

I Started with Huck Finn

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The first book I read that really struck me was *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. I was in second grade, thus seven years old. My mother had allowed me to buy a copy of the book at a drug store for twenty-five cents. It was part of a series of boys' books, and had a very colorful cover depicting Huck and Jim on the raft, joyously eyeing a fish Huck had caught and was pulling out of the river. In later years I assumed this was an abridged edition, but I still own that copy, and checking several years ago I found it is actually unabridged, with all the violence and horror of Pap and the feud included. I'm not sure how all that struck me at seven, but maybe it was part of my feeling that the book had enlarged the world, that it was big and scary as well as funny, and death was part of it.

The book was so vivid to me I felt I had lived it. I grew up in orange groves, and immediately after reading it I went out into them pretending to be Huck. I dressed like Huck on the book's cover, and made my friends dress like Tom Sawyer and their companions, and we played games as if we were in Hannibal, Missouri, in 1840. It was my first real love of literature, and an early indication of how strongly literature was going to affect my life. I had experienced how novels expand your experience and your inner world. I also knew, because of Jim, that racism was wrong and all humans were fundamentally just like me.

After that childhood experience I was off into the world of other books, and seldom thought about Twain again, until as an adult I discovered with great pleasure *Life on the Mississippi*, *Roughing It*, *The*

Innocents Abroad, and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. I also reread *Huck Finn* several times. What struck me in my adult encounters with Twain was that he was not only consistently and naturally funny, but also that he could shift from his comic mode to serious matters instantly, and be completely convincing at all registers.

I agree with those who feel the last third of *Huck Finn*, when Tom Sawyer arrives, is a great falling off. Twain could not figure out how to write an ending to Huck and Jim's trip that was true to the real world of their time. In fact, the greatest work of Twain scholarship I know is the rewriting of Twain's novel by John Seeley, *The TRUE Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1987), for its suggestion of a possible ending that was, although clearly modernist and existential, somehow more true and beautiful: It ends before Tom's final appearance in Twain's original novel, with Huck one night on the river alone on the raft, having failed to free Jim. The last line is: "In fact, I didn't much care if the goddamned sun never come up again." This re-vision was a kind of gift to Twain, I felt, as it supplied an ending that was both true to Huck's time and powerful as a novel ending in its own right. When I wrote my first novel, *The Wild Shore* (1995), I named the hero Henry Fletcher to indicate that the story is another kind of re-write of Huck Finn, a futuristic homage to Twain's work. The first scenes are similar in ways, and there is a Tom Sawyer figure, too. I am always pleased when people say that *The Wild Shore* is like science fiction's *Huck Finn*. Recently, I have had the pleasure of reading several

of Twain's novels aloud to my sons as part of their bedtime reading. I was surprised by the enduring power of imagination in both *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Prince and the Pauper*; the first is surely one of Twain's best novels. And it was a deep joy to read aloud *Huck Finn* to my own boy, establishing a connection to my own childhood from its future that resonated very deeply. I suppose these books will live forever in that sense.

The question has been raised for this new journal of *Mark Twain Studies*: "How is Twain our contemporary?" For me, this is a crucial question. Near the end of his career Twain watched the United States embark on an imperialist, colonialist war against the Philippines, and his anger at this betrayal of American democratic values was huge. He wrote against that war and against all imperialist tendencies in the McKinley administration with fury and with his usual cutting satire. He set the example of how American writers should now react to the Bush administration and their horrible actions throughout the world today.

To me, Twain joins Lincoln, Melville, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Dickinson, and Muir among the great voices of 19th-century America, as one of those who made the best parts of America come into being.