


Boo Radley know implicitly, and that the Finch children never fully comprehend.

Our nostalgia for the heartwarming message we took away from *To Kill a Mockingbird* in high school protects us from the harsh reality that history and experience can make people irreconcilably different. It also relieves us of the responsibility of examining our own attitudes and beliefs about others, and it allows us the illusion that everyone is just like us—and strikingly, the Finch children are fond of referring to “ordinary folks like us.” That’s an illusion that can easily invalidate others’ distinct identities.

Metaphor is one of literature’s fundamental tools. It shows us not so much how particular things are alike, but how we can *make* them alike and how we establish the grounds that allow us to perceive similarity in the first place. *To Kill a Mockingbird*’s title metaphor illustrates the ways we often make others little more than slightly exotic versions of ourselves. Atticus explains, in the work’s most often cited phrase, that mockingbirds “don’t do one thing but make music for us to enjoy,” and that’s why it’s a sin to kill them. But we recall that mockingbirds imitate the calls of other birds; they don’t sing their own songs. When we presume easy identification with other people, we assume that, like mockingbirds, they will sing our song, conform to our worldview, abandon their own unique voices, and sing in unison along with us—all for us to enjoy.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* has endured as a complex literary phenomenon for half a century in part because it establishes a tension separating simplistic views of Americans’ relationships with one another and sophisticated understandings of our history and culture. The challenge in reading this great American novel is not to be beguiled by its form. Remember that it’s precisely when you think you’ve understood others’ perspectives that you must recall you are not in their skin. A lifetime of experience is not assumable. We’re arrogant—and we’re drawing on a learned ignorance that adults cannot afford—when we claim otherwise. We must learn the difference between understanding others and imposing our views on them. That’s a lesson worthy of this masterpiece of American literature. And it’s not kids’ stuff. 

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STUDENT LIFE

By the Numbers

Students aren’t the only ones getting ready for a new academic year. Here are some of the figures that add up to 2010-11.

5,036

undergraduates estimated to arrive at the College and the Eastman School



1,600 items placed on reserve at Sibley Library for Eastman courses

150 pounds of chocolate-covered pretzels in the preliminary order for the Common Market

800

pounds of eggs ready at Danforth Dining Hall for one week’s worth of meals

Six thousand pounds worth of new pizza oven installed at Wilson Commons

29 shuttle buses to take students to Wilson Day sites

18,000 feet of glass cleaned at Wilson Commons

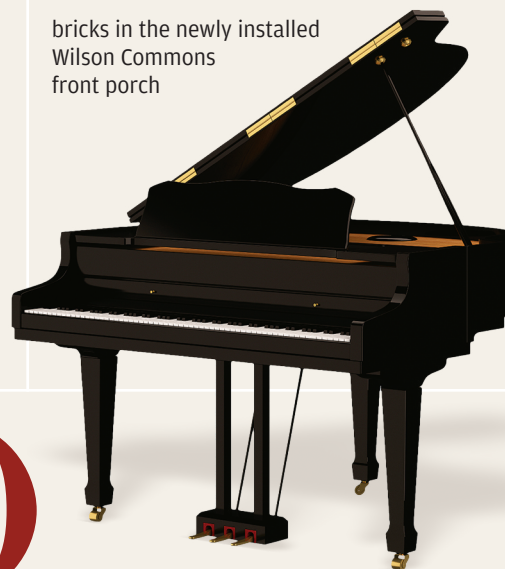


500

gallons of paint used in repainting River Campus residence halls

4,400

bricks in the newly installed Wilson Commons front porch



270

pianos tuned at the Eastman School

—Kathleen McGarvey