

# Soundings on Hucklebe

BY DALE SMITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY THOMAS HART BENTON

A MAN AND A BOY FLOAT A RAFT down a river—for memorable images in literature, this unlikely pair of heroes is right up there with Hamlet's chat to Yorick's skull and the rambling duo of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Maybe we take from *Huckleberry Finn* the idyllic float down the Mississippi because Mark Twain took to writing the book in 1876 as an imaginative journey from his worldly troubles.

Twain scattered more than 20 escapes throughout the novel, says MU's Tom Quirk, a scholar of Twain's writings and author of *Coming to Grips with Huckleberry Finn* (University of Missouri Press, 1993). "Despite Twain's persona as a jokester, he was a very responsible and modest man—with some shortcomings—who did his duty by and large," Quirk says. "But he would rather have been doing something else." Twain's fame meant publishing deadlines pushed him, writers pestered him for advice, interviewers were innumerable. His escapist motives gave the project a casual cast at first. He planned to pigeonhole the manuscript or burn it when it was done.

Originally *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was to be a boy's book to follow in the fashion of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, his hymn to childhood. He'd promised to take the boys up through adulthood to see how they turned out. The book's portrait of the pre-Civil War Mississippi Valley may have had the ring of truth, but it was no hymn. Although there's humor, to be sure, Quirk says, the book is brimming with contempt. It's full of Twain's own bile as well as the bigotry and violence he'd witnessed. And, as a runaway slave and an ignorant boy descend the river, it turns out—perhaps to Twain's surprise—to be a lot about the brighter side of human possibility.



HUCK'S IS A LIFE OF EASE AT FIRST.

"The widow Douglas, she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn't stand it no longer, I lit out. I got into my old rags, and my sugar-hogshead again, and was free and satisfied."

## STREET PERSON AS HERO

Twain wanted to be good, respectable, mainstream. But jokesters and satirists grow popular popping other people's balloons. He was an outsider, and he identified with the novel's hero. "Huck Finn was what we would nowadays call a street person," Quirk says. At times, he sleeps in a hogshead, scrambles for food and, in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, admits accepting vittles from a slave.

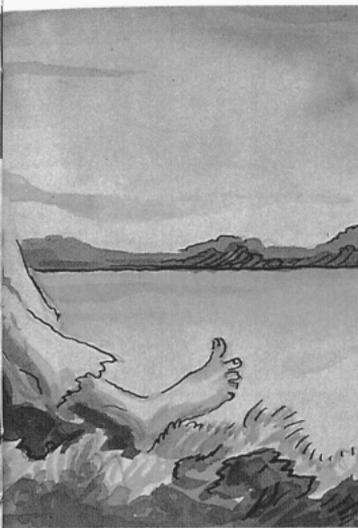
"That's a remarkable admission considering the racial environment of the time."

Domestic comedy sets the tone for our

hero's time with the Widow Douglas, with Huck chafing under stiff collars and sneaking out for midnight pirate meetings with Tom Sawyer. And there's the river. Although less than a quarter of the novel takes place floating downriver, Twain romanticized its freedom and luxurious ease, Quirk says. Twain actually "remembered" that he had chartered a raft to float the Neckar River near Heidelberg, though it's unlikely the event occurred.

But serenity soon evaporates in this book for boys by a man fondly recreating his boyish dreams.

# erry Finn



OUR HERO IS KIDNAPPED BY SLEAZY, GREASY, UNEASY PAP Quirk calls Twain a rough and sometimes coarse man who'd grown up early around unsavory elements, such as riverboat men, miners, journalists and theater people.

This son of a slave owner married Olivia Langdon, whose more proper family had prospered in the timber and railroad businesses. Her father was instrumental in the Underground Railroad. So, Twain's vices of drinking—he had the makings for Manhattans in his bathroom as “medicine”—and swearing—Virginia City newspaper buddies putting tacks on his chair could pique 20 minutes of profane poetry—were perennial topics of reform.

Twain soon complicates matters. In thunders Huck's Pap, an angry, racist and violent bum, especially when drunk. The long-absent Pap demands parental “rights” in the form of the \$6,000 Huck

ALONGSIDE QUOTATIONS FROM THIS AMERICAN MASTERPIECE AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY THOMAS HART BENTON, MARK TWAIN SCHOLAR TOM QUIRK TELLS THE STORY OF THE BOOK AND THE MAN WHO WROTE IT.

ILLUSTRATIONS COURTESY OF STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI, COLUMBIA, WITH PERMISSION OF EASTON PRESS.



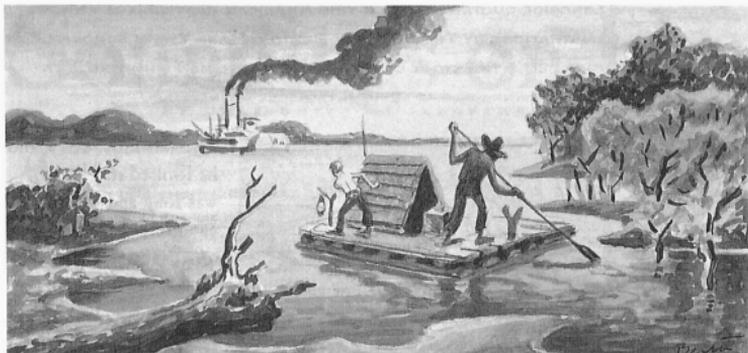
HUCK'S SURLY PAPA WANTS THE BOY'S MONEY.

had in the bank (from the previous *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*). He kidnaps Huck to an isolated river shack, a lazy life the boy comes to like until he realizes Pap might well kill him in a drunken rage. So, Huck stages his own murder, escapes to Jackson's Island and finds a second complication, Jim, the Widow Douglas's runaway slave. Jim had overheard the widow's plan to sell him downriver, and he considered it a death sentence.

“A more unlikely pair you'll never see,” Quirk says. Huck is escaping from society and his family. He hopes eventually to wind up on the Amazon River as was Twain's unrealized boyhood hope.

“He was most fifty, and he looked it. His hair was long and tangled and greasy, and hung down, and you could see his eyes shining through like he was behind vines. It was all black, no gray; so was his long, mixed-up whiskers. There warn't no color in his face, where his face showed; it was white; not like another man's white, but a white to make a body sick, a white to make a body's flesh crawl—a tree-toad white, a fish-belly white. As for his clothes—just rags, that was all.”

“But Jim wants to escape north to Canada to get a job and buy his family out of slavery. He's escaping into society.”



OUTCASTS HUCK AND JIM LIGHT OUT DOWNRIVER WHEN THINGS GET HOT.

"Not a sound, anywheres—perfectly still—just like the whole world was asleep, only sometimes the bull-frogs a-cluttering, maybe. The first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line—that was the woods on t'other side—you couldn't make nothing else out; then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness, spreading around; then the river softened up, away off, and warn't black any more, but gray; you could see little dark spots drifting along, ever so far away—trading scows, and such things; and long black streaks—rafts; sometimes you could hear a sweep screaming; or jumbled up voices, it was so still, and sounds come so far; and by and by you could see a streak on the water which you know by the look of the streak that there's a snag there in a swift current which breaks on it and makes that streak look that way; and you see the mist curl up off of the water, and the cast reddens up, and the river, and you make out a log cabin in the edge of the woods, away on the bank on t'other side of the river, being a wood-yard, likely, and piled by them cheats so you can throw a dog through it anywhere; then the nice breeze springs up, and comes fanning you from over there, so cool and fresh, and sweet to smell, on account of the woods and the flowers; but sometimes not that way, because they've left dead fish laying around, gars, and such, and they do get pretty rank; and next you've got the full day, and everything smiling in the sun, and the songbirds just going it!"

### HEART TRIUMPHS OVER HEAD

Huck's sunrise soliloquy is flowing vernacular poetry whose charm comes in part as it eddies back on itself: The morning is silent, "only sometimes the bull-frogs a-cluttering, maybe." The air is sweet, except for the gars and such, "and they do get pretty rank." Twain sets Huck and Jim amid the river's beauty, and he sets their language firmly in the Mississippi River Valley dialects he so painstakingly renders.

Beauty or not, the outcasts were a "community of misfortune" that mostly stuck together to survive. Soon Huck's guilt over helping a runaway slave sent him paddling ashore to turn Jim in. But midstream he meets two men hunting runaways and, without thinking, plies a street-smart lie. He begs the men to come back to the raft and help his sick Pap (though it's Jim there, not Pap), who suffers with symptoms remarkably like smallpox. Or so Huck says. This urchin knows his audience, figuring correctly that the slavers would rather avoid smallpox than win a reward. In sympathy, they pass Huck \$40 on a paddle and hightail it to shore.

So, what happened to Huck's guilt? Twain called Huck a boy with a sound heart and a deformed conscience. "His conscience was deformed by a society that taught him it was wrong to help a slave," Quirk says, "but his heart was good because he did it anyway."

Twain claimed determinist ideas, in which one's upbringing and self-interest predict behavior. Or so he said. The smallpox lie doesn't jibe with that, nor, later on, does Huck's decision to go to hell rather than betray Jim. Does Twain's "damned human race" have a few scraps of morality after all?



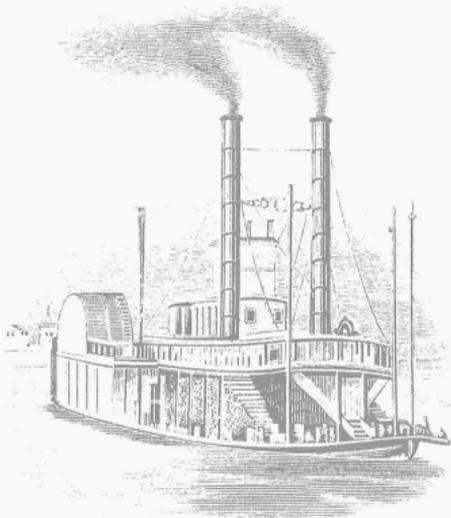
A CRUEL JOKE AWAITS THE SLEEPING JIM.  
HUCK APOLOGIZES.

"It was a monstrous big river here, with the tallest and the thickest kind of timber on both banks; just a solid wall, as well as I could see, by the stars. I looked away down stream, and seen a black speck on the water. I took out after it; but when I got to it it warn't nothing but a couple of saw-logs made fast together. Then I see another speck, and chased that; then another, and this time I was right. It was the raft. When I got to it Jim was setting there with his head down between his knees, asleep, with his right arm hanging over the steering oar."

### JIM DECLARES HIS HUMAN DIGNITY

When an accident separates the pair for a night, Huck eventually finds Jim, who has worried himself to sleep, and tricks him into thinking their mishap was just a dream. Jim falls for the prank but shortly notices broken branches on the raft—signs of the night's real rough ride, which confirms Huck's lie. Jim's pride is hurt. He's angry. This time Twain lays out a scene in which it's Jim's behavior that butts up against the author's avowed determinism. As a runaway slave, Jim's life depends on Huck's good will, but he gives Huck a tongue-lashing: "See that trash? Trash is them that puts trash on the head of their friends." After thinking things over, Huck apologizes: "I humbled myself to a nigger, and I never felt bad about it afterward."

If Jim behaved from self-interest alone, he never would've done that, Quirk says. Just as contradictions correct the course of Huck's lovely sunrise soliloquy, Quirk says the character of Jim grows ever more vivid as the book unfolds: Jim is a target of ridicule for Huck and Tom; a phony fortuneteller whose savvy extends to passing counterfeit coins; a solicitous friend to Huck during wearying travel; a fearful sidekick when Huck wanted his help to rescue scoundrels aboard a soon-to-sink steamboat; a boastful man about his knowledge of nature's workings; a bullheaded opponent in his debate with Huck about Biblical King Solomon; a grieving husband and father longing for family; a runaway slave floating south, though he needs to go north; and a hero who would sacrifice freedom to save Tom Sawyer's life. All in all, Jim is a man that a boy like Huck would risk hell for.





WHY ARE THE GRANGERFORDS AND SHEPHERDSONS ALWAYS FIGHTING? NO ONE REMEMBERS.

"All of a sudden, bang! bang! bang! goes three or four guns—the men had slipped around through the woods and come in from behind without their horses! The boys jumped for the river—both of them hurt—and as they swam down the current the men run along the bank shooting at them and singing out, "Kill them, kill them!" It made me so sick I most fell out of the tree. I ain't agoing to tell all that happened—it would make me sick again if I was to do that. I wished I hadn't ever come ashore that night, to see such things. I ain't ever going to get shut of them—lots of times I dream about them."

#### MODERN WRITING, ANCIENT FEUDING

The art is in what isn't in the art. When Twain let readers invent Huck's terror ("I ain't agoing to tell all that happened..."), it was a new way of drawing on readers' emotions. Quirk says that such artful omissions may have been on Ernest Hemingway's mind when he called *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* the beginning of modern American literature.

Meanwhile, Twain piles on the details to take a swipe at the ignorance and hypocrisy of the feuding Grangerfords and Shepherdsons. They've been fighting so long nobody remembers how the thing started. "They go to the same church every week and stack their guns in the corner," Quirk says. "They both hear sermons on brotherly love. They listen and sing their hymns, and they take their guns and go shoot each other afterward."

"No, you ain't the only person that's had a secret of his birth.' And by jings, he begins to cry.

"Hold! What do you mean?"

"Bilgewater, kin I trust you?" says the old man still sort of sobbing.

"To the bitter death! He took the old man by the hand and squeezed it, and says, 'The secret of your being: speak!'

"Bilgewater, I am the late Dauphin!"

"You bet you Jim and me stared, this time. Then the duke says:

"You are what?"

"Yes, my friend, it is too true—your eyes is lookin' at this very moment on the pore disappeared Dauphin, Looy the Seventeen, son of Looy the Sixteen and Marry Antonette."

"You! At your age! No! You mean you're the late Charlemagne; you must be six or seven hundred years old, at the very least."

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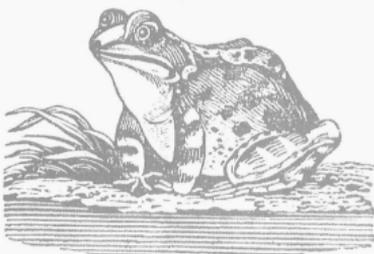
#### TWAIN POKES FUN AT ARISTOCRATIC PRETENSE

"Mark Twain was an ardent small-d democrat and small-r republican. He was against all manner of pretense," Quirk says, "which he typically associated with England." Twain once planned a satirical novel about the English class system, but he was so kindly treated in England that he abandoned the project. That particular vent for his satirical steam was closed off, but Twain still had plenty of hiss for the sham-artistocrat characters who bestowed on themselves the titles of King and Duke. Quirk says Twain distilled the rascals of numerous real and imagined cheats—from plumbers to publishers—who kept the author's naturally suspicious constitution in uproar.

These confidence men commandeered Huck and Jim's raft, and our heroes are pressed into servitude. Twain lampoons these villains, who pretended to be royalty, as well as the herd-mentality fools who fall for their scams. Perhaps their most memorable moment was the Royal Nonesuch performance ("Ladies and children not admitted"). After the Duke introduces the "thrillingest tragedy ever," the King enters, prancing and capering naked across the stage painted in stripes. The otherwise appreciative audience grows angry at the one-peep performance. But instead of tar and feathers for the east—an act that would shame the patrons by confirming the swindle—a judge in attendance persuades all to save face by talking up the show across the town. Which they do.



SWINDLERS COMMANDEER THE RAFT.





WHEN JIM IS CAPTURED, HUCK AND TOM SAWYER FREE HIM AFTER A STRING OF ANTICS THAT BURLESQUED ADVENTURE NOVELS OF THE DAY.

“ ‘Who’s that? Answer, or I’ll shoot!’  
“But we didn’t answer; we just unfurled our heels and shoved.  
Then there was a rush, and a bang, bang, bang! and the bullets  
fairly whizzed around us! We heard them sing out:  
“ ‘Here they are! They’ve broke for the river! after ‘em boys!  
And turn loose the dogs!’ ”

#### THE BOOK GOES COMMERCIAL

Having soured on his publisher, Twain started his own company as he came to the end of the new book. He started thinking like a businessman, but it’d be telling a stretcher to call him savvy. Twain’s salesmen hawked subscription sales for *Huckleberry Finn* door-to-door, in the telemarketing of its time. Twain sensibly awaited orders for 40,000 copies, though he was already eating up profits by outfitting the edition with extravagant illustrations and an expensive portrait of himself.

The writing goes commercial, too, in an uncharacteristic string of silliness, Quirk says, which is altogether different from the dramatic and moral book *Huckleberry Finn* was turning out to be.

Jim is captured and held in a small log shack on the Phelps’ place. It is clean and dry, and the family’s slave brings in hot meals. Huck finds Jim, and escape will be easy. But then Tom Sawyer shows up, and the scenes take on a minstrel show quality, Quirk says. Although the boys could simply heist the key to free the slave, that’s too simple for Tom, who concocts an elaborate “evasion.” That sets Twain loose to burlesque any adventure story he’d ever read. Tom cooked up indignities for Jim—he’d be told to water a plant with the tears of his captivity, for instance—and the once-decisive Huck defers to Tom’s high jinks.

At last, with Jim in a dress for disguise, the three crawl out the hole they’d dug under the cabin wall and escape.





JIM IS WILLINGLY CAPTURED THIS TIME, AS HE HELPS A WOUNDED TOM SAWYER, WHO DREAMED UP JIM'S WACKY GETUP FOR THE GETAWAY.

"I followed the men to see what they was going to do with Jim; and the old doctor and uncle Silas followed after Tom into the house. The men was very huffy, and some of them wanted to hang Jim, for an example to all the other niggers around there, so they wouldn't be trying to run away, like Jim done, and making such a raft of trouble, and keeping a whole family scared most to death for days and nights. But the others said, don't do it, it wouldn't answer at all, he ain't our nigger, and his owner would turn up and make us pay for him, sure. So that cooled them down a little, because the people that's always the most anxious for to hang a nigger that hain't done just right, is always the very ones that ain't the most anxious to pay for him when they've got their satisfaction out of him."

#### THE NOBLEST MAN WEARS THE RIDICULOUS DRESS

They escape, but Tom is shot in the leg, and Jim sends Huck for a doctor saying, "No, sah—I doan' budge a step out'n dis place, 'dout a doctor; not ef it's forty year!" And Huck thinks about Jim, "I knowed he was white inside, and I reckoned he'd say what he did say—so it was all right, now, and I told Tom I was agoing for a doctor." When the doctor arrives, Jim offers his help and is captured.

"By any reckoning Samuel Clemens was something of a racial bigot, though the form it took was typically paternalistic rather than actively prejudicial," Quirk writes. But don't confuse the writer who created Huckleberry Finn with the ordinary man "who, on the one hand wrote abundant racist remarks in letters to his mother, or, on the other, paid a black man's tuition to Yale."

Like most of us, Quirk says, Twain's head believed one thing and his heart another. "It was the better part of him that surfaced to create a Jim or a Huck." Quirk says *Huckleberry Finn* made vivid several original images of "nobility in tatters": Huck choosing hell before he'd turn Jim in, and Jim in a dress forgoing freedom to nurse Tom. In inventing these outsiders, Twain did the humorist's job on himself—he burst his own bubble. He told himself a thing he didn't want to hear but that he knew was true, Quirk says. As full as he was of contempt for most everything, "the better part of him" had room to affirm humanity after all.

Twain might say that his stories survive because he's a moralist more ready to deliver a sermon than a joke. But what effect can Huck and Jim have after all? Says Quirk: "You hope the way the preacher on Sunday hopes that whatever you do as a writer or teacher lasts until Monday. These are creatures of the imagination. They shed light on real problems, but they aren't going to transform those problems. Literature isn't going to do it, and criticism sure isn't going to do it. Robert Frost remarked that a poem is a momentary stay against confusion. I think that's a pretty good way of putting it." ❁