A Book That has Influenced Me

There have been many books that have influenced me over the years, but none have had such a lasting effect as did *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The story is about a 12 year old girl, growing up in a small southern town, who is repeatedly faced with questions about racism and equality. The girl's father is a trial lawyer in town who takes on the case of a young black man, Tom, who has been charged with raping a teenage white girl, the daughter of one of the white men in town.

The story revolves around the trial, and how the girl's father tries to explain to her that even though our country stands for truth and justice, unfortunately, justice often is not colorblind. The girl watches as the trial progresses, and as evidence is presented by the father that clearly shows that Tom was not the guilty party. For one thing, the girl was struck repeatedly on the left side of the face. Tom had a useless left arm, due to an injury from long ago, and in fact the girl's father was left handed. Unfortunately, the people of the town did not believe this meant too much, and tried to lynch Tom before the verdict could be reached. It was obvious to most that there was enough evidence to acquit, and the girl's father felt confident with the situation.
This did nothing to sway the all-white jury, and a guilty sentence was handed down. It was at this point that I really grew quite angry. I remember talking to my teacher for a long time, describing how it was impossible for Tom to be guilty, and asking why I couldn't contact the author and tell him how it was ridiculous to convict Tom. I vividly remember her laughing, and telling me that I was getting a glimpse of the real world; so much for justice I thought.

That was my first real exposure to "educational fiction". The story did in fact make me think about the parallels, (or lack thereof) between this small town, and Cambridge. Having gone to school in the Martin Luther King Open School all my life, and having grown up in culturally diverse Cambridge since the age of 4, this made it a lot more interesting to consider what would happen if the people I knew didn't believe in equality for all. I had the unpleasant experience of realizing, as I grew up, that even though Cambridge was so diverse, it still had a long way to go before it could be recognized as a place where all people could live together peacefully, regardless of color.

After reading the book, I came to realize that much of what is depicted in the novel is reality, even today. There are still many places in this country, such as Forsythe County, Georgia, where equality for all does not exist. We have examples as close to home as South Boston and Roslindale. I think that authors such as Harper Lee, the author of this book, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and others who describe such injustice play an invaluable role in educating society as to the realities of our times, and the limitations of our progress. I know that I shall remember the lessons of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and I can only hope that someday this book will be read in the schools of Meridien, Connecticut, and South Boston, Massachusetts. Then, and only then can it be acknowledged that society has finally awoken and realized that the "dream" is well within our grasp.