Lee's Inspirations
Harper Lee, known locally as Nelle, based her only published novel on the people and places with which she was familiar. Many of her childhood experiences in a sweltering small town in Alabama in the Depression era were incorporated into To Kill a Mockingbird, written some 30 years later.

The setting for To Kill a Mockingbird, Maycomb, was based on the author's hometown of Monroeville, a sleepy Bible Belt community surrounded by red dirt and cotton fields. Lee's father, Atticus, was a lawyer, and in his only criminal case he defended two African-American men accused of robbery and manslaughter. Both were hanged. Lee vowed never to take another criminal case and remained a real-estate lawyer for the rest of his life. The story of Tom Robinson and Mayella Ewell was undoubtedly inspired by a case tried in the Monroeville court when Harper Lee was about Scott's age. An African-American man was found guilty of raping a white woman and sentenced to death. Leading citizens of the town, presumably including Lee's father, came to have doubts about the facts of the case, but the prisoner suffered a breakdown while awaiting execution and later died in custody.

Lee has confirmed that she based the character of Dill on a young boy who came to live with her cousins in the house next door to hers. His name was Truman Streckfus Persons, later known as Truman Capote, author of Breakfast at Tiffany's and In Cold Blood. He was a great friend and playmate of Lee's. Boo Radley's character was undoubtedly inspired by a local boy who had broken the law and was kept virtually isolated in the family home out of shame for a quarter of a century.

Rumours and superstition grew up around the elusive figure and children crossed the road to avoid imagined evil vapours emanating from the house. Apparently Lee did speak to the recluse on one occasion and found nothing too strange about him.

Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it. In rainy weather the streets turned to red slush. Coral grew on the sidewalks. The courthouse sagged in the square. Somehow it was hotter there.

JUDY BROAD and JILL DIEDRICH
explore the places that inspired
Harper Lee.

The Old Courthouse

Lee's fascination with the courtroom scene comes close to obsession. In the novel, the trial of Tom Robinson is conducted in the courtroom of the Old Monroe County Courthouse, a red brick building with an octagonal clock tower, which dominates the Town Square. The unusual oval-shaped courtroom has been restored to look exactly as it did in the 1930s. In the old courtroom, the trial of Tom Robinson was conducted with the same solemnity and dignity as the trial of the actual events.

Walking the Town

A museum brochure details a self-guided walking tour exploring Monroeville as it was in the 1930s, when not only Lee and Capote played there, but also as Maycomb would have been when Jem, Scout, and Dill lived and played there, too. Pointers on the state and a monument erected by the Alabama State Bar, paying tribute to the fictional Atticus Finch, their lawyer who knew how to tell the truth, the building where Lee's father practised law, and the jail outside which Atticus faced down a lynch mob. Lee's childhood home has been demolished and is now the site of an ice-cream shop, Mel's Dairy Cream. The house next door, where Capote lived with his cousins, was destroyed in a fire. Only the remains of a stone wall, fish pond and historical plaque mark the place where two future writers played in a tree house and wrote stories about local people on an old Underwood typewriter given to them by Lee's father.

Over the road, a service station has replaced a dark, shuttered house, backing onto the school grounds, unimoraled in the mysterious Radley place. With the aid of the map, it is easy to retrace Jem and Scout's steps along South Alabama Avenue, from the schoolhouse and site of Bob Radley's house, past the imagined residences of Miss Maudie, Stephanie Crawford, Mr Avery and Mrs Dubose to the Courthouse and the nearby jail. Many gardens in the Monroeville feature camellias, like the ones Jem destroyed in Mrs Dubose's front yard. Large outdoor murals depict scenes from the novel, including one featuring Jem, Scout, and Dill trying to catch a glimpse of the elusive Boo Radley through a fence.

To experience the flavour of Harper Lee's Deep South, take a leisurely stroll past the historic houses in Mount Pleasant Street, then sample local delicacies such as catfish, cheese grits and corn bread at David's Catfish House. Drive a short way out of town to Kilman's Mill, to see the water-powered gristmill grind corn into cornmeal and grits, and displays of other traditional crafts, including blacksmithing and the making of cane syrup. Mockingbirds are quite common in the Monroeville area, and the chances are good that you will hear and see one of these small grey-and-white creatures imitating the sounds of other birds, humans and mechanical noises.

In honour of the town's extraordinary literary tradition, Monroeville has been declared the 'Literary Capital of Alabama' and the Monroeville-Writers' Fountain at Alabama Southern Community College honours outstanding writers who have lived in Monroe County, including Harper Lee.

Other literary attractions in the State of Alabama include the F Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald Museum, based in their former home in Montgomery; the house of Helen Keller at Ivy Cottage, Tuscumbia; and the Inn of the Holy Cross in Inlandale, which was the real-life model for Fannie Flagg's Whistle Stop Cafe and features for its fried green tomatoes.

The Old Courthouse

Author's note: The text is a rich tapestry of literary references and historical facts, blending the real and imagined world of Monroeville with the fictional world of To Kill a Mockingbird. The author's love for the town is evident in the detailed descriptions of the courthouse, the old jail, and the surrounding areas. The walking tour highlights the connection between the town and the novel, inviting readers to experience the setting firsthand. The mention of local delicacies and typical southern bird species adds to the authenticity of the description, making it a compelling read for fans of Harper Lee's work.