science surrounding eclipses. Grades 5-8. --Hazel Rochman --*This text refers to the **Hardcover** edition.*

Book Reviews

Follow these steps written by Rodman Philbrick! They will lead you to a great book review!

Bold items are REQUIRED on the final draft.

1. Before you begin writing, make a few notes about the points you want to get across.
2. While you're writing, try thinking of your reader as a friend to whom you're telling a story.
3. Try to mention the **name of the author and the book title** in the first paragraph — there's nothing more frustrating than reading a review of a great book but not knowing who wrote it and what the title is!
4. If possible, use one paragraph for each point you want to make about the book. It's a good way to emphasize the importance of the point. You might want to list the main points in your notes before you begin.
5. Try to get the **main theme** of the book across in the beginning of your review. Your reader should know right away what he or she is getting into should they choose to read the book!
6. Think about whether the book is part of a **genre**. Does the book fit into a type like mystery, adventure, or romance? What aspects of the genre does it use?
7. What do you like or dislike about the **book's writing style**? Is it funny? Does it give you a sense of the place it's set? What is the author's/narrator's "voice" like?
8. Try using a few short quotes from the book to illustrate your points. This is not absolutely necessary, but it's a good way to give your reader a sense of the author's writing style.
9. Make sure your review **explains how you feel about the book** and why, **not just what the book is about**. A good review should express the reviewer's opinion and persuade the reader to share it, to read the book, or to avoid reading it.
10. Do **research about the author** and incorporate what you learn into the review. Biographical information can help you formulate your opinion about the book, and gives your review a "depth." Remember, a book doesn't come directly from a printing press, it's a product of an author's mind, and therefore it may be helpful to know something about the author and how she or he came to write the book. For instance, a little research will reveal the following about author Harper Lee:
    - *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, is the only book she's ever published.
    - The town she called Maycomb is really Monroeville, Alabama. Many of the residents thought the author had betrayed them by writing the book.
    - Some people think she based the character Dill on Truman Capote, a famous writer who was her childhood friend.
11. **Describe the setting of the book.** How does it compare or contrast to the world you know? A book's setting is one of its most vital components — particularly for a book like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which is set in the past. Does the author make you feel like you're a part of the setting? Can you picture the book's setting if you close your eyes? As you write, try to pass on to your reader the sense of the setting and *place* that the author has provided.
12. **Describe the book's main characters.** Does the writer make you believe in them as people? Why or why not? Think about whether you like the characters and about how liking them or disliking them makes you feel about the book. As you write about the characters, use examples of things they've said or done to give a sense of their personalities.
13. **Give your reader a taste of the plot, but don't give the surprises away.** Readers want to know enough about what happens in a book to know whether they'll find it interesting. But they never want to know the ending! Summarize the plot in a way that will answer some questions about the book, but leave other questions in the reader's mind. You may want to make a list of questions about the book before you begin.

Book Review Publishing Options

Scholastic Share What You're Reading

http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/swyar/write.asp

East Library Catalog

https://destiny.coppellisd.com/common/servlet/presenthomeform.do?l2m=Home&tm=Home