Signet Classics

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

WITH
A NEW
AFTERWORD
BY JAYNE
ANNE PHILLIPS

MARK TWAIN

Mark Twain

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Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

"Tom Sawyer's Comrade"

SCENE:

THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY

TIME:

EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

With an Introduction by
Padgett Powell
and a New Afterword by
Jayne Anne Phillips

SIGNET CLASSICS

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In his person and in his pursuits, **Mark Twain** (1835–1910) was a man of extraordinary contrasts. Although he left school at twelve, when his father died, he was eventually awarded honorary degrees from Yale University, the University of Missouri, and Oxford University. His career encompassed such varied occupations as printer, Mississippi riverboat pilot, journalist, travel writer, and publisher. He made fortunes from his writing, but toward the end of his life he had to resort to lecture tours to pay his debts. He was hot-tempered, profane, and sentimental—and also pessimistic, cynical, and tortured by self-doubt. His nostalgia for the past helped produce some of his best books. He lives in American letters as a great artist, the writer whom William Dean Howells called "the Lincoln of our literature."

Padgett Powell, professor of writing at the University of Florida, has received the Prix de Rome of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Whiting Writer's Award, the Pushcart Prize, and a nomination for the American Book Award. Among his published works are two collections of stories and the novels *Mrs. Hollingsworth's Men*, *Edisto*, and *A Woman Named Drown*. His stories have appeared in numerous anthologies, including *The Best American Short Stories* and *Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards.*

Jayne Anne Phillips is Professor of English and Director of the MFA Program at Rutgers-Newark, the State University of New Jersey. She is the author of two widely anthologized collections of stories, *Black Tickets* and *Fast Lanes*, and three novels, *Machine Dreams*, *Shelter*, and *MotherKind*. Her works have been published in nine languages. She is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, a Bunting Fellowship, a Howard Foundation Fellowship, a National Book Critics Circle nomination, and an Orange Prize (UK) nomination. She was awarded the Sue Kaufman Prize (1980) and an Academy Award in Literature (1997) from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Her most recent novel is *Termite*. She lives in Boston and New York.

INTRODUCTION

There is at the back of every artist's mind something like a pattern or a type of architecture. The original quality in any man of imagination is imagery. It is a thing like the landscape of his dreams; the sort of world he would like to make or in which he would wish to wander; the strange flora and fauna of his own secret planet; the sort of thing he likes to think about. This general atmosphere, and pattern or structure of growth, governs all his creations, however varied.

—G. K. CHESTERTON

Before getting to the business at hand, in which I do not much believe, permit me to download.

There are nineteen rules governing literary art in the domain of romantic fiction—some say twenty-two. In *Deerslayer* Cooper violated eighteen of them. These eighteen require

5. They require that when the personages of a tale deal in conversation, the talk shall sound like human talk, and be talk such as human beings would be likely to talk in the given circumstances, and have a discoverable meaning, also a discoverable purpose and a show of relevancy, and remain in the neighborhood of the subject in hand, and be interesting to the reader, and help out the tale, and stop when the people cannot think of anything more to say. But this requirement has been ignored from the beginning of the *Deerslayer* to the end of it.

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In addition to these large rules there are some little ones. These require that the author shall

12. *Say* what he is proposing to say, not merely come near it.
13. Use the right word, not its second cousin.
14. Eschew surplusage.
15. Not omit necessary details.
16. Avoid slovenliness of form.
17. Use good grammar.
18. Employ a simple and straightforward style.

Even these seven are coldly and persistently violated in the *Deerslayer* tale.

—Mark Twain, "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses"

The Concord [Massachusetts] Public Library committee has decided to exclude Mark Twain's latest book from the library. One member of the committee says that, while he does not wish to call it immoral, he thinks it contains but little humor, and that of a very coarse type. He regards it as the veriest trash. The librarian and other members of the committee entertain similar views, characterizing it as rough, coarse, and inelegant, dealing with a series of experiences not elevating, the whole book being more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people.

—*Boston Transcript,* March 17, 1885

We have had writers of rhetoric who had the good fortune to find a little . . . of how things, actual things, can be, whales for instance, and this knowledge is wrapped in the rhetoric like plums in a pudding.

Emerson, Hawthorne, Whittier, and Company . . . all these men were gentlemen, or wished to be. They were all very respectable. They did not use the words that people always have used in speech, the words that survive in language. Nor would you gather that they had bodies. They had minds, yes. Nice, dry, clean minds.

—Ernest Hemingway, *Green Hills of Africa,* 1935

* * *

Huck Finn had no use for the nice bright clean New England boy advancing under the motto *Excelsior.* When Aunt Sally threatened to "sivilize" him, he decided to "light out for the territory ahead." There was a time when it was normal for American children to feel that "self-improvement" propaganda would lead us not up the mountain but into the sloughs.

—Saul Bellow, 1992

If "great" literature has any purpose, it is to help us face up to our responsibilities instead of enabling us to avoid them once again by lighting out for the territory.

—Jane Smiley, 1996

The principal aim of these opinionmakers is to immerse us again and again in a marinade of "correctness" or respectability.

—Saul Bellow, 1992

Ernest Hemingway, thinking of himself, as always, once said that all American literature grew out of *Huck Finn.*

—Jane Smiley, 1996

All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn.* If you read it you must stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys. That is the real end. The rest is just cheating. But it's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since.

—Ernest Hemingway, 1935

The above constitutes the critical primer to *Huckleberry Finn.* Below is the political primer:

People who have the best of everything also desire the best opinions. Top of the line. The right sort of thinking, moreover, makes social intercourse smoother.

The wrong sort exposes you to accusations of insensitivity, misogyny, and, perhaps worst of all, racism.

—Saul Bellow, 1992

From the 1950s on, groups of black parents—some with white sympathizers among school faculties and administrators—have been concentrating on the 160 appearances of "nigger" in the book. Then, as now, the book was full of the word "nigger." Why, John Martin, the principal of the Mark Twain Intermediate School in Fairfax County—who agreed with the Human Relations Committee that *Huckleberry Finn* is racist—told National Public Radio that the word is repeated some 160 times in the book.

—Nat Hentoff, 1992

Add to this the presence in the novel of the most powerful racial epithet in English—the word appears 213 times—and it is evident why *Huckleberry Finn* legitimately concerns African-American parents sending their children into racially mixed classrooms.

—Allen Carey-Webb, 1993

Summing up, critically and politically, we have:

The wrong sort exposes you to accusations of insensitivity, misogyny, and, perhaps worst of all, racism

more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people.

They were all very respectable. Nice, dry, clean minds.

Huck Finn had no use for the nice bright clean New England boy

told National Public Radio that the word is repeated some 160 times in the book.

* * *

> The principal aim of these opinionmakers is to immerse us again and again in a marinade of "correctness" or respectability.
>
> They were all very respectable.

The book in your hands has inspired some comment, a ton of it. The quotations above serve, I hope, as navigational high points in the vast topography of this comment, like peaks in meringue.

The author of the book in your hands would, I have no doubt, call most of the comment the book has inspired rubbage. That is one of his words which is not a word. Since about 1950 the rubbage has been metarubbage, of course: criticism of criticism. The book itself, a misfit like its eponymous hero, a phrase I have waited all my short literary life to use, has been spanked very hard and left to stand, itself, forgotten, in a corner.

It is a pile of verbiage—at first critical, now political—that no sane man would add to. A lot of the most distinguished, distinctive verbiage is to be found in introductions to the book in your hand, or, I should say, in other introductions to other editions of the book in your hand, which, the editions, are themselves weighed by the ton, and a sane man would be doubly advised not to hazard yet another introduction to the book in your hand.

In uttering what little I have so far, and in boding ill (as you can tell by looking down the page) to utter more yet, I have alerted you that your introducer may not be altogether sane. As a further kindness to you, which none of my predeceasing rubbage makers has extended you, I counsel you to quit this introduction now and read the book. This is the way Twain would have wanted it. Respect the wishes of the dead. He was most fond of respect, both real and facetious, for the dead and for the wishes of the dead.

A moment of silence as you quit these pages and turn to the book proper, then.

Alas, you deign not go. Let us eschew concerns for sanity and proceed. I am not altogether sane and will fashion yet another unnecessary introduction to this book

because I apparently want to prove it. To my mind the opportunity to insult a successful ape comes from the hand of Providence—no, strike that. I mean the opportunity to introduce a successful book comes from the hand of Providence. I got excited. That the opportunity to insult a successful ape comes from the hand of Providence was so in *Enoch Emory*'s mind, Enoch Emory who is a character of Flannery O'Connor, Flannery O'Connor who is to *my* mind a true descendant of Mark Twain, in style and in mettle. Links like this one, to the not altogether sane mind mistrustful of introduction altogether, have solid bearing on, and belong in, another unnecessary introduction to *Huckleberry Finn.* There are more.

Here is one of them: the only introduction to a book I have ever read is by Flannery O'Connor, to one of her own books, the one, in fact, in which Enoch Emory insults an ape. I began reading that introduction because it was by the author to the book in question, to my mind the only authority sufficient to introduce a book and sufficient to deem its introduction merited, and I completed the introduction only because it was under a page long. I cite my history with introduction reading as further evidence of my unsuitability to the task at hand.

When Flannery O'Connor wrote of Enoch Emory "To his mind, an opportunity to insult a successful ape came from the hand of Providence," the ape in question is Gonga the Giant Jungle Monarch. Gonga is a man in a gorilla suit, and he is very successful.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a successful gorilla if ever there was one on earth. But, like a gorilla, certainly like a man in a gorilla suit, it perplexes. Is it human or beast? To what extent either? Is it gentle or not—kind or cruel (the Jim question)? Is it endangered (banned when and where now, attacked by what school board, what riot of parents seeking its extinction)? And of its success, there is no accurate accounting of the number of editions, the number of copies sold, in how many languages—it is, liked or disliked, one of the most popular books in the world.

So why insult a successful book with an introduction?

Your introducer is perhaps the last literary boy on earth to have swallowed whole the tenets of New Criticism. These tenets proscribe, first, all manner of biographical inspection of the author of literary works; they allow critical explication of the text alone, *after* the text has been read, when and if its explication might enlighten a reader who has proved not sufficiently nimble on his own to receive the work in all its resonances and nuances, and these resonances and nuances are happily and naively exclusive of all the correct concerns of our day. The last thing allowed, I should think, in this my obsolete but fond critical orientation, is comment *before* the work at hand is read. In the present case, what is more, the author of the book, by temperament the original New Critic, has, like Miss O'Connor, elegantly introduced the book himself:

> NOTICE
>
> Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.
>
> BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR
> PER G.G., CHIEF OF ORDNANCE

Twain was of course disingenuous with the nailing up of this handbill; he knew that sleeping plot fiends and narrative hounds and moral mongers would be drawn by it from the very woodwork. He had no idea how many "persons" would volunteer for prosecution, banishment, the firing squad, many of them voting to effect similar punishments unto him.

Nobody knows the trouble this book has seen. William Dean Howells called Mark Twain "the Lincoln of our literature"; if Mr. Howells could have waited a hundred years, he could have compared Twain more tellingly to Richard Nixon. *Huckleberry Finn* is Twain's Watergate.

Twain could not have foreseen the most recent debates over the book, but the earliest verdict (the veriest trash more suited to the slums) pleased him entirely: "I

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never cared what became of the cultured classes; they could go to the theater and the opera, they had no use for me and the melodeon. I always hunted for the bigger game—the masses." In the slums were the masses. He was on his game. By Twain's lights—the aesthetic by which he slays James Fenimore Cooper and his *Deerslayer*—to be judged inelegant by respectable people was the surest sign he was writing well. The aesthetic of deliberate "inelegance" T. S. Eliot would call no less than "a new discovery in the English language," and Hemingway would, thinking of himself, as always, embrace it next and supply the energy for the quantum leap in the critical din over *Huckleberry Finn* with the enigmatic homage in *Green Hills of Africa,* which bears repeating:

> All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn.* If you read it you must stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys. That is the real end. The rest is just cheating. But it's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since.

This remark is, in Huck Finn's locution, the sockdolager. There is no more seminal nougat of critical utterance in American letters, unless it is Eliot's pronouncement in 1920 on objective correlative, which is strangely apt. That utterance—

> The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately released.

—will be seconded in substance but countered stylistically, and you might say Twainly, by one from Hemingway in 1936:

> I was trying to write then and I found the greatest difficulty, aside from knowing what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel, was to put down what really happened in action; what the actual things were which produced the emotion that you experienced.
>
> . . . but the real thing, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion and which would be as valid in a year or in ten years or, with luck and if you stated it purely enough, always, was beyond me and I was working very hard to get it.

and forms the intellectual basis, as it were, for Hemingway's affection for Eliot:

> It is agreed by most of the people I know that Conrad is a bad writer, just as it is agreed that T. S. Eliot is a good writer. If I knew that by grinding Mr. Eliot into a fine dry powder and sprinkling that powder over Mr. Conrad's grave Mr. Conrad would shortly appear, looking very annoyed at the forced return, and commence writing I would leave for London early tomorrow morning with a sausage grinder.

This is the relationship between Eliot and Hemingway—called fondly today, invariably, adversarial—with which we are accustomed, and comfortable, and it serves as background, a kind of critical Muzak, to one of the truly bizarre notes in the music of the critical spheres: in 1950 Eliot weighs in seconding Hemingway in assessing *Huckleberry Finn* great, and incidentally invoking the greatness of Conrad. Either things are truly queer, or the book is truly a force to be reckoned with, if it brings Eliot and Hemingway to the same side of the table. (The prospect of a fracas on the same side of the table is imminent, though. Contrast Eliot making myth for *Finn* in 1950:

> But Mark Twain is a native, and the River God is his God. It is as a native that he accepts the River God, and it is the subjection of Man that gives to Man

> his dignity. For without some kind of God, Man is not even very interesting. In its beginning, it is not yet the River; in its end, it is no longer the River.

and Hemingway resisting myth making for *Old Man and the Sea* in 1952:

> There isn't any symbolysm (mis-spelled). The sea is the sea. The old man is an old man. The boy is a boy and the fish is a fish. The shark is all sharks no better and no worse. All the symbolism that people say is shit.

Hemingway's interested-in-himself-as-always sockdolager passage defines the terms of the war that will be waged over the book. The Great White Fathers, except some, think the book the veriest greatest, and squabble, except sometimes, about the ill-fitting end. The non-great non-white non-fathers, except some, think it the veriest trash, mostly because of that mysteriously increasing word which with progressive dunkings in the marinade of correctness becomes an unnamed "racial epithet." It is a familiar fight: the Redcoat Canoneers vs. the motley, people-based guerillas.

I was taught that the job of a good book is not to improve but to inspire. Literature's job is *not* to gas us morally. If instruct it must, let it be not in living but in *writing.* I don't care if Huck Finn, the boy or the book, is noble or ig-; if Jim is man or n-; if Twain is saint or bastard; if the book is great, middling, or poor (how bad its end, how expansive its moral gas). I don't have a dog—as we say down South when pressed for colorful locution and don't wish to disappoint—in that fight.

I propose to soak off some troops in the interest of the larger fight. Twain was a racist. It is a racist book. Let us concede it. Here is a passage which is probative:

> You'd see a muddy sow and a litter of pigs come lazying along the street and whollop herself down right in the way, where folks had to walk around her, and she'd stretch out and shut her eyes and wave her ears whilst the pigs was milking her, and look as happy as

> if she was on salary. And pretty soon you'd hear a loafer sing out, "Hi! *so* boy! sick him, Tige!" and away the sow would go, squealing most horrible, with a dog or two swinging to each ear, and three or four dozen more a'coming; and then you would see all the loafers get up and watch the thing out of sight, and laugh at the fun and look grateful for the noise. Then they'd settle back again until there was a dog-fight. There couldn't anything wake them up all over, and make them happy all over, like a dogfight—unless it might be putting turpentine on a stray dog and setting fire to him, or tying a tin pan to his tail and see him run himself to death.

There is no finer set of objects, situation, chain of events terminating in sensory experience which is the formula for the emotion disgust with white trash—rednecks, the last racial epithet allowed on NPR-controlled American soil—than that. Jim he may be forgotten narratively, he may be a Richard Wright A'mos' a Man and step and fetch too much, he may be a victim of cruelty, he may prove Twain negligent of moral obligations—but if Twain can write this way about whites, then he at least distributes the thin milk of human kindness in his breast evenly between the races. Let us get the book out of the schools; it is too good for them. No good book should be done to what is done to books in schools.

This book is good because it is fun, and it is fun because Mark Twain had fun writing it. That is palpable. He wanders in this landscape of his dreams free to be, in Huck Finn, a rube who could outwit all the rubes around him—arguably Twain's notion of himself in adult life—and who could do it with his mouth, from which comes not pudding but plums. Huck Finn is an extraordinary stylist who deploys in thought, word, and act the nineteen rules governing literary art in the domain of romantic fiction. That an uneducated fourteen-year-old motherless boy raised by the town sot can be so extraordinary a stylist is implausible in the extreme; that Twain can render this implausibility eminently plausible is the

genius and the force of the book. Huck can say *anything,* and Twain can again say anything, with every adult thing he knows thrown in, all of it reined down to a frisky, country, unpretentious trot.

Yes, being on a raft on the great river (when it was one—unpolluted, undiked, and not yet a God) is a great, good, boy-lovely thing, and the passages about rafting are so sensuous when it's just Huck and Jim out there by they lonesome that the sexual epithet "homoerotic" gets inflicted upon them, but the book is much better than that:

> When the place was packed full, the undertaker he slid around in his black gloves with his softly soothering ways, putting on the last touches, and getting people and things all shipshape and comfortable, and making no more sound than a cat. He never spoke; he moved people around, he squeezed in late ones, he opened up passageways, and done it with nods, and signs with his hands. Then he took his place over against the wall. He was the softest, glidingest, stealthiest man I ever see; and there warn't no more smile to him than there is to a ham.
>
> They had borrowed a melodeum—a sick one; and when everything was ready, a young woman set down and worked it, and it was pretty skreeky and colicky, and everybody joined in and sung, and Peter was the only one that had a good thing, according to my notion. Then the Reverend Hobson opened up, slow and solemn, and begun to talk; and straight off the most outrageous row busted out in the cellar a body ever heard; it was only one dog, but he made a most powerful racket, and he kept it up, right along; the parson he had to stand there, over the coffin, and wait—you couldn't hear yourself think. It was right down awkward, and nobody didn't seem to know what to do. But pretty soon they see that long-legged undertaker make a sign to the preacher as much as to say, "Don't you worry—just depend on me." Then he stooped down and begun to glide along the wall, just his shoulders showing over the people's heads. So he glided

along, and the powwow and racket getting more and more outrageous all the time; and at last, when he had gone around two sides of the room, he disappears down cellar. Then in about two seconds we heard a whack, and the dog he finished up with a most amazing howl or two, and then everything was dead still, and the parson begun his solemn talk where he left off. In a minute or two here comes this undertaker's back and shoulders gliding along the wall again; and so he glided and glided around three sides of the room, and then rose up, and shaded his mouth with his hands, and stretched his neck out towards the preacher, over the people's heads, and says, in a kind of a coarse whisper, *"He had a rat!"* Then he drooped down and glided along the wall again to his place. You could see it was a great satisfaction to the people, because naturally they wanted to know. A little thing like that don't cost nothing, and it's just the little things that makes a man to be looked up to and liked. There warn't no more popular man in town than what that undertaker was.

Well, the funeral sermon was very good, but pison long and tiresome; and then the king he shoved in and got off some of his usual rubbage . . .

That is the most soothering writing I know, and Twain is the glidingest at it, and, self-interested or no, Hemingway is today correct: nearly everyone in American letters is trying to write this way, more or less, as opposed to the Emerson Whittier & Company way. The school of coordination has displaced the school of subordination.

Twain fathered a line that would run through Hemingway, Stein, Anderson, graze Fitzgerald, be disregarded by Faulkner, and be resumed by O'Connor, Bellow, Barthelme, Stone, Percy, Paley, Ozick, Joy Williams, Barry Hannah—by everyone paying attention.

The book in your hands is good because Twain can *write.*

—Padgett Powell

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