

SOUTHERN STORY OF RARE CHARM

By **BETSY HOPKINS FANCHER**

In Maycomb, Ala., the seasons fade gradually into one another. Ladies sit powdered like tea cakes on their porches in the afternoon. Clans are inbred, promises are sealed with spit, and it's a sin to kill a **mockingbird**.

This is the cruel and lovely land from which most Southerners derive, the lost land of old and easy relationships, of Lane cakes and azaleas and lingering twilights, of poverty and ignorance and individuals who live by their own lights and die beholden to no one.

It is the scene of "To Kill a **Mockingbird**" (J. B. Lippincott; \$3.95.), this month's Literary Guild selection and the first novel by Harper Lee, a 34-year-old Alabama woman who writes with a humor and integrity that recall Mark Twain and a whole brave and bygone era of the American novel.

NARRATOR of her story is Jean Louise Finch, clad in overalls and not at all a lady, young "Scout" who was born knowing how to read and is quite honestly opinionated—i.e., "North Alabama was full of Liquor Interests, Big Mules, steel companies, Republicans, professors and other persons of no background." Not since Huck Finn has literature spawned such a child!

There is her wise and funny father, Atticus; her brother Jem, growing painfully into manhood, and the invincible Calpurnia, cook, maid, and nurse to the two motherless youngsters. There is the terrible-tempered Mrs. Dubose; Boo Radley, a ghostly figure behind closed doors; Miss Maudie, tending her thrift in a tattered sun hat, and the poor white Ewells, wallowing in squalor on the fringe of the city dump.

Life is paced to the leisured hum of conversations at dusk, and a child's first snow is a miracle. Jean Marie records it.

" . . . I stuck out my tongue and caught a fat flake. It burned. 'Jem, Jem, It's hot!'

"'No it ain't, it's so cold it burns. Now don't eat it, Scout, you're wasting it. Let it come down!'"

BUT LIFE has a darker side. The ancient regional sin asserts itself when Atticus is called upon to defend a Negro accused of raping young Mayella Ewell. Although Tom Robinson is clearly innocent, he is convicted of the crime in a trial which should be—but is not—unbelievable. In the book's most moving scene, the Negroes rise as Atticus leaves the courtroom, a stooped but heroic figure, embodying that lonely company of the brave who have fought for justice and lost, undefeated and unembittered men who have loved the land that would destroy them, and have not lost faith in the ultimate destiny of their people.

The South has found in Miss Lee a loving and honest writer of rare good sense and rare good humor. She neither maligns nor caricatures the region, but writes of it as it was, and in some places, still is. If her portrait is sometimes heart-breaking and marred by violence, that too is the way it is.