Atticus Finch, the sins of our fathers and the ‘sad blot’ on their legacies

In 2003, the American Film Institute released a list called “100 Years — 100 Heroes & Villains.” No surprise, James Bond and Indiana Jones were high on the list. But the No. 1 hero was criminal defense lawyer Atticus Finch of “To Kill a Mockingbird.”

It was F. Scott Fitzgerald who once said, “Show me a hero and I’ll write you a tragedy.” So Harper Lee did just that with her recent book “Go Set a Watchman.” If “Mockingbird” is often placed in the young adult section of a bookstore, then “Watchman” belongs on the “Adult Confronting Reality” shelf.

It is an absolute must-read for lawyers.

You know the “Mockingbird” story. Finch is a white lawyer in 1930s Alabama who is assigned the rape of a black man the night before. The black man is the grandson of the white man the night before. The black is black, had fatally run over an old white man the night before. The black, had fatally run over an old white man the night before.

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The next morning, before she can say anything to Atticus, his law partner arrives to tell them that a drunken driver, who is black, had fatally run over an old white man the night before. The black is black, had fatally run over an old white man the night before. The black is black, had fatally run over an old white man the night before.

The law partner tells Atticus that he assumes Finch wants nothing to do with the case. But Scout is relieved to hear her father is not the saintly figure she had once imagined. It is a nuanced, sophisticated story about flawed people coming to terms with the other flawed people they both know and love.

Stephen L. Carter, a Yale Law School professor and an African-American, praises the book for its vision of race and slavery in the South. During the trial, Finch clearly means, he says that the colored, NAACP-paid lawyers are standing around like buzzards down here waiting for things like this to happen. They watch and wait, just for some felony committed by a Negro against a white person [and] they demand Negroes on the juries. [T]hey raise every legal trick in their books [to] try to force the jury to dismiss the case.

Above all else, they try to get the case into federal court.” Atticus then says all this can be avoided if he takes the case and arranges a plea bargain.

The remainder of the book describes Scout’s attempts to deal with the donnee constructed by her realization that her father is not the saintly figure she had once imagined. It is a nuanced, sophisticated story about flawed people coming to terms with the other flawed people they both know and love.

Like the fictional Finch, Madison could also never resolve the issues of race and slavery in the South.

There is a reason slavery is called “America’s original sin.” No one is scathed by the evils it caused. Not Americans today, facing race-related deaths in Baltimore, Staten Island and Cincinnati. Not a Founding Father from the 18th century. And not even the fictional Atticus Finch.