



[Adventures of Huckleberry Finn](#), by Mark Twain

In A Nutshell

Ernest Hemingway probably summed it up best when he said, "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*" (source). We're dealing with quite a book here. First published in 1884, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain's follow-up to the *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, carved new territory into the American literary landscape in several ways.

As one of the first novels to use a specific region's vernacular in its narration, the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* set a precedent for many other distinctly American works to follow. Some readers didn't exactly "get" this new colloquial style, however. Accustomed to the proper prose of Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Emerson, some readers didn't know what to do with Huck's particular way of storytelling.

Aside from the novel's new style of writing, Twain's decision to use thirteen-year-old Huck as the narrator allowed him to include certain content that a more *civilized* narrator probably would have left out. At first, Twain's novel was labeled crass by some readers. The book was even banned in schools for its use of the word "nigger," which is ironic, given that the novel is up in arms over slavery. Even today, the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* makes "Banned Books" lists.

Twain's novel jumped head first into one of the biggest issues of its day: racism. Although the

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Emancipation Proclamation had been signed over two decades before *Huckleberry Finn*'s original publication date, African-Americans everywhere were still victims of oppression and racism. They were technically "free," but often by name only in Reconstruction-era America. Many southerners were bitter about the outcome of the Civil War.

By guiding his characters through several states of the Confederacy, Twain was able to reveal the hypocrisy of many pre-war southern communities. As a southerner himself, Twain had first-hand experiences to draw on, and he was able to walk the fine line between realistic depiction and ironic farce. Not to mention, Twain created the now-iconic character of Jim, a runaway slave whose convinces Huck that African-Americans people are not only deserving of freedom, but also that equality is a goal for which we all should be fighting.

The *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is now considered to be one of the Great American Novels, mostly due to how it so heartily champions the American ideals of freedom, independence, and rugged individualism. Huck's dedication to his own moral standards and his bold sense of adventure and self-sufficiency have earned him a place in the All-American Hall of Fame. In addition, Twain is a hilarious storyteller, and the plot of this novel is a roller-coaster ride of moral dilemmas – so trust us when we say that if you haven't taken the ride yet, you probably should.

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- 1 There is a lot of criticism surrounding the last few chapters of the book, where Tom Sawyer comes into play. Many believe the playfulness of these chapters ruins the serious message of the book. On the other hand, it does raise some bigger questions that we wouldn't get without Tom. What do you think?
- 2 The biggest big picture question of all is this: how does Huck effectively change over the course of the novel? Or does he change at all?
- 3 How does the comic nature of Huck's youthful narration work together with the book's examination of racism and slavery? How is it possible that such serious issues can be addressed with a seemingly light tone?

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