To Kill a Mockingbird: Why Can’t the Finch Family Pronounce the Names of the Prospects for the 1935 Crimson Tide?

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That spring was a good one: the days grew longer and gave us more playing time. Jem’s mind was occupied mostly with the vital statistics of every college football player in the nation. Every night Atticus would read us the sports pages of the newspapers. Alabama might go to the Rose Bowl again this year, judging from its prospects, not one of whose names we could pronounce (Lee 126).

The question of why the Finch family are unable to pronounce the names of the prospects for the 1935 University of Alabama football team does not ever appear to have been broached in To Kill a Mockingbird criticism. Nevertheless, a possible answer, drawing on the team roster, points to a problematic politics lying just below the surface of a novel that is widely considered to be a parable of liberal tolerance.

While I have been unable to locate any contemporaneous newspaper articles listing the “prospects” for the 1935 Crimson Tide – a term I take to refer to those players trying out for the team during spring training – a look at the team’s final roster makes the Finches’ pronunciation problems seem quite puzzling. The players are listed as follows: Adams, Angelich, Baswell, Belcher, Best, Bloodworth, Boozer, Bostick, Bryant, Caldwell, Cochrane, Edwards, Ellis, Fletcher, Foshee, G. Francis, Goldberg, Granger, Gunther, Harkins, Hinson, Hughes, Johnson, Kellar, Kilgrow, King, Kywolsky, Lyons, Machtoff, McDanal, McLeod, McNeeese, Monsky, Moyer, Nichols, Nisbet, Peters, Radford, Redden, Rhordanz, Riley, Roberts, Rogers, Scott, Shepherd, Shoemaker, Smith, Stapp, Teague, Tipton, Walker, Warren, Whatley, White, Williamson, and Young (“1935 Football Archives”). Of these 56 players, 25 are listed on the 1934 roster, meaning that more than half of the 1935 roster were probably among the “prospects” whose names the Finches were supposedly unable to pronounce (“Remember the Rose Bowl”). These include Adams, Belcher, Best, Bostick, Caldwell, Edwards, Ellis, Fletcher, Francis, Harkins, Hinson, Hughes, Johnson, King, Nichols, Redden, Roberts, Shoemaker, Tipton, and Warren. These would seem to be fairly common names that would appear to pose no real problems of pronunciation for Southerners, educated or otherwise, in the 1930s. Indeed, the word “best” is ascribed in direct speech to Atticus (Lee 120, 124, 324), Jem (Lee 246), and Scout (Lee 305), without any suggestion of linguistic difficulty. Scout likewise identifies “Old Tim Johnson” (Lee 105), the rabid dog, with seemingly unproblematic diction. Thus, it might be argued, the Finches’ asserted inability to pronounce single name of the Tide’s prospects is best explained as the product of a narrator prone to emphasis through overstatement. – “A day was twenty-four hours long but seemed longer” (Lee 5). The questions of what is being exaggerated, and why, nevertheless remain unanswered.

In 1935, the Alabama State Legislature passed a eugenics bill so egregious that Governor Bibb Graves – a Klan member with eugenic sympathies – sought an advisory opinion from the Alabama Supreme Court concerning its constitutionality.¹ The Court unanimously agreed that the bill violated the constitution and Graves vetoed it (Dorr 33). Nevertheless, the 1919 law permitting the involuntary commitment of the “feeble-minded” and sterilization of those so committed, remained on the books and in use. This concern with good breeding – embodied in To Kill a Mockingbird by Aunt Alexandra (Lee 147) – also extended to encouraging immigrants from the so-
called “advanced” nations and discouraging/banning immigration from the supposedly “backward” ones. In 1924, America passed the Johnson–Reed Immigration Act limiting total immigration, effectively banning immigration from Asia, and imposing quotas that adversely affected Greeks, Italians, Jews, Poles, and Slavs (Molina 1). It is in this anti-immigrant context that Scout’s observation about the Finches’ ability to pronounce “not one” of the names of the prospects for the Crimson Tide is best understood.

Although it is hard to say with absolute certainty which names would have posed linguistic challenges to the Finches, it is, perhaps, not too great a leap to suggest that they might have included Foshee, Kywolsky, Machtoff, Monsky, and Moye. Such names would, no doubt, have struck the Finches as unusual and, above all, as foreign. In the anti-immigrant atmosphere of the times – an atmosphere suggested in To Kill a Mockingbird by Miss Tutti’s claim that “Syrians” were responsible for the theft of her furniture (Lee 289) – Scout’s assertion that neither she, Jem, nor Atticus could pronounce the names of the Tide’s 1935 prospects should, perhaps, be understood as a hyperbole indicative of a shared prejudice, with a few names being inflated into all names through the mathematics of bigotry.

The publication in 2015 of Go Set a Watchman, a Harper Lee novel which many took to be an earlier draft of To Kill a Mockingbird, generated considerable furore when it was revealed that Atticus Finch, upstanding paragon of liberal virtue in Mockingbird, was an unreconstructed bigot (Henninger). Nevertheless, that the Atticus of To Kill a Mockingbird seems to have shared his children’s conflation of “few” with “all” with regard to immigrants on the roster of the Crimson Tide – Scout nowhere suggests that he dissented from the opinion – might indicate that he was always closer to the Atticus of Go Set a Watchman than many might be willing to admit.

Note


Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Works cited


