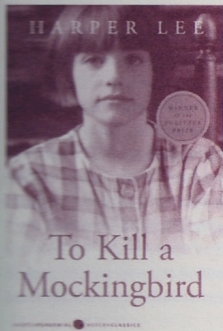


## THE BOOK THAT MADE ME . . . JOY PARKS

*In the age of Will & Grace, the L Word, and Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, it's a little difficult to recall that for generations, the first glimpse of our orientation, of our difference, appeared in the stories we read, the characters we developed crushes on, in the lives we dared to dream of. For a new series of essays, Lambda Book Report has asked writers to remember those first moments of recognition and awareness. We're calling this feature, "The Book That Made Me . . ." Gay? Lesbian? Bisexual? Trans? Let your own experience complete the sentence. In the meantime, I hope you enjoy Joy Parks' story about a girl named Scout.*



There's a reason we call them coming out stories. They are the tales we tell ourselves about how we came to be what we are. In many cases, they portray a sometimes painful, even shameful, gradual understanding of our desires for our own gender. They often come at a time when sexual awareness is thrust upon one unwittingly; the close proximity of a roommate in college, a special relationship with a teacher. But I was a particularly early bloomer. I knew what I was long before I had the words to explain it. And what I am

began to clarify in some small way the summer I was ten, while reading Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. But it would take years before I had the courage to acknowledge that I had had a full-blown girl crush on the character of Scout.

Children mark time with summers. Which is why I know I read *To Kill a Mockingbird* at least two summers before I found my great aunt's stash of lesbian pulp novels in her bathroom hamper. It was a good seven summers before my mom bought me a copy of Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle*, nearly seven more before I would sit on a train, tears streaming down my face, reading Lee Lynch's *Toothpick House* and yearning for an Annie Heaphy of my own. Long before any of that, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was the book that fired my fascination for female rebelliousness and my love for women who shrugged off roles and stretched femaleness to the breaking point.

I had seen Scout long before I read her story, a flickering memory of a dark pageboy haircut and ill-fitting hand-me-down overalls, a certain defiant line of chin, the chiaroscuro effect of a black and white movie on a rabbit-eared TV screen one slow-motion night when a childhood bout of pneumonia forced my parents to sit up all night, me tucked into the couch, them quietly hoping that the crushed-up penicillin dissolved in warm milky cocoa would take effect.

This almost primal memory is why it is significant, that at the age of ten, I navigated the chasm of maturity, abandoning Dorothy, the Lion, and the Scarecrow and Nancy Drew and Harriet the Spy (who, come to think of it, also had some potential) to pad along in the cool musty book-scented air of the adult library, among the thick hardcover books that had hardly any pictures, to find my way to Scout. And to me.

Those images from the film, the words I read that fateful summer, these things that shaped who Scout was for me, must have found some safe place in the back of my brain, remaining undiluted by the heterosexual training we all receive to one degree or another. Training that comes with the whine of the k-i-s-s-i-n-g song bellowed to its shy victims whenever they were seen communicating with a member of the opposite sex, even if that communion was being hit by a soccer ball. *He hit you, that means he loves you.* The mock schoolyard weddings, where I clutched a half dead bouquet of dandelions. And Friday afternoon dance class in the gym, where I loved to move my prepubescent body that knew grace only when there was a song with decent downbeat to dance to, but loathed the abundance of sweat and lack of charm my partners displayed. I thought, *if only they would let us girls dance together.* Spurred by the mere idea that a "Scout" could exist and that I might find her, I lived a secret life in the steady stream of tomboys I courted by helping them with their homework, in the hours I spent sitting on splinter-laden bleachers in my pastel dresses and maryjanes, smiling as demurely as a fourth grader can while watching my latest crush round the bases, in how I would initiate games of "house," so I could assign my butchest buddy to be the "daddy," a position that required she kiss me good-bye before leaving for "work." I marvel at how I managed to get away with being a rather obvious baby femme for much of my childhood.

Scout was my earliest glimpse of the kind of woman I would grow to want. Understand (and you must, because if you don't, then this revelation is banal and more than a little creepy) that I most certainly didn't feel sexual desire for the character. I was too young to understand what that would have meant. I was innocent in a way

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that doesn't seem to exist any longer. I had no lust, no physical want of Scout, but a deep admiration. I wanted a friend like her, even though I knew she would want no part of me, with my clear nail polish and occasional Barbie Doll fashion show. She was different, in a

way I'd never seen described in a book before. And I loved her sense of comfort in that difference, her defiance, her ability to be forthright, whether she was setting her teacher straight on the social mores of the town or smacking around a male classmate for disrespecting her. Girls simply didn't do these things. I loved the fact that she was honest to a fault, I loved the freedoms she sustained in a time and place where there was very little freedom to be had for anyone considered



different. And it is that sense of defiance, that fearlessness, that rare ability to be comfortable in one's skin (even if the way of presenting that skin is disquieting to others) that I would seek out in the women I would come to love. She was a sign of what was possible, even before I understood why I would need such a sign.

Even today Scout reminds me of the misunderstanding I'm still faced with when I try to explain the kind of woman who turns my head. If you like masculine women so much, why not go for the real thing. It's still hard to explain that it's not the masculinity I crave; it's the unwillingness of these special women to be limited by someone else's idea of femininity, that hard rocking of the gender boat, the courage to make being a woman encompass so much more than it has ever been allowed to be. And why there is much power in this defiance.

I have always been aware of how much of what Harper Lee had to say about race in the South in the 1930s could stand for just about any other group of people singled out for their difference. I understand, that while Scout may have been the temptress to attract me to the book, there were other ideas inherent in it, which I, even as a child, knew were important. Honor, freedom and decency. And most importantly, the possibility of a world where smart and courageous could win—at least for a while—over ignorance and physical force.

In the 36 years that have passed since then, I try to count how many times I've read the book. At least three times from beginning to end before high school. Once more in grade nine, when I could hardly bear the tedious English class discussion that I feared would destroy the book for me forever. A few times in college, out of loneliness or boredom or both. I read it during the daylight hours of an ice storm nearly ten years ago when I was afraid the power would go out. And again a few summers ago, lying late in bed on hot humid mornings waiting for a broken heart to mend. I read it yet again just a few months ago, knowing that it was time for another change in my life, only this time, I don't know where that change will take me.

According to a Book-of-the-Month Club survey of readers, only the Bible tops *To Kill a Mockingbird* as the book that made a difference in their lives. That makes me uneasy. I'm not much of a joiner, and knowing that I agree with so many strangers is hard to take. But I am reassured by the fact that the difference it made in my life most likely is quite dissimilar to the effect it had on the others who chose it. In all fairness, reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* didn't make me gay. But it definitely gave me an early advantage in understanding why I am so. And my sense of pride in being different and loving difference in others grows stronger every time I read it. ▣

Joy Parks writes about gay and lesbian literature for the book sections of several daily papers throughout the US and Canada.