

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

by Mark Twain

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About the author

Samuel Langhorne Clemens was born in Florida, Missouri, in 1835, and was raised in the river town of Hannibal. He left school at 12 and apprenticed as a typesetter, and later learned to pilot steamboats. When the Mississippi was closed to commercial traffic during the Civil War, Clemens relocated to Nevada and began writing humorous pieces for newspapers. Over the next years he traveled extensively. His collections *The Innocents Abroad* and *Roughing It* established his reputation as a travel writer, for which he was better known by many readers than as a novelist. In 1870, he married Olivia Langdon, and they eventually settled in Hartford, Connecticut. Though he continued to flourish as a writer, he suffered some financial setbacks and was forced into bankruptcy. He gradually fought his way back to solvency through writing and lecture tours that took him around the world. Within a short span, Clemens lost his wife and two daughters, and his health began to fail. Although his acerbic wit remained, his outlook darkened considerably in his later works. He died of heart disease on April 21, 1910.

Discussion questions

The culture of 19th-century Missouri affects Huck in many ways—his values, his assumptions, his rebelliousness, his dreams—are born of it. How does his particular upbringing and early environment shape Huck? What choices does his culture require of him?

Attitudes about race and “racial epithets” have evolved since Huck Finn’s publication. Some people feel that although the novel’s language is historically accurate, school children ought not to be exposed to it, that the depiction of Jim as a slave degrades contemporary African-Americans. Some argue that Twain himself was racist—or didn’t adequately condemn racism. Others feel the novel’s value as literature overshadows these concerns. What do you think?

A character’s flaws are often what attract us, what make the character human and memorable. Is Huck flawed? Does he use bad judgment (and why)? How does he judge himself? What evidence do you find for Huck’s growth and maturation over the course of the novel? What qualities make up maturity?

If it’s been years since you read *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, what surprises you most about this re-reading? If you’re reading it for the first time, how does it measure up to the cultural icon you’ve heard about?

Additional reading

Bernard DeVoto, ed. *Letters from the Earth*, 1962.
Mark Twain. *The Innocents Abroad*, 1869.
Roughing It, 1872.
The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, 1876.
Life on the Mississippi, 1883.
A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, 1889.
The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg, 1899.

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"All modern literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*," Ernest Hemingway proclaimed in *Green Hills of Africa*, a judgment shared by H. L. Mencken, among others. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) is embedded in our national consciousness as perhaps no other novel is. Enormously popular for over a century, it's also been the subject of unending controversy. It was pulled from library shelves in Concord, Massachusetts, the same year it was published, and remains fixed in the crosshairs of would-be book censors. Some even argue that it is not about the Midwest, although it has long been associated with the region.

What is it about Huck Finn that has pleased so many readers for so long, and has tweaked an exposed nerve of so many others? How does the culture Huck comes from—slaveholding, mid-19th-century Missouri—influence his character and his judgments? It may not be possible to read Huck Finn with fresh eyes, but we should try. We should enjoy it page by page, ignoring the battalion of scholars and high-school English teachers breathing down our necks.

We should feel free to laugh. Huck Finn is a very funny book in spots—Twain was, after all, a humorist, capable of buffoonery and stinging satire. It's hard not to howl at his send-up of piously morbid poetry in Chapter 17, for example. We should admire Huck's gift for splicing out new life stories as needed. We should wince at his adolescent tricking of Jim in Chapter 15, and feel his confusion as he straddles the border between childhood and adulthood, and the torturous immediacy of his accepting "damnation" as he elects to help Jim.

At the same time, the more we know about the novel, the more interesting it becomes. Generations of scholars have dissected it, and while their findings are primarily of concern to other specialists, they do enrich the context we read the book in. It helps to know that Twain

began the book during the corruption of the Grant Administration. As scholar Emory Elliott writes, Twain used Huck's trip down the Mississippi in the 1840s as an allegory for life in the 1870s and 1880s:

While the action is actually set in the pre-war South, most of the social and political criticism is aimed at the abject conditions of American business, politics, and race relations of the post-Reconstruction period, and the eroding moral and ethical values of the nation as Clemens perceived them in the 1880s.

Before settling on "Mark Twain," Samuel Clemens had tried out five earlier pen names, including Sergeant Blab and Quintus Curtius Snodgrass. It's often said he took the name from a boatman's term meaning the water was two fathoms deep, the danger point for a steamboat. The truth is more complicated. As a fledgling journalist, Clemens had parodied the writing of an esteemed riverboat captain named Isaiiah Sellers, who signed his pieces "Mark Twain." Sellers never published another word after this lambasting, and went to his grave hating Clemens. Using the man's castoff byline was an act of contrition, Twain confesses in *Life on the Mississippi*, and a vow to honor truth.

Soon after finishing *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), Twain began *Huck Finn*, his companion book. Right away he made the key decision to let Huck tell the story in his own voice—a bold, "even defiant" move, contends Emory Elliott, since Huck's character in Tom Sawyer had been taken as an affront to polite society. It was "a blow at the self-assured respectability of contemporary American arts and letters from which it has never recovered."

Huck Finn is an example of several literary genres. Like DeFoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) or Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones* (1749), it's "picaresque"—it follows a roguish or 'low-born' hero through a series of comic, not-necessarily-related exploits (flying by the seat of the pants is a central element). *Huck Finn* is also a coming-of-age story in which the hero emerges stronger or wiser or more whole by book's end. We might also call *Huck Finn* the prototype of the American "road" novel—precursor to *The Grapes of Wrath* and Jack Kerouac and a host of films from *Easy Rider* to *Thelma and Louise*.

For Huck, "coming-of-age" means learning to see for himself. As he floats from the Midwest into the Deep South, he also, unwittingly, sets into motion a moral journey: How will he respond to Jim's quest for freedom? In the 1840s, Missouri was a slave state. Illinois, across the river, had banned slavery at statehood, but the issue was still being played out in the courts; Jim would not have been safe there. This was the culture Huck came from.

Huck's elders in Missouri were God-fearing Christians who nonetheless believed in—or tolerated—the ownership of human chattels. Huck's natural inclination is to treat Jim as a friend and source of wisdom (even, it can be argued, as a surrogate father). The two are bonded by the raft, by their status as outcasts and their shared superstitions. Both also share a certain passivity, a mute acceptance of how things are. For all that, Huck wrestles with whether or not to turn Jim in—he believes he must. His challenge is to throw off what he's been taught, and trust his own moral gyro.

We're left with a final question: What's next for Huck? His connection to "village life" has always been tenuous—Miss Watson scrubbed him up and got him some schooling, but he's a boy who'll never be at ease in good clothes. He's happiest lazing naked on the raft. After his new

friend Buck is killed in the feud with the Shepherdsons, Huck tells us:

... there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft.

The trouble with a raft is that the river eventually ends. Once the novel's plot is wrapped up—Tom nearly healed from a (well-deserved) bullet in the leg; Jim freed and ready to begin the task of buying his wife out of captivity—Huck gets in the last words:

But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before.

Perhaps it's this, the yearning to light out for the unknown, that gives the novel its final resonance, that makes it so quintessentially American.