



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. Published in 1885, *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 [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 who convinces Huck that African-Americans are deserving of freedom, and 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.

Why Should I Care?

[Mark Twain](#) wrote *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* twenty years *after* the American [Civil War](#). Slavery had been abolished, and the North and South were making up (albeit with some residual anger).

So why publish a highly moralistic tale about a system that was no longer in place? Weren't race issues a moot point once slavery was out of the picture?

Hardly.

Freedom didn't mean equality by any means - not legally, socially, or practically.

(See Shmoop History's "Jim Crow in America" for more.) Actually, come to think of it, this isn't an outdated notion at all.

Rules and laws often don't accurately reflect what's really going on.

From a legal standpoint *today*, we have equality of race; yet racism is still a problem.

Men and women are equal, yet many still see a "glass ceiling" for women in the workplace, meaning they often have invisible boundaries to advancement.

That doesn't mean laws are useless.

Laws may not immediately effect change, but we've seen that they do *precede* change.

While laws can affect how people act, it takes more to change the way we think.

We can't rely on laws alone.

That's where *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* comes back into the picture.

We need people like Mark Twain to remind us not to be self-congratulatory for starting a process in motion, but instead to realize that greater change is always necessary.