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
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.
“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 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.

At the same time, the more we know about the novel, the more interesting it becomes. 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 Isaiah 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 rogish 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 or—depending on the telling—*Tom Sawyer* is going to* Thelma and Louise,* *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and *Moll Flanders* (1722) are all descendant of the *Huck Finn* model.

Huck’s *history* of the South has long been associated with the region. As a boatman, Isaiah 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. 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 quintessentially American.