

**Q: How did you approach getting inside the head of a fifteen-year-old girl? Frances is strong--she is changed but she also changes those around her. How did the trial serve as a catalyst for her evolution as a character?**

**A:** When I create stories, somehow I always tell them from the perspective of young people. I'm not sure why; maybe I never grew up. So the fifteen-year-old part wasn't hard. In writing female characters, I just try to imagine myself in their place, with no special allowances for gender. I figure that whether my characters are male or female, people after all are just people. As for Frances's evolution as a character, to me the key was her love for John Scopes. Without it, I don't believe she would have questioned her parents or her beliefs.

**Q: How does publicity change people in the story? Why does Johnny destroy all the lecture circuit offers?**

**A:** Publicity is a critical part of the story, because it brings out some of the key questions: What is truth? How far can you bend it before it becomes a lie? When you begin to doubt what you've been taught, how do you respond? Johnny destroys the lecture-circuit offers because he comes to believe that accepting them and the huge fees he was offered would mean abandoning his principles—in effect, selling his soul. By the way, he received and rejected these offers in real life as well as in my story.

**Q: What lessons does *Monkey Town* have for us today, in a world where mediocre musician's personal troubles merit more news coverage than soldiers dying in foreign wars?**

**A:** Today we've taken publicity to a level far beyond anything imagined by F.E. Robinson and the town fathers of Dayton. What both sides did to John Scopes, making him a symbol and using him for their own purposes, is done routinely today to virtually everyone in the public eye, including movie stars, musicians, politicians, and the people we see on reality shows. Fight the impulse! Look behind the façade to discover the real person, as Frances did with H.L. Mencken.

## About the Author

Ronald Kidd is the author of *Dunker*, winner of a Children's Choice Award; *Second Fiddle*, and Edgar Award nominee and a Library of Congress Children's Book of the Year, *Who is Felix the Great?*, a Books for the Teen Age listing; and *Sizzle & Splat*, a *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year. He is a two-time O'Neill playwright who lives and works in Nashville, Tennessee.

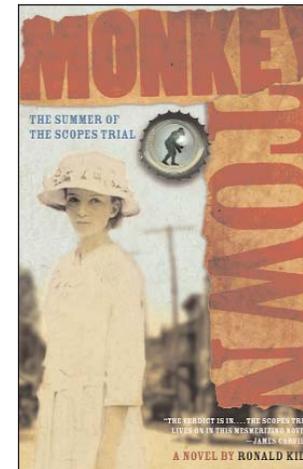
---

History   Science   Religion   Journalism   Law  
Literature   Psychology

---

# A Resource Guide

## Monkey Town The Summer of the Scopes Trial



by **Ronald Kidd**

“An excellent read and a wonderful piece of literature. . . .  
Reminiscent of Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*.”  
--*School Library Journal* (starred review)

**Selected as Tennessee’s Official State  
Book for the National Book Festival, 2007**

## Summary

The year is 1925 and Dayton, Tennessee is the hottest and the sleepest place on earth. That is, until the day fifteen-year-old Frances Robinson's dad has John Scopes arrested for teaching evolutionary theory in schools. Overnight, the world's most famous thinkers are flocking to Dayton to ask, "Are people really descended from monkeys?"

Suddenly everything Frances has ever believed about the world, her father, and truth seems like a lie. And worst of all, Johnny Scopes, her secret crush, is crumbling right beside her. Sleepy Dayton wakes up as it hosts some of America's most famous thinkers including H.L. Mencken, Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan.

## Discussion Questions

1) Frances struggles with the nature of truth as the trial progresses. How do her ideas about the nature of truth change over the course of the book? How do our beliefs shape what we believe to be true? Think about your own life. Have you ever had a moment when you realized you were completely wrong about something or someone? What action did you take? What did you learn from the experience? What does Frances learn about truth by the end of the story?

2) How does religion enter into the debate about evolution during the trial? How does Frances respond? Can you imagine this trial happening today? Why or why not?

3) H.L. Mencken was probably the most famous curmudgeon in the early 20th century and he really did cover the Scopes trial. Discuss his approach to reporting the story. At what point does he begin to influence the story? What do you think a journalist's mission is? Does Mencken fit the job description? Do the journalists today fit the ideal of what a journalist should be?

## Activities

**Make Your Own Monkey Town.** Create your own version of the Scopes trial but change the names to students in your class. Let them choose which side of the debate to be on and invite a local representative of the legal profession to preside over the exercise. Does it turn out differently? Think about the external factors affected the outcome of the Scopes trial. What outside pressures have been revealed during your version of the trial?

**Evolution is still in the news.** Ask students to create their own news story on evolution by interviewing family, community members and so forth. Create a survey that can be taken anonymously and place it in a high traffic area of the school. How do the poll results compare with the interviews?

**Find the story!** What novel is waiting to be written about an episode in your local history? Interview the local public library director or archivist. If you are close enough, plan a trip to your state library and archives and see history come alive.

## Interview with Ronald Kidd

**Question:** What drew you to the Scopes trial? Which came first the idea of the Scopes Trial or the story of Frances and her teacher crush?

**Answer:** Honestly, I had never thought much about the Scopes trial until I learned that the family of my friend Craig Gabbert had been at the center of it. Craig's grandfather F.E. Robinson owned the drugstore where the idea for the trial was cooked up, and Craig's mother Frances Robinson Gabbert was there to see it all. Their involvement fired my imagination and gave me the idea for the book. The story of young Frances came later, along with her crush on John Scopes, which is fictional.

**Q:** What challenges did you have creating a fictional work that contains so many historical people? What preconceptions were dashed in the research process? Which were borne out?

**A:** For me, the biggest challenge of writing historical fiction is balancing history and fiction. I fall in love with the fascinating historical figures—in this story there were dozens of them—and am tempted to use every single one.

Of course, that gets in the way of the story. Regarding preconceptions, I started out thinking the reason for the trial was primarily legal, but in the course of my research I found out that in fact it began as a publicity scheme, as we learn in the story. And I started out thinking both William Jennings Bryan and H.L. Mencken were more complex and interesting than other accounts of the trial had shown them to be; that judgment was borne out by my research, and I've tried to present them in that way.

~continued~