

Reading Passage - Beginner level (Set 2)

Read and answer questions in the Question-Answer Book.

Lessons for us from Harper Lee

[1] If you haven't read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, you must. If you have and haven't yet picked up author Harper Lee's second book, which was published earlier this month, don't bother.

5 [2] At least, that was how I felt when I finished reading *Go Set a Watchman*, the most pre-ordered book in publisher HarperCollins' history. It was heart-achingly disappointing if you had gone into it as I did, wanting to reconnect with the characters in *Mockingbird* as they moved into adulthood in this sequel, published 55 years later. I did not want to lose the hope the first book offered — that young people, through watching the examples of the adults in their lives, learn that one can overcome the barriers of race and difference. In *Mockingbird*, one came to believe in a world where we are judged not by the colour of our skin but the content of our character, to quote the late civil rights leader Dr Martin Luther King Jr.

10 [3] It was the story of a young girl's coming of age as she and her brother watched their lawyer father, Atticus Finch, defend a black man falsely accused of rape in the American deep south before the civil rights movement. Published in 1960, it resonated instantly with Americans campaigning for an end to racial segregation and discrimination. But its lessons were universal and timeless.

15 [4] As we read, wept and reread *To Kill a Mockingbird*, my classmates and my 15-year-old self aspired to be kinder, more empathetic and forgiving of others when we saw Atticus giving his daughter, Scout, one of the best lessons about life: "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." We adored Atticus for his courage and integrity.

[5] *Go Set a Watchman* was actually Lee's debut novel. But her editor told her to write another one with a younger Scout. *Watchman* features an adult Scout, while older brother Jem, we find out, has died. Many fans
20 have been upset to find Atticus depicted as more of a racist than was evident in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: he regarded his non-white neighbours with suspicion and grating condescension.

[6] To preserve the purity of the Atticus we knew and loved, critics have suggested that we view the two books as separate and presenting two different men, rather than the same character becoming a racist over time.

25 [7] Lee's second book is perhaps more in tune with our morally ambiguous times. Fifty years after the US Civil Rights Act, racial profiling still goes on. Mob lynchings may have ended, but hate crimes have not: last month's murder of nine people in a black church in South Carolina was just one extreme example of white supremacists in action.

[8] *To Kill a Mockingbird* gave many Americans a moral compass of sorts as they struggled with the challenge of bringing equality to their society. *Go Set a Watchman*, while it had the same characters, is a more despondent
30 look at the chains of convention and conformity. Stylistically, it is also a raw, more awkward endeavour of a first-time author. In all, it isn't a pleasant experience, but it should give readers a sharp jolt about their own prejudices and world view of race. And maybe, just maybe, they will have the honesty to admit that inside all of us resides

a racist.

- 35 [9] Some weeks ago, in this same space, I wrote about the need to confront racism and xenophobia in Hong Kong. In that column, I did not point out a paradoxical fact of life in this and most other cities: despite a densely populated urban environment, most people live in their own social bubbles, and rarely do their different worlds come together. Indeed, perhaps it is the in-your-face crowdedness that tempts us to retreat into psychological comfort zones, like MTR commuters enveloped in their smartphone cocoons so that they can ignore the strangers who are uncomfortably close.
- 40 [10] It is natural for us as city dwellers to treasure our privacy and autonomy, to want to imagine that we are independent of the teeming metropolis. The problem comes when we are too successful at this trick. We block off those who are different and desensitise ourselves to their needs. In such an environment, intolerance finds fertile ground to grow and thrive. And before long, a city can lose one of the important qualities it needs for global competitiveness — being welcoming of diversity.
- 45 [11] Hongkongers are conflicted on this issue, wanting to believe this is an open, tolerant and cosmopolitan city, but also feeling the sand shifting beneath their feet as the city inches ever closer to the mainland. The opposing pulls between a defensive nativism and a confident cosmopolitanism will continue to shape Hong Kong politics and society.
- [12] In the end, all responses are personal. After the political speeches and demonstrations are done, we go
50 home and look inwards. In that private space, literature can be a great resource.
- [13] So, if nothing else, if you want to be a better person, go and read *To Kill a Mockingbird* if you haven't, and read it again if you have. You will find new truths in it. If you want to hold up a mirror about the problems of race and difference, go and read *Go Set a Watchman*. Such works of imagination help prod us to step out of our own cloistered worlds every now and then.

END OF READING PASSAGE