

Revisiting modern developmentalism

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



For anyone who wants to try to unravel the tangled knot that ties modern Americans to their past, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) remains essential. According to the most recent studies, Twain's novel about a white boy and a runaway slave escaping down the Mississippi River is the most frequently read classic American book in American schools. Few critics' lists of the "greatest American novels" fail to cite it; few reporters describing its influence fail to quote Hemingway's famous claim that "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*." At the same time, it also remains one of the most controversial books in American history, and in many schools has been removed from reading lists or shifted into elective courses. One hundred years after his death, Mark Twain can still put a book on top of the best-seller list—as his *Autobiography* did in October 2010. And *Huck Finn*, 125 years after its publication, can trend high on Twitter, as it did in January 2011 when NewSouth Books announced it would publish a version that excised the racial epithet "n***r," which appears more than 200 times in the original, and replace it with "slave"—an editorial gesture both praised and derided with an intensity rarely reserved for the classics anymore. *Huck Finn* was, and remains, "an amazing, troubling book," as novelist Toni Morrison tells us; an "idol and target," as critic Jonathan Arac writes. Predictably, our regard for the book is even more two-sided than that summary suggests.

For over a century, Twain's oft-beloved novel has been taught both as a serious opportunity to reflect on matters of race and as a lighthearted adventure for children. Authors, historians, teachers, and politicians have sung its praises as a model of interracial empathy, or debated the wisdom

and limits of that claim; studio motion pictures, big-budget musicals, cartoons, comic books, and children's editions have all focused on it as a story of boyish escapade, an "adventure" with, at best, modest political ambitions. Since 1987, eight books plus dozens of scholarly articles and chapters have been published on race and Huckleberry Finn. But not one book, and only a modest number of chapters and essays during that span, have dealt deeply with Mark Twain's portrayal of children in Huck Finn.

The vast majority of newspaper editorials, Twitter posts, and public debates about Huckleberry Finn have focused upon race. References to childhood and Huck Finn in popular media abound, but he and his friend Tom Sawyer remain, in the public imagination, largely uncomplicated "emblems of freedom, high-spiritedness, and solid comradeship," as James S. Leonard and Thomas A. Tenney have written. Huck is a "charming rascal," one preview for a local production of the musical *Big River* claims. "Make your own kids [sic] fishing pole – Huck Finn Style," an "adventure for boys blog" offers: "You may not be as free to roam as Huck, but you can spend a day lazing on the riverbank just like he did."