EIGHT

ABOUT A BOY—AND A RAFT
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

This was where I was going to make my stand. Go against the grain. Make the surprise pick. After all, I wouldn’t be wrong. What everyone thinks they know about growing up in a small town isn’t in the book they think it is. Consider the list: untroubled childhood, outwitting slightly dim friends and competitors, the whitewashed fence, the sore toe, the wholesome little girlfriend named Becky, the adventure to thwart a clear-cut bad guy, the innocent mischief, the life almost without grown-ups. I even had a theme all worked up: Tom Sawyer ruined things for every subsequent kid in America. No one can have that childhood experience. It was a perfect plan. I’d have gotten away with it, too. Except for one thing.

I couldn’t do it.

Why? Well, there’s Hemingway, for one. He said it is, despite the unfortunate final chapters, “our best book.” Wait, he goes further: “All modern American literature comes from one book called Huckleberry Finn.” Then there’s Fitzgerald, there’s Eliot, there’s everybody. Even the
people who hate it do so because they can't ignore it. Okay, I know when I'm whipped. When so many people, including me by the way, think it's the most important novel in the American canon, it goes on the list.

It's just that the contrarian position was so pleasing, so elegant. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* really did teach Americans about childhood, even if much of the lesson was bogus. As And I've said repeatedly and will say again, this list isn't about literary quality or merit. Nor about my preference. If it were up to me, *Letters from the Earth* would be Twain's most influential book, and Americans would be better for it. More disturbed, but better. I even prefer, for reasons that are entirely personal and hardly literary, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *Those Extraordinary Twins*. You see why you never want to put me in charge. So sign me up. The book that matters among the very considerable Mark Twain oeuvre is indeed *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884).

The novel is a classic case of a novelist not knowing what he's doing until he does it. I do not believe it is the book he intended to write when he began a companion volume to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876). There is plenty of evidence to that effect, not least that he carried over a chapter he chose not to include in the previous book. But as Faulkner famously suggested, a novelist is really a recording secretary, chasing after his characters to jot down what they do in his notebook. In this case, lighthearted adventure went out the window when Huck and Jim climbed on the raft. Lacking propulsion, a raft on the Mississippi in slaveholding times can only go one direction: toward trouble. The result is a darker, more violent book than its predecessor. There are, among other niceties, the murder of Huck's father, a manhunt for the escaped Jim, who is believed to have killed Huck, the slaughter of the Grangerford men, and the tar-and-feathering of the Duke and the Dauphin. There is also every sort of bigotry, skullduggery, confidence game, and threat of violence that you could hope to meet in a day's walk. This is clearly not a children's story.

So what sort of story is it? If this were a film, it would be a buddy caper. Which is interesting, given how abysmally Hollywood has done trying to adapt it over the years. Either they get the buddy part and leave out the social criticism, or they dwell on the social criticism and go all somber, drowning the caper—and nearly the buddies. So it's a buddy caper, sort of. With social criticism. And satire. He ridicules nearly everything—family loyalty taken to extremes, the dimwittedness of the great mass of people, racial attitudes in the middle of the country, hucksters and con men and their victims, the system of social castes, adventure romances of the sort Tom Sawyer favors, organized religion, received morality, and rules. Especially rules. Nearly every one of them that Huck encounters, and especially the important ones, are less moral than his transgression of them. He's been told of the importance of religion, yet nearly every person he meets who is part of organized religion is party to some grotesque immorality, whether it be slavery or mass murder. Religion is the cloak worn by charlatans and humbugs. From whom come rules. Slavery is right and proper; that's a rule. Huck believes in it because he's been told that it is so. He's been told how limited black persons are, which assumption justifies slavery. Yet he finds Jim to be deeper, more honest, more devoted to family than anyone ever suggested. It takes Huck a while to assimilate the lesson, but little by little he comes to understand that Jim is fully human—which is why the later chapters in which Huck acquiesces to Tom Sawyer's dangerous and dehumanizing nonsense regarding Jim are such a disappointment to readers. Indeed, virtually everything Huck believes to be moral, because society has told him it is, turns out to be the exact opposite. He's a straight being in a twisted world, which is the heart of the Innocent's Narrative.
That narrative form, the innocent abroad in a corrupt world, is at the heart of much great literature. The outstanding example may be Voltaire's Candide, but the genre would also embrace Dostoevsky's The Idiot, The Catcher in the Rye, To Kill a Mockingbird, and innumerable other works. The innocent, the child, the holy fool, moves through a space he or she cannot understand, and that lack of understanding is commendable. If one can understand that space, one is already among the damned. It may be that Twain's great contribution to the genre is the use of first-person central point of view; that is, the child narrates what he cannot comprehend. He may not have been first to the line on this one—we have the example of Swift's Gulliver's Travels, among others, although Lemuel Gulliver is no child—but his use is early and instructive. Hardly surprising, then, that such later avatars as Salinger's Holden, Lee's Scout, and Bellow's Augie all tell their own stories. What's key in these novels is that we readers outstrip the narrators in knowledge of the world. The discrepancy between the external reality, which readers grasp completely, and the young person's version of it produces irony, which in turn produces social commentary, satire, or pathos. In each case, the narrator does not know what he or she is telling us, but we do, and irony lies in that disparity of knowledge. When Huck tells us that the Grangerfords are fine people or that the Duke and the Dauphin are upstanding citizens, he has no idea of the truth of the situation. Twain does, and we do, but not Huck. The results are delicious.

The lineaments of the story are, on one level, quite simple. On another, the episodes come so fast and thick that they represent a torrent of complications. Huckleberry Finn's early life has left him unfit for town living with its school, church, proper dress, and indoor living. Why, he can't even smoke when he wants to. So even though life with Widow Douglas is easier and safer than life with drunken, abusive, and delusional Pap, he chafes against it. Meanwhile Pap sues to recover Huck's fortune (awarded at the end of the prior novel) and is awarded custody by a new judge in town, proving that justice is not merely blind but stupid. He nearly kills Huck one night in a fit of delirium tremens, and Huck fakes his own death and effects an escape. His plan accidentally meshes with that of Jim, the runaway slave of the widow's sister, Miss Watson. When a flood brings them a raft, they embark on a trip downstream toward Cairo, Illinois, and ostensibly freedom for both; in the event, they miss Cairo on a night of fog and confusion, traveling deeper into slave territory. Along the way they have numerous misadventures. Huck puts a dead rattlesnake in Jim's bed as a prank, but its mate comes and bites Jim, who suffers greatly but recovers. When they find the raft, they also find a murdered man, whose face Jim won't let Huck see. The man is later revealed to be Pap. Huck dresses as a girl to gather intelligence but is found out when he can't properly thread a needle, proving that you can fool the law, but you can't fool a matron. Several times, using a variety of means, including feigning smallpox, they must elude bounty hunters or others who would capture and sell Jim. They steal a boat from robbers. Huck becomes involved in a family feud that ends with his new friend, Buck Grangerford, among the murdered. He and Jim become entangled with two malevolent con men, the Duke and the Dauphin, whose first coup arrives when Huck finally decides to do the right thing by their victims, three sisters whom the two hustlers are well on their way to impoverishing. Jim is sold by the Dauphin for forty dollars to Silas Phelps; the occasion for the sale is not Jim's original handbills but the fraudulent ones the Duke and the Dauphin had printed, supposedly to prevent Jim's capture. Silas Phelps turns out to be the uncle of Tom Sawyer, and Huck is mistaken for his friend, whom the family has not seen but has been expecting. When Tom does arrive, he impersonates his younger brother Sid and
introduces many ridiculous and dangerous elements into a plan to rescue Jim, one of which results in Tom getting shot in the leg. Eventually, all is made right by two deaths: Pap’s and Miss Watson’s. It turns out that both traveling companions have been free almost from the start without knowing it, the terms of Miss Watson’s will having liberated Jim. Ultimately, Huck rejects Aunt Sally’s proposal to take him in and plans to “light out for the Territory.” That the wilds and perils of Indian Territory are preferable to being “civilized” again speaks volumes about what Huck has learned about civilization during his adventures.

This is a world in which “good” people are cruel, immoral, unjust, and benighted. Huck’s friend Tom Sawyer is a much darker figure in this novel, citing the “best authorities” from the adventure novels he favors to concoct dangerous adventures of his own; his sense that any other being has rights is shriveled to nothingness. His Aunt Sally Phelps is relieved to hear from Huck that an explosion killed no one, “only a ‘nigger,’” as Huck says. That a woman who is basically decent and good can find no room in her heart for the fate of a black person is a major indictment not merely of her but of the society in which she lives. And Miss Watson, the severe churchgoer Huck most fears disappointing, has every opportunity to know that owning other human beings is wrong, yet she does not. Her bequest of Jim’s freedom is almost as damning as her owning him in the first place, suggesting as it does that she knew all along that she was committing sin. The Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons attend the same church and hear sermons on brotherly love while cradling their long rifles between their knees. And these are the people from whom Huck is supposed to learn right conduct? I think not.

What Twain is after in his novel is a kind of verisimilitude, a fidelity to real life, even if the events are at times farfetched. It doesn’t matter greatly that he’s fighting a battle long over. This is not an antislavery treatise, nor need it be one. That issue is settled. Rather, the issue he takes on is more current, the thoroughgoing attitude of racism, that blacks are inherently inferior to whites, that they are not fully human, that they conform to the stereotypes that make their mistreatment easier to justify. That issue is by no means settled when Twain writes his novel, nor would they be for many, many decades thereafter. Prejudice, it seems, has a long shelf life. One of the author’s shrewdest choices is to give so many of those bad attitudes and ignorant assumptions to his hero. Even after he has been exposed to Jim’s humanity for weeks, Huck can still declare that his devotion to his family seems “unnatural” in a black man. The boy who has barely been to school, and hasn’t liked it, can make fun of the unschooled man’s ignorance. And on and on. Yet what saves Huck, and what distinguishes him from his fellow whites, is his capacity for moral growth. He mostly learns from his mistakes and overcomes the prejudices that society has attempted to instill in him. He is still a work in progress at the end of the novel, but he’s also still only thirteen. At that, he’s further advanced than most of the so-called adults in this tale.

We can’t leave this discussion of the novel without addressing a major concern: so what about the Tom Sawyer subplot? “So what” pretty much covers my response. I’m with Hemingway on this one; we should stop reading when Tom shows up. In a novel that has covered so much ground and been so daring in so many ways, Tom Sawyer’s “authorities” and contrivances represent a huge leap backward. Twain had to put the novel away for several years, unable to conclude the thing. That he settled on this device, of massive cruelty to free a man already manumitted by bequest, indicates the level of desperation. I have always found the later chapters of the novel embarrassing, undoing all of Huck’s moral development. Even a high school sophomore or junior can tell that something is definitely wrong here. It is the worst
sort of betrayal of character; Huck becomes someone other than the person he has grown to be. Would he let himself, after having faced down so many dangers, be so governed by Tom's whims? Can he not see that Tom is the Duke and Dauphin writ small? Can he suddenly be so ignorant of Jim's humanity? I don't think so. Yet there it is in black and white. Readers always have the right to reject some aspect of their novels, and I have come to the point of declining delivery of the late chapters. They're too inauthentic for me.

But I'll defend to the death the greatness of the novel that contains them.

The main thing about Huck and his book is the whole language business. Have you ever considered what life would be like if everyone talked like a character in a Henry James novel? Now don't get me wrong; I have the utmost respect for James. Sort of the way I have the utmost respect for the federal penitentiary. It's necessary for my way of life, but I don't really want to go there. Forget life. Have you considered what reading would be like if all characters talked as if they were in a James novel? No? I'll tell you. It would be decorous but dull. And that's just what Huck Finn isn't. Dull, that is. Or decorous, for that matter. Huck talks the way a boy would, if he were ignorant and rough around the edges, if he's been raised by the town drunk in a place like Hannibal, Missouri, if he'd seen the devil and 'sivilized' ladies and had been more frightened of the ladies. Huck is ungrammatical, uneven, crude, poetic, beautiful. Here's the famous opening of the novel:

You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer"; but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Polly—Tom's Aunt Polly, she is—and Mary, and the Widow Douglas is all told about in that book, which is mostly a true book, with some stretchers, as I said before.

What a thing of beauty! "You don't know about me without you have read a book"! They don't write 'em like that anymore. That's because they've educated such speech out of almost all of us. Do you know anyone who could even get their mouths around "without you have read a book"? I used to, a couple of folks back home in the hills, but they were very old even then, and that was a long time ago. As for me, I wouldn't even know how to characterize the parts of speech in that phrase, except to say they're not behaving in a prescribed manner. Which is pretty much true of Twain's language throughout the novel. Also his people. Huck has some great coinages and twists of language, many of which are regional, like "warn't," that commingling of "wasn't," "weren't," and maybe "aren't"—a sort of plural "ain't." To which he also has frequent recourse. Or "clumb" for "climbed." Makes sense to me. He even rises to a kind of poetry at times, as when he hides the money the two charlatans have stolen from the Wilks sisters:

But I knewed better. I had it out of there before they was half-way down stairs. I grooped along up to my cubby, and hid it there till I could get a chance to do better. I judged I better hide it outside of the house somewheres, because if they missed it they would give the house a good ransacking; I knewed that very well. Then I turned in, with my clothes all on; but I couldn't a gone to sleep if I'd a wanted to, I was in such a sweat to get through with the business. By and by I heard the king and the duke come up; so I rolled off my pallet and laid with my chin at the top of my
ladder, and waited to see if anything was going to happen. But nothing did.

That's beautiful. The sound alone of "I had it out of there before they was half-way down stairs" can't be improved. It's swift, crisp, and clean. Compared to that, what's subject-verb agreement? The critics of Huck's language have never understood that it is the ideal vehicle for conveying his experience, and his experience is everything to this novel.

One of the great achievements of the novel is freeing writers to make use of dialect and colloquial expression in the pursuit of "serious" writing. Before Huck, dialect was inevitably the hallmark of "low"—low comedy, low class, lowbrow. Like the minstrel show, it was used to make fun of the group it supposedly represented. Twain shows that it can do something else—bring us into the minds of characters who may not be like us, raise serious issues from inside a social or ethnic group, depict without denigrating. He authorizes later writers of all ethnicities to explore the language people around them actually use. Writers as disparate on other grounds as Langston Hughes, Louise Erdrich, and Eudora Welty are beneficiaries of his example. Most importantly, he demonstrates that literary language need not be "literary language." For that alone, we should be most grateful.

The other sort of language issue has caused the book no end of difficulties. When it first came out, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn was assailed in some quarters for the coarseness of its language. It was banned in many quarters. A century or so later, it was again one of the most controversial books in the country, according to the American Library Association's list of challenged books, again because of language. The issues are not the same. When the Concord, Massachusetts, Library Committee banned the book, it was because of language that was "beneath" educated readers, suitable only for the slums. This was chiefly because the main speaker was himself uneducated and raised by a ruffian father. It probably also had something to do with Huck's statement when he tears up the letter to Miss Watson and says, "All right then, I'll go to hell." Hell may or may not have lost its sting since 1884, but "hell" certainly has, becoming one of the milder expletives at our disposal. That Library Committee stopped just short of calling the book immoral, although they wanted to, which borders on the bizarre, since in many ways it is the most moral book in our literature.

In the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of our own, the language issue surrounds a single word. Yes, Huck, like the people he encounters, does employ the word "nigger." A lot. As he would have. The word troubles us a great deal, as it should, and its history is so varied and fraught that its study would merit a separate book. But Twain was a realist, which is to say, he sought to portray the world as he found it, often satirically but always with a high degree of verisimilitude. To suggest that a common boy from a slaveholding state would refrain from the word, or have any sense that he might need to refrain, is to enter the realms of purest fantasy. Whatever else this novel may be, it is not that. The combination of that word, however, and the attitudes of the characters and by extension its author, ensure that controversy will attend the book as long as we and it hang around. If it were a lesser book, we could simply ignore it. But it is not a lesser book.

This is the book without which a great many other books would not exist. More importantly, a whole class of literature would not look as it does. American satire and a very great deal of American fiction could not be what it is without Twain's singular example. I think you could pretty much remove Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon, Tom Robbins, and Peter de Vries from the literary map. Among a hundred
or so others. Or you could simply erase that map and begin again with the descendants of William Dean Howells or Hawthorne or James. Where do I go to sign up? The fiction of childhood would not be what it is without him. Scratch Salinger and Harper Lee and probably Judy Blume. And Jonathan Safran Foer's Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (2005), about the Twin Towers attack from a child's perspective.

Let’s not forget the armada of critical material. Leslie Fiedler’s “Come Back to the Raft Agin, Huck Honey,” dwelling on the heterosexism of the American male-bonding narrative, set off a firestorm of controversy when it appeared in 1948. Is Fiedler right? I don’t know, but the essay remains provocative sixty years on. Then there’s Was Huck Black? (1994) by Shelley Fisher Fishkin, which stirred nearly as much controversy as the original. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is the American Hamlet, an occasion for crackpot theories and wise analyses, and sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference.

Treatise on hypocrisy. Indictment of racism. Satire of American foibles. Failed masterpiece. Centerpiece of American literature. We might wish for something other than it is. We might wish it better. We wouldn’t wish it away. We’ll never escape its long shadow. We don’t have to be in Hannibal. Honolulu will do. Or Helena. The Hamptons or Hamtramck. There is one river, one raft, one novel that absolutely matters in American writing. You know its name.