

Austin Horjus
Vancouver, WA

Dear Ms. Lee

The house stood forlorn in the dense shadow of the oak trees. I sat in the oppressive heat of an Alabama summer, beads of sweat forming on my forehead. My friends Jem, Scout and Dill beside me, I wondered with a child's intense curiosity about the "Malevolent phantom" lurking with the Radley house. Though I was present only in my imagination I was no less surprised than they to discover that the phantom was really a shy man with a gentle spirit.

When I was younger I had a very one dimensional view of people. Eli, the kid across the street was mean and stupid. My brother and my friend Tanya were cool and nice. People fit neatly into categories based on whether I liked them or what other people told me about them. Life was simple. Then I read your book, *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, and I began to realize that people are not always what they seem, that whatever you've been told about them is probably only part of their story. Along with Jem and Scout, I learned from Atticus that the best you can do is to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, and treat people with kindness and respect regardless of how different they are, or how they treat you.

This new insight helped me deal with a difficult person in my own life. At the time I read your book I was about the same age as Jem is in the story, and in the fifth grade. I had a classmate who went out of his way to annoy and insult me every chance he got. I am dyslexic and am very slow at anything involving reading and writing. He was academically gifted and reveled in pointing out my inadequacies. He was my Mrs. Dubose. Like that crotchety old woman, he never missed an opportunity to pester me just for the joy of it. While he was more of an annoyance than someone to be feared, he shared Mrs. Dubose's mean spirited attitude toward others, especially me. After reading the episode in which Jem has to read to old Mrs. Dubose, in restitution for attacking her camellias, my attitude toward him changed. Just as Jem learned that Mrs. Dubose had trials he had not imagined, I learned to see my classmate as a human being with his own problems and feel some compassion toward him; though he, like Mrs. Dubose, never returned the gesture. I began to see that part of the reason he targeted me was that I was fairly popular and he had very few friends. Although he still tried with all his heart, he didn't make me angry anymore.

As Atticus said to Scout "...it's never an insult to be called what somebody thinks is a bad name. It just shows you how poor that person is, it doesn't hurt. So don't let Mrs. Dubose get you down. She has troubles enough of her own."

Now when someone insults me I remember that they are not just mean or stupid, but are complex people living in complex circumstances that I may not fully understand. If I'm always looking at people through my preconceived ideas I may not see who they really are. So I try to treat everyone with the grace and respect that Atticus would display, because you never know when a Boo Radley will come out of the house and save your life.

Sincerely,

Austin Horjus