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The Business of *Go Set a Watchman*: Marketing, Publicity and Reception of Harper Lee's Novel

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Abstract: In an age where information is disseminated and reaches the target audience within a very short span of time, the manner in which a book finds its way into the hands of the readers has changed dramatically. This paper takes a look at the importance of marketing in generating recognition for Harper Lee's "new novel" *Go Set a Watchman*. The commodification of the novel through various publicity campaigns manufactured a hype that heightened the reader's desire to possess and read the novel. The role of *cultural merchants* who package the literary work as a commodity whose monetary value is realized when it is purchased by the customer is also analysed. The reviews given by prominent newspapers, while giving free advertisement for the novel, also influence the way readers receive the work. Also comparisons with Lee's previous novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird* polarized reader response into two distinct groups. Aspects of marketing and the three processes of production, dissemination and reception help create the book and everything that is associated with it.

Keywords: marketing, publicity, teasers, hype, packaging, positioning, paratext.

On the third day of a cold February morning, the world of bibliophiles was plunged into a frenzy of excitement not witnessed since the release of the last book in the Harry Potter series in 2007. The cause of this commotion/hype was the announcement made by Harper, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers regarding its decision to publish “a newly discovered novel by Harper Lee, beloved author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*” on the 14th of July, 2015. Two things immediately stand out in this press release – this “newly discovered novel”, enigmatically entitled *Go Set a Watchman*, is being publicized on the strength of the literary merit, popularity and cult status of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and secondly, the time period between the announcement date and the date of publication was specifically designed to give ample scope for generation of publicity and promotion.

“Literature is not only about aesthetics, but also almost equally about economics” (Leving 1). Thus, marketing plays an important role in generating recognition for a particular literary work that may otherwise go unnoticed. In the case of Harper Lee, her novel would have eventually gained traction since she is an established and respected author, but in an age of digital and social media where information can be disseminated in a matter of seconds, marketing of the novel targets prospective readers at a faster pace. It is therefore no surprise that *Go Set a Watchman* became the fastest pre-ordered book in HarperCollins’ history.

During the weeks that followed the initial announcement, HarperCollins designed a careful marketing strategy lolling out *teasers* to the reading public. It focused intensely on the emotional and nostalgic connection readers had with *To Kill a Mockingbird* which was published fifty five years ago in 1960 and till date has sold more than forty million copies. The aim is to ride on the massive wave of success of *To Kill a Mockingbird* while simultaneously emphasizing on Harper Lee as a Pulitzer Prize winning author to add legitimacy to the “new novel”. Claire Squires in *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (2007) writes that “literary prizes are one of the wider agencies involved in book marketing... and are one of the forces that come to influence notions of cultural value and literariness” (97). And although these prizes are not controlled by the

publishers, they do allow them to capitalize on what such prizes represent for an author and his/her work. In other words, they facilitate the creation of the author as a brand name as Juliet Gardiner (2000) writes “the author in his or her designation as a brand name has become a sign of the event of commodification and this sign informs the whole process of publication” (67). While commodifying the novel, the publisher also attempted to maintain a kind of brand exclusivity by giving the rights to publish excerpts of the novel to only two prominent newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Wall Street Journal*. It also secretly provided advance review copies to certain outlets that had national and international presence to review the novel on the condition that their reviews would be embargoed until the official date of publication. The desired effect was to create a need, build anticipation and heighten the reader’s craving to possess and read the novel.

The reclusive nature of Harper Lee who had famously declared that she would never publish another novel also comes into play in the marketing strategies employed by the publisher adding allure and mystery to the novel as fans become curious about the reason(s) that made Lee change her mind. This only served to generate more interest in the book as seen when the embargo was breached when *The New York Times* published a review of the book on July 10, 2015, days before the official publication and many other newspapers followed suit although they refused to confirm the source of their advance review copies. “Thus, the selling of a book has happened long before it reaches the bookshop” (Gardiner 14).

“The successful marketing of an author and his literary works”, writes Yuri Leving, “is more dependent on the activities of *cultural merchants* than on the particular words or phrases found in the author’s prose” (1). These *cultural merchants* are none other than the literary agents, the author’s lawyers and representatives as well as the publishers. These merchants package the literary work as a commodity whose monetary value is realized when it is purchased by a customer. In its press release, HarperCollins (2015) specifically mentioned that “The original manuscript of the novel was considered to have been lost until fall 2014, when Tonja Carter discovered it in a secure location where it had been affixed to an original typescript of *To Kill a*

Mockingbird.” The statement highlights the dominant role played by Tonja Carter, Lee’s attorney in bringing the novel into the world. But controversy soon erupted when a counter narrative emerged suggesting that the novel was actually discovered as early as 2011 when Justin Caldwell, a rare books expert from Sotheby’s auction house went to Alabama to meet with Carter and Samuel Pinkus, then Lee’s literary agent to appraise a “Mockingbird” manuscript for insurance and other purposes. Both camps maintained their stories bringing to the fore the uneasy relationship between art and money. Another element was added to the discourse when it was suggested that Lee who is 89, deaf and blind and had just suffered a stroke and living in an assisted living facility in her hometown may not have the ability to make sound decisions. While the publishers and Carter insisted that Lee is “humbled and amazed” about the novel’s publication, Lee’s sister, Alice in a 2011 letter had written that Lee “can’t see and can’t hear and will sign anything put before her by anyone in whom she has confidence” (Giraldi 2015). These contradictory narratives while making the reader wary and suspicious, fuel debates that in all likelihood can only increase sales by increasing product awareness.

The ‘negative publicity’ in this case did not damage sales because the drama centered around the circumstances that led to the novel’s publication rather than the contents of the book per se. Berger, Sorensen and Rasmussen (2010) in their paper, “Positive Effects of Negative Publicity: When Negative Reviews Increase Sales” suggested that increased product awareness may lead even negative publicity to increase purchase (816). The publisher continued to tease readers by roping Oscar winning Hollywood actress, Reese Witherspoon to narrate the first chapter ahead of publication. Witherspoon’s unmistakable Southern accent gave voice to the third person narrator of the novel as she describes Jean Louis Finch’s homeward journey by train as she registers the big and subtle changes that had crept their way to the landscape. Movie screening and readings were organized by booksellers everywhere. In New York, Mary Badham who portrayed Scout in the 1962 screen adaptation of *To Kill A Mockingbird* thrilled a rapt audience with readings from new-old novel. The “persuasive impact of publicity” (Berger 816) translates into sales figures which were enormous.

HarperCollins reported that in the first week alone the novel sold more than 1.1 million copies in both its physical and digital form. Sales are expected to increase further as there are 3.3 million copies of the novel in print.

The publicity and media attention given to *Go Set A Watchman* did boost sales but this “unrestrained reign of hype, with its seemingly irresistible attraction for opportunistic and big-money writers, and its eerie capacity for luring and ensnaring unwary artists” (Moran 36) also raises serious questions about the literary merit of the work itself. Since the marketing of the novel rests on the brand name of Harper Lee as the author of the hugely successful *To Kill a Mockingbird*, one wonders if “Watchman” would have been published if there was no “Mockingbird”. The novel was a first version of “Mockingbird” that Lee’s agent submitted to the publishing house of JB Lippincott in 1957. The editor, Tay Hohoff recognized the potential of the novel but suggested that Lee rework on it by setting it twenty years before the events described in “Watchman” and to narrate the story from the point of view of the young precocious Scout and “Mockingbird” was born. With the hype that surrounded its publication, the line between actual and perceived literary value begins to blur. With its review *The New York Times* performed free advertisement for the novel cementing its literary, cultural and commercial value since a review in the paper not only signals its literary status but also gives it “unparalleled positional power” which can guarantee “a book’s commercial success, regardless of the review’s content” (Moran 45).

The pre-release reviews of the novel become marketing tools that introduce and acquaint the readers to the contents of the book. They situate and contextualize the novel for those already familiar with the “Mockingbird”, performing the role of segmenting the market, breaking down the readership into two distinct groups – those who have read “Mockingbird” as primary target customers and those who have not as prospective customers. For the second group, the reviews foster curiosity that may result in a purchase. More than influencing the readers’ evaluation of the quality of the novel, these pre-release reviews with titles like “Harper Lee’s ‘Go Set a Watchman’ Gives Atticus Finch a Dark Side” (*The New York Times*), “More Complex than Harper Lee’s

Original Classic, but Less Compelling” (*The Guardian*), “A Rough Draft, but More Radical and Politicised than Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*” (*The Independent*) are more informative giving the readers a peek at characters and events and the writing process that went into the novel. As such, whether the review is scathing or positive becomes irrelevant because it simply draws in more customers/readers.

The first visual attraction for prospective buyers is, of course, the cover of the novel or the “packaging”. It is the means by which they get a first impression and gauge the novel as an object or a product. The cover provides the opportunity of positioning the novel in such a way that it communicates directly with the customers. Positioning is not what is done to a product, says Al Ries and Jack Trout, but “what you do to the mind of the prospect” (3). Gerard Genette calls the cover and all the entities, “devices and conventions” (xviii) that are extraneous to the text of the novel that are used to adorn or beautify it, the “paratext”. He also stresses their importance because it is they that make it possible for the text to become a book and be offered to the reader or the public as a finished product. The cover, specifically is a “*threshold*” or a “*vestibule*” that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back” (2). It is therefore, important for the cover to possess elements that can arrest the attention of the prospective buyer long enough for him/her to consider buying the book.

A great deal of thought seemed to have gone into the creation of the cover of *Go Set a Watchman*. While the HarperCollins publication in the United States used a blue background with illustrations of a tree with falling leaves that pay homage to the first edition of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and a train on a track signaling the coming home journey of Scout, the Penguin Random House in the United Kingdom (the cover under consideration) had a popping, rich orange background that immediately grabs attention. Genette in *Paratexts: thresholds of interpretation*, distinguishes between a book cover and a “paratextual support”, “*the dust jacket (or wrapper)*” (27). The orange of the *dust jacket* is punctuated by big bold white fonts declaring the name of the author and the name of the novel. The illustration of a leafless black branch with a black bird singing links the present novel to “*Mockingbird*” while also breaking the even space between author's

name and book title. In between the title there are red fonts, almost equal in size to the white typography, bearing the title of Harper Lee's previous novel building the connection between the "Mockingbird" and "Watchman". The back has illustrations of falling leaves at the top and the Maycomb square with a solitary bird taking flight at the bottom. These frame the quotation taken from the novel: "Every man's island, Jean Louise, every man's watchman, is his conscience" which underscores the subject matter of the text. The folds or flaps of the jacket that are tucked inside contain short blurbs about the work and the author. It also contains an evaluation of the work as "an unforgettable novel of wisdom, humanity, passion, humour and effortless precision ... It not only confirms the enduring brilliance of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but also serves as its essential companion, adding depth, context and new meaning to a classic." This self advertisement links the text and the paratext and highlights the "material book's role in its own marketing" (Squires 78). After the reader crosses the threshold of the *dust jacket*, she encounters a pale grey plain cover, the titles of the author and the novel having been relegated along the length of the spine. On the first and last page, the train track spreads out linking the past and the present. The intertextual connections created by the *dust jacket* and the cover target specific segment of the reading population and position the novel in relation to what the readers already know about "Mockingbird". This is the function of positioning "not to create something new and different. But to manipulate what's already up there in the mind. To retie the connections that already exist" (Ries and Trout 5) and this is what the "paratext" of the novel did.

To Kill a Mockingbird has always been regarded as a coming of age novel where the main characters, Jean Louis Finch better known as Scout and her brother Jeremy "Jem" Finch learns that the world and its inhabitants cannot be pigeon-holed into distinct categories, that sometimes the categories overlap and grey areas exists. Through many episodes that challenge their childish understanding and comprehension of the world, they always looked up to their father, Atticus Finch who serves as their moral compass and the conscience of the novel. In *Go Set a Watchman*, the notion of Atticus as an upright man with integrity and a firm belief in the ability of the court of law to treat every citizen –

black or white – as equal is debunked by the novelist who added another dimension to this man's character. He is portrayed as a seventy-two-years old man, struggling with rheumatoid arthritis and attending meetings that find ways to thwart the anti-segregation movements that were sweeping the nation and the Supreme Court's attempts to impose integrated education and equal voting rights in the South. Many readers are unable to fathom this newly discovered element in Atticus' personality because they tend to read "Watchman" as a sequel to "Mockingbird". However, what is worth noting is how Atticus' character evolved as a supporter of segregation in "Watchman" to the lawyer who is ready to do whatever it takes to defend a coloured man, Tom Robinson falsely accused of raping a white woman in "Mockingbird".

Atticus' attitude in "Watchman" resembles the paternalistic and imperialistic civilizing mission of those who think they are better than other races by virtue of the colour of their skin. This is evident when he explains to the twenty-six year old Scout who confronts him about the issue by asking her if she had ever considered that "[she] can't have a set of backward people living among people advanced in one kind of civilization and have a social Arcadia?" (242) or whether she wants "Negroes by the carload in ... schools and churches and theaters?" (245). If the foundations of a society are to be preserved, Atticus suggests that potentially disruptive elements such as "a set of backward people" also referring to the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) have to be kept in the fringes otherwise social boundaries and cultural ethos, "Our Way of Life" (248) will collapse. It is precisely this double talk of helping the blacks to be 'civilized' enough to be part of the mainstream society but not so much that they demand to take care of their own business that incensed Jean Louise. More than this, however, it is the thought of being betrayed by the only man she had ever looked up to that made her feel as if she has been hurled into an alien universe whose rules she cannot comprehend. The text hints that her biggest flaw is not her inability to emulate her aunt who represents the paragon of Southern grace, femininity and hospitality, nor her inability to be social or mind the rules and conventions of her society but her blindness to see the world as it is. At

one point her father even tells her to “come down to earth” (149). “Watchman” is also notable for the disconcerting absence of Jem, who seemed destined to become a future lawyer and gentleman who will carry on Atticus’s legacy of adherence to justice. In “Mockingbird” he always acted as Jean Louise’s sounding board, the interpreter of the meaning of events and the protective older brother. During a lengthy conversation after Tom’s trial, Jem tells Scout that he thinks “there are four kinds of folks in the world. There’s the ordinary kind like us and the neighbors, there’s the kind like the Cunninghams out in the woods, the kind like the Ewells down at the dump, and the Negroes.” Scout disagrees and says that “there’s just one kind of folks. Folks”. Jem responds with “That’s what I thought, too, when I was your age” (230). It is clear that Jem is becoming wiser regarding the ways of the world while Scout remains “blind”. Thus, without Jem’s guidance, her coming to the world becomes a painful birth that alienates her from everyone she loves, including Henry “Hank” Clinton, her boyfriend of many years. Hank replaces the effervescent Dill Harris of “Mockingbird” but he neither shares Dill’s imagination nor his sense of right or wrong but is closer in mindset to the older version of Atticus.

Toward the close of “Mockingbird”, Jean Louise remembers her father saying that “you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them” (283). “Watchman” portrays Jean Louise’s attempts to walk in her father’s shoes to understand his thought process. Helped by her eccentric uncle and her aunt, she does finally see things from his perspective but she does not agree with him. For Atticus, this is the moment he has been waiting for, the coming of age of Jean Louise: “I certainly hoped a daughter of mine’d hold her ground for what she think is right – and stand up to me first of all” (277). She is finally able to see. Sight and blindness are important metaphors in the novel and with the destruction of the “tin god”, Atticus, the readers along with Scout are given an opportunity to understand a complex personality. The novel allows the readers to see Atticus as a human being with all the frailties and prejudices that an ordinary mortal may possess.

The characters of “Mockingbird” are treated with sympathy and understanding even as they behave in ways that are hard to understand;

in “Watchman” they are looked at with suspicion and distrust. In fact, certain pessimism envelops the text – a pessimism that comes with the wisdom of experience and the realization that the innocence of childhood once gone can never be recaptured. Like Jem who realize that there are stratifications in this world, which cause hate, and the only hope for those who want to make a difference is to learn how to operate within the system (Bloom 44), Jean Louise also begins to grasp the necessity of learning to be a part of the system:

I did not want my world disturbed, but I wanted to crush the man who is trying to preserve it for me. I wanted to stamp out all the people like him. I guess it's like an airplane: they're the drag and we're the thrust, together we make the thing fly. Too much of us and we're nose heavy, too much of them and we're tail-heavy – it's a matter of balance. (277)

The past can teach lessons but it always comes at a cost, for Jean Louis, it is the lost of her idol. The novel, whose title derives from Isaiah 21:6 which says “For thus hath the Lord said unto me: Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth”, calls for the need to keep a watchman for one's conscience because in order to be able to carry on while the world is falling apart at its seams, one must be able to stand up for his beliefs and live with one's conscience. The novel then, is about the shattering of illusions, lifting the veil off the chimeras, the setting in of disillusionment and learning to live with them.

Reader responses to the text have been polarizing to some extent with one side regarding the ‘evolution’ of Atticus as shocking and difficult to absorb while the other camp believes that traces of a “bigot” are already embedded in his character but were largely ignored due to the dominant trope of his character as a representation of all that is good, just and moral. Among the second group is Katie Rose Guest Pryal, who in a 2010 essay, “Walking in Another's Skin: Failure of Empathy in *To Kill a Mockingbird*” wrote that Atticus in “*Mockingbird*” suggests that we should empathize with others while he himself merely displayed sympathy. Angela Shaw Thornburg in “On Reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*: Fifty years Later” expresses the same opinion and

suggest that Atticus' defense of Tom is typical of the "paternalistic and downright accommodationist approach to justice" (113). In an article "The Courthouse Ring: Atticus Finch and the Limits of Southern Liberalism" on *The New Yorker* in 2009, Malcolm Gladwell notes that Atticus' approach is "about accommodation, not reform." Those who accept the change concede that Lee never said he was a saint; it was the readers who sanctified him. Whichever side of the debate one chooses to uphold, he will have to swallow the hard truths that "bigotry exists and it is ugly" (Mcdermott 2015). Despite the five and a half decades difference in the time the novel was conceived and written and the time of its publication, its relevance to the contemporary world can be discerned in the light of the Charleston shooting on the 7th of June where a twenty one year old Dylann Roof killed nine people during a prayer service at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church with the intention of igniting a race war. *Go Set a Watchman* may not be as interesting as its predecessor, the magic and the lyricism in the narrative so potent in "Mockingbird" may be missing but it does reflect the Deep South in all sincerity. A reader in California said, "The book Lee wrote could not have been published then (1940s). She sweetened the tale and we have the lovely 'Mockingbird.' But 'Watchman' is the truth that could not be told until now" (Mcdermott 2015). With the removal of the Confederate flag, which has always been inextricably linked with racism and segregation, from the State House in South Carolina, the novel can be read as another stepping stone toward the discussion of the issue of race relations which in more cases than not is quietly swept under the carpet.

From its pre-release publicity to its publication and reception, *Go Set a Watchman* has been making headlines around the world. Much of the interest it generated had something to do with the marketing techniques adopted by the publishers. "Marketing" is after all, "conceived as a form of representation and interpretation, situated in the spaces between the author and the reader – but which authors and readers also take part in – and surrounding the production, dissemination and reception of texts" (Squires 3). These three processes of production, dissemination and reception created the book and everything that is associated with it. The publicity of "Watchman"

which hinges on “Mockingbird” reveals that readers generally cannot read the novel as an independent work without references to “Mockingbird” which provides a framework for interpreting the novel. Moreover, once the book was released to the public, it could not sustain the mystery it generated prior to its release. A particular case in point is when Brilliant Books, a bookstore in Michigan started offering refunds to reader after one loyal customer got upset after reading the novel. The incident also testifies to the ability of marketing to create a need where there was none. The reader did not need a ‘sequel’ to “Mockingbird” and was upset when she discovered this. Brilliant Books also contended that HarperCollins misled readers by marketing the novel as a sequel to “Mockingbird” when it should have been released as an academic piece for scholars and fans and not as a new novel. Yet when word got around about Harper Lee’s “new novel”, everyone wanted to have a piece of the action effectively triggering an increase in sales volume. As the hype dies down and the fickle market gears itself to make room for the next big publication, the controversy surrounding *Go Set a Watchman* will fade to the background and the test of longevity in comparison to *To Kill a Mockingbird* will begin. “Watchman” may never be regarded as a classic text, but as long as lovers of literature continue to read “Mockingbird”, “Watchman” will always find readers. It can therefore, be concluded that marketing and publicity may help in the initial sales of a literary work but its longevity and its popularity as a work of art will depend on the loyalty and interest of the reading community who is more concerned with the content of the work rather than the “paratext” or what the cover of the book says.

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