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Harper Lee: Success, Creativity and Basic Income



Harper Lee, by Sara Louise Tucker, 2017 ©

Harper Lee is the writer extraordinaire who wrote the book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which was also made into an excellent [movie](#). If you didn't read the book, I'd advise to stop reading this essay, pick up a copy and

read it. Even though the film is great, the book is an absolute masterpiece. Each chapter is perfectly crafted; each sentence is wonderful. And of course, the content, the implications for the African-American civil rights movement, the view of life through the eyes of a child, the code of honor it portrays that hardly exists this day and age, everything about it is as poignant as it was back then. A must read for everyone.

Here, though, my interest in Harper Lee comes from the often cited connection between her and the idea of a Basic Income. Basic Income is the policy according to which there should be a minimum level of income guaranteed to all. This minimum, also often referred to as a “safety net,” would ensure that no one falls below a certain level and has a guaranteed minimum to provide for their basic needs. Harper Lee is said to have benefited from a Basic Income of sorts in the form of a gift she received from a couple, Michael and Joy Brown, which in turn helped her to write *To Kill a Mockingbird*, one of the most famous books of all time. So let’s explore a little regarding how Harper Lee came to be in a position to receive a Basic Income of sorts and used it to develop her work as a writer.

Harper Lee was from the small town of Monroeville, Alabama. She went to college to be a lawyer but decided to forgo that option and to move to New York City to become a writer. In New York, she supported herself by working as an airline reservation agent, while working at her writing in her free time. Lee was in New York during the Christmas of 1957 and spent the holiday with the Brown family; they were close friends of hers. The Browns were a young couple with two children, Michael Brown was a singer and songwriter originally from the South, the same as Harper Lee. Being from Alabama, Christmas in New York was a somewhat melancholic event for Lee, she writes in an essay published in McCall’s magazine: “I missed Christmas away from home, I thought. What I really missed was a memory, an old memory of people long since gone, of my grandparents’ house bursting with cousins, smilax and holly.” The Browns had two children, whom Harper occasionally babysat. Christmas at the Browns, was all about the children, as it should be.



Michael Brown record that allowed the Browns to give Lee the 1 year income Christmas present.



Joy and Michael Brown with one of their children.



Joy and Michael Brown's child opening presents.

That Christmas, even though Lee was close to the Brown family, there must have been some malaise of sitting at someone else's Christmas morning. The children opened their presents, Lee describes her feelings this way: "The children were in agonies of indecision over which package to open next, and as I waited, I noticed that while a small stack of presents mounted beside their mother's chair, I had received not a single one. My disappointment was growing steadily, but I tried not to show it." So, not only Lee was sitting in at another family's Christmas morning, but she wondered if there was a present for her. Obviously, she had brought a gift for the Browns. She was wondering whether she was going to get anything. At that point, Joy Brown said: "We haven't forgotten you. Look on the tree." And then this happened:

"There was an envelope on the tree, addressed to me. I opened it and read: 'You have one year off from your job to write whatever you please. Merry Christmas.'

'What does this mean?' I asked.

'What it says,' I was told."

The Browns had given Harper Lee a check, for her to fill out with a one year salary, for her to do whatever she wanted to develop her writing. That present is often said to have been a Basic Income of sorts, and as a result, Lee took a year off to work on what was to become *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Lee describes this experience saying that her friends

wanted to show their faith in her, and “whether I ever sold a line was immaterial. They wanted to give me a full, fair chance to learn my craft, free from the harassments of a regular job.” Of course, Lee protested a little, considering the Browns had young children and that Michael Brown was a songwriter, not the kind of profession that provides guaranteed stability. But they insisted and said she could consider it a loan if she preferred. She writes in her McCall’s article:

“‘It’s a fantastic gamble,’ I murmured. ‘It’s such a great risk.’

My friend looked around his living room, at his boys, half buried under a pile of bright Christmas wrapping paper. His eyes sparkled as they met his wife’s, and they exchanged a glance of what seemed to me insufferable smugness. Then he looked at me and said softly; ‘No, honey. It’s not a risk. It’s a sure thing.’”



During the next year, Lee produced the first draft of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In reality, she had been working on some scenes that appear in the book for years, but with time off her regular job she was able to bring everything together in one first draft. She worked in her small New York City apartment, day in day out, with a Portable Underwood typewriter. The draft was accepted by J.B. Lippincott publishing company that offered her a contract, and Tay Hohoff became her personal editor. Harper Lee and Tay Hohoff worked together for another 2 and 1/2 years on her manuscript. Lee would show Hohoff her pages, and Hohoff would help put it together so that the novel slowly took shape. What Lee had written was not at all ready for publication. Tay Hohoff said it was “more a series of anecdotes than a fully conceived novel.” The process was not an easy one for Lee, and Hohoff was right by her side through it all. Lee experienced moments of desperation. Lee spent six to 12 hours a day at her desk, producing one page a day. She said: “Contrary to what most people think, there is no glamor to writing, in fact, it’s heartbreak most of the time,” she told a class at Sweet Briar College in the 60s, according to Charles Shields’ unauthorized biography *Mockingbird*.

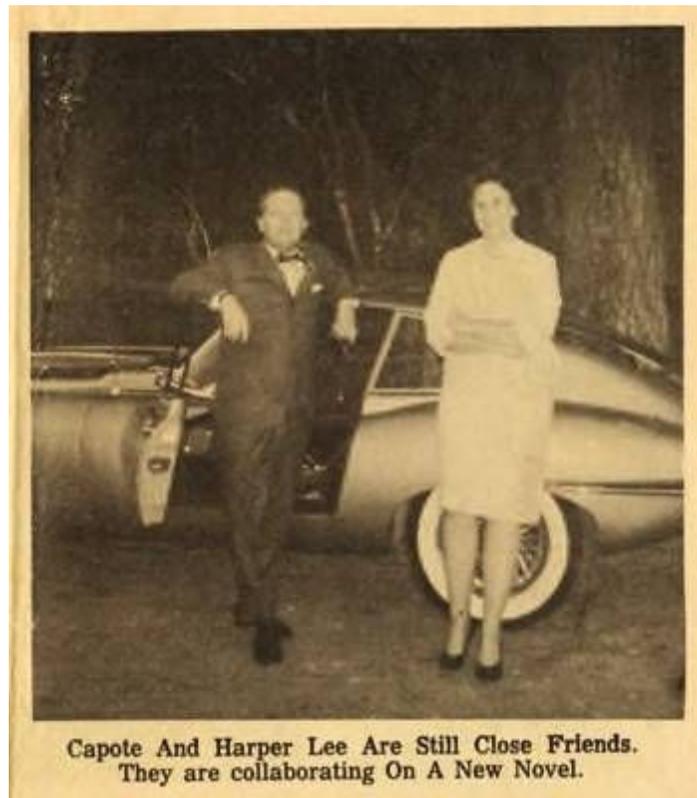


Tay Hohoff, Editor.

A moment of desperation is described by Kerry Madden in *Up and Close with Harper Lee* this way: “Her heart was pounding. It felt as if she’d been in that tiny cold-water flat forever. She couldn’t see her way to the

end of her book and could hardly stand to look at it another second. In a fit of rage, she tore the last sheet of the typewriter, opened her window, and threw the entire manuscript out into the snow, watching the pages swirl through the air like giant snowflakes.” (p. 108). When this happened, Harper immediately called Tay who “told her with great calm to go outside and pick up those pages.” She went out, got the pages and set them out to dry in her apartment. She made up her mind the book was going to be published—no matter what. She kept working on it and finally it was finished in 1959, having taken around eight years to be written. The book was published in 1960.

Lee was not prepared for what happened next. She was a struggling writer in New York City that finally, after working painstakingly for over eight years, published her first novel. She is often quoted saying she expected: “A quick and merciful death at the hands of the critics.” In 1959, while waiting for the book to be published, she traveled with Truman Capote, to do interviews in his research for the book that was to become *In Cold Blood*. Capote was her next door neighbor when she was growing up and inspired the character Dill in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In the 70s there was a rumor that Capote might have written *To Kill a Mockingbird*. At that time, Capote was deep into alcohol and drug abuse and is said not to have denied that rumor, which was particularly hurtful to Lee and severed their relationship. Capote’s letters have since made clear he had nothing to do with the writing of the book.



Lee's travels with Capote were her last experience of normalcy. The book, *To Kill a Mockingbird* became such a phenomenon that her fame immediately rose to levels she was not at all comfortable with. For about a year after the book was published, Lee tried her best to fulfill all the requests that were directed to her, interviews, book signings, and appearances. Then work started on the movie version of the book, starring Gregory Peck as Atticus, and Lee was highly involved in the making of the movie as well. She traveled to Hollywood and she escorted Gregory Peck and other members of the crew around Monroeville. The movie was a huge success, and so more demands were set upon her. In the two years after the book was published, Lee was busy with work related to the book and did not work on anything else.

Harper Lee's Only Recorded Interview About 'To K...



The extraordinary success of the book and movie resulted in great wealth for Lee. According to Brian Warner in [Harper Lee's Permanent Christmas](#): "To Kill A Mockingbird sells between 750,000 and 1m copies every year. So how much money has this put into Harper Lee's pockets? According to legal papers filed against former book agent Sam Pinkus, in the first six months of 2009 alone Harper Lee earned \$1,688,064.68 in royalties. That's \$9,249 per day". So the small one year investment the Browns made yield something around the \$9,000 a day! Talk about a financial success history resulting from a small Basic Income gift one year's salary.

But then, there is the other side of this story. Even though *To Kill a Mockingbird* was a huge pop culture phenomenon, Harper Lee never published another novel. Furthermore, following the roller coaster years after the book and the movie came out, Lee decided to stop giving interviews and to stay out of the public eye altogether, making her life a complete mystery thereafter. As a result, the success of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is sometimes considered not to be a way to endorse Basic Income at all. For instance, in a comment to the [Universal Basic Income Infographic](#), where Harper Lee's success is mentioned, someone says: "The 'Harper Lee' example is hardly a ringing endorsement for UBI. She wrote one book and then did nothing productive for 60 years." So, is the success of *To Kill a Mockingbird* an endorsement of Basic Income? Or is the fact that Harper Lee never published another novel reason to think a Basic Income is not a good idea?

First of all, financially, it was definitely a good idea for Harper Lee to be the recipient of a one year Basic Income gift from her friends. That investment held the likes of \$9,000 a day! Furthermore, Lee continued

to live a simple life and reinvested a lot of her income in other people's education, for instance, as an anonymous donor. If Basic Income was a reality, that kind of profit would be automatically redistributed by many, giving then the same opportunity that Lee had. So, financially, a Basic Income investment in Harper Lee was indubitably worthwhile. But what about creatively?

The question regarding creativity is not if Basic Income helps or injures creativity—the story indicates that it does help. The question is if unexpected great success hurts creativity, and everything seems to suggest that it indeed does injure it. In a story by Philip Hensher in the Telegraph, *Why Harper Lee Kept her Silence*, he says: “A novelist who had become a celebrity would find it almost impossible to pursue their task of listening, of modest disappearance into the background, of observation. Some writers manage to tough it out; others find the weight of expectation impossible to manage.” It seems like it is very common when first novels have great success, that the writers may not write a second novel. He says: “It's striking that out of the four novelists, for instance, who have won the Booker Prize in the last 40 years with a first novel, none has so far managed to write a successful follow-up.”

In my opinion, when researching Harper Lee, and for anyone who read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, it seems impossible that someone that writes the way she does, did not continue writing. So I went ahead and read several biographies, mostly unauthorized, but also the book by Marja Mills, *The Mockingbird Next Door*, that was authorized. From those books, I learned that Lee was a prolific letter writer for the rest of her life (it would be wonderful to read a collected letter edition some day). I also found five non-fiction pieces that corroborate the idea that she was, in fact, a writer extraordinaire. For instance, read this last paragraph of her essay on Love:

“Love purifies. Suffering never purified anybody; suffering merely intensifies the self-directed drives within us. Any act of love, however—no matter how small—lessens anxiety's grip, gives us a taste of tomorrow, and eases the yoke of our fears. Love, unlike virtue, is not its own reward. The reward of love is peace of mind, and peace of mind is the end of man's desiring.”

Besides the letters and the five pieces, there seem to have been at least two other attempts of writing another book. For a while, she was said to have been working on a book called, *The Long Goodbye*. According to the biography, *I am Scout* by Charles J. Shields: “a producer visiting Monroeville for a BBC documentary asked Alice (Harper’s sister) whatever happened to the second novel her sister was supposed to be working on. According to Alice, just as Nelle was finishing it, a burglar broke into her apartment and stole the manuscript.” (p. 191). There is no way of knowing if this is indeed true, but regardless, she tried to work on a second novel and failed.

Another book in the works, that never came to fruition, was developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. At that time she spent a couple of years researching an *In Cold Blood*-style account of part-time preacher W.M. Maxwell, who was suspected of murdering five people close to him and profiting from their insurance policies. The book was going to be called, *The Reverend*, and was about Reverend Maxwell’s multiple insurance motivated murders of members of his own family. Maxwell ended up being killed at the funeral of one of his victims and his killer was judged “not guilty” in trial. A fascinating story, indeed. However, Lee abandoned the project. Writer Marja Mills wrote in her book *Mockingbird Next Door*: “Nelle told me that her research uncovered information she believed put her in personal jeopardy. She would not elaborate.” She dropped the project and passed it on to another writer who is said to have dropped it for the same reason.

In 2015, *Go Set a Watchman* was published and marketed as new book from Harper Lee. However, this is not a new book, but the early manuscript of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Permission to publish this book was given by a Lee with failing health and many speculate whether she would have allowed it if she were in her right mind. However, reading *Go Set a Watchman*, is an important part of the puzzle and can give us a clue of not only how *To Kill a Mockingbird* came to be, but also why Lee never published another book. As I have described *To Kill a Mockingbird* took over eight years to write and was written with the help of editor Tay Hohoff. In fact, creativity does not exist in a vacuum and creative artists and writers do not work alone, as Brian Eno clearly says in this clip:

Brian Eno on basic income



Lee had Hohoff and other members of her troupe, all of them made *To Kill a Mockingbird* possible. Lee's sudden fame, and the death of several of her close collaborators, dismantled that creative net. Because of her enormous success, it is hard to recreate a similar net, as at that point most collaborators are interested in making money out of the famous person— call it the Elvis posse phenomenon, a group of “yes-men” that say everything is great just to get part of the profits from fame. Harper Lee would have none of that and preferred to step back, live a simple life, and write letters to her friends. Her other attempts to writing in isolation did not bear the fruits she expected, so she did not publish them—as they were not up to the standards of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Creativity and success are not a conundrum impossible to resolve, as others have proven. But in this case, being that Lee was a shy and reserved person, it was the undoing of her. Oprah writes in *My Lunch Date with Harper Lee*, that she said, regarding not giving interviews: “You know the character Boo Radley? Well, if you know Boo, then you understand why I wouldn't be doing an interview. Because I am really Boo.”

In conclusion, the gift that Lee received from her friends that Christmas was indeed similar to Basic Income grant, albeit for only one year. With that gift, she was able to produce a masterpiece that has inspired millions, made a fortune, and enabled her to help via charity countless others. However, fame did not help Lee to maintain her flow and creativity, a phenomenon that is not unheard of when unexpected huge successes occur. The reason for that failure, in her case, was probably a combination of her shyness and loss of the creative circle that made *To Kill a Mockingbird* possible. Artists don't work in isolation, they need an

artistic community. But fame can often change the shape of such community, hindering creativity. If this is a problem for Basic Income, it would apply only to a very small set of Basic Income grant recipients, therefore it is not a general argument against Basic Income, but instead a warning regarding the perils of fame. And if Basic Income produces even just a few more books of the caliber of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we would be all so much better off for it.



Charles McBurney, Elizabeth Otts, Nelle Lee, Jimmy Moore

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Please see also my essay [George Orwell and Useless Work](#) for an Orwellian view of poverty and low wages, [Basic Income as Seed Funding for Humanity](#) and [We are Keynes' Grandchildren](#).