

Finn

JON CLINCH

A Reader's Guide

A NOTE TO READING GROUPS

At the outset, a famous novelist warned me that if I insisted on writing *Finn* I ought to be constantly on my guard. "Mr. Clemens," he said, "will be looking over your shoulder."

He didn't know the half of it.

And frankly, neither did I.

Only after I showed early bits of the manuscript to other writers did I begin to understand. There was plenty of encouragement, of course, and lots of praise, but beneath it all was an undercurrent of "How dare you?"

Funny thing is, it had never occurred to me that writing a novel about Huck Finn's father was all that daring. It was just something I needed to do. Blame it on Twain himself, who planted the seed for *Finn* in my mind so many years ago: the house that Huck and Jim found afloat on the Mississippi, bearing a corpse whose identity would remain a mystery until the end of the book. I'd never forgotten the scene. And when I returned to it as an adult, it seemed to have grown even creepier and more evocative than I'd remembered. The walls, covered all over with words and pictures in charcoal. The men's and women's clothing. The wooden leg. The two black masks made out of cloth.

What on earth, I asked myself, did Twain mean by leaving those clues behind? What did

he want to suggest to us about the life and death of Huck's brutal, alcoholic, racist father? One conventional reading is that Finn died in a brothel, but I wanted more. I wanted to understand what kind of life a man might lead that would cause him to die precisely there, in that unmoored two-story house, surrounded by that particular collection of dreadful artifacts. My respect and admiration for Twain—as a novelist, as a craftsman, as a moralist of the highest order—would not permit me to dismiss these details as mere meaningless throwaways. And so I began, placing these various artifacts around the course of Finn's daily life and tracing the path they made so as to discover the truth about his life.

When people learn that I wrote *Finn* in only five and a half months, I remind them that although it's not much time to be writing a serious novel, it's a long stretch to be nursing a serious illness. Which is pretty much what writing *Finn* was like: a violent, feverish dream that I could escape only by surrendering myself to it utterly. Finn's story and his world took over my life, and I believe that a good amount of that strange fervid intensity remains upon the page.

Even my agent was terrified to watch my progress. Each time I e-mailed him an update, he'd respond with a cagey, "Take your time!" He'd been representing the book ever since page fifty or so, and I'm pretty sure he thought I was rushing to the end. Hardly. The book was rushing me, if anything, and I strained for six, eight, ten hours a day to keep up with it.

Would I endure that kind of thing again? You bet. Writers prowl day and night looking for an idea that will assail them this way.

So, yes. I believe I would kill for the opportunity.

Although that may be Finn talking.

ON THE ROAD AND ON THE PHONE:
A CONVERSATION WITH JON CLINCH

During his tour for *Finn*—and in telephone calls to book groups ever since—Jon Clinch has been collecting interesting questions. Here are some of the best, by way of sparking discussion at your group meeting.

Question: Early in *Finn*, we know that the two main characters will die by the end. What kind of problems did that pose for you?

Jon Clinch: More than a few—but I wanted to start out with that floating corpse for a number of reasons. First, it never hurts to start with a body—especially one that's been mysteriously flayed. Second, I wanted to echo a scene from chapter three of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, where people find the corpse of a man drowned in the river (for a while they believe it's Finn himself). And last, this particular body belongs to a character who will be the emotional center of the novel and its chief revelation.

Beginning with this moment left me with two choices: I could either write the rest of the novel as a flashback leading up to this point, or I could structure the narrative in a much more complex way to focus more on character than on plot. Obviously, I chose the second

path. My goal from that point on was to create a story that developed its urgency by means of intense focus on a handful of characters—mainly Finn himself.

In the end, this structure served thematic purposes as well. *Finn* is in many ways a novel about imprisonment—Finn physically imprisons both Huck and Mary at various times—and taken all around there’s really no character who functions with the absolute freedom that he desires. It seems to me that the novel’s structural confinement reinforces that point.

Q: Why didn’t you use dialect in *Finn*?

JC: I set out with two clear aims for the way that *Finn* would sound. First, I wanted an archaic and mythic kind of narrative voice that would give the novel a sense of timelessness and truth. That meant calling on the language and cadences of some large and imposing models: the King James Bible, for one, and the work of American masters like William Faulkner and Herman Melville. My second goal was to honor Twain’s grand use of dialect in *Huckleberry Finn* without attempting to mimic it in any way. By stripping the speech of characters like Finn or Bliss down to its barest essence, I was able to create a contrast between narrative and dialogue that conveys the impression of dialect without giving in to specifics.

As for Finn’s “I know it,” I hear this vocal tic as a statement of mingled assent and defensiveness and one-upmanship—as if he believes that merely agreeing with another person is too passive and undignified an act. With this little formula he simultaneously assents and defends his independence and declares his awareness of any knowledge possessed by whatever person he’s speaking with. Plus I believe that the Homeric quality of repeated, formulaic expression—coupled with the naming conventions in the book, where certain characters are identified only by their roles and Finn himself has no known first name—works to advance the novel’s mythic scope.

Q: How careful were you to match events in *Finn* to events in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*?

JC: Extremely, although I always gave myself a certain amount of leeway. As Twain himself wrote: “Get your facts first, and then you can distort them as much as you please.”

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My intent was always to honor the imaginative world that Twain created in *Huckleberry Finn*, rather than enslave myself to the details of geography or history. Some scenes from *Huckleberry Finn* replay whole in *Finn*, except for point of view and subtext. Some scenes that Twain only sketched or suggested—Finn and the professor from Ohio, Finn and Judge Stone—are fleshed out fully. Other scenes that my narrative required—Finn’s discovery of Huck’s escape from the squatter’s shack, for example—called for interpreting the events of *Huckleberry Finn* in new ways, ways that I think are often more credible than Huck’s reportage.

Twain’s decision to have a child tell his own story gave me the freedom to consider Huck an unreliable narrator, particularly when it came to describing the wickedness of his own

father. (One key example of this is the scene in *Huckleberry Finn* where, his escape from the squatter's shack having left the people of St. Petersburg thinking him dead, Huck describes seeing a search boat that carries practically everybody in town—including Judge Thatcher and Pap. I couldn't see Finn playing the good father here, even for pay, any more than I could see him falling for Huck's clumsy "escape." So I chalked Huck's report up to wishful thinking, and let Finn go on his way up the river.

Q: Other than Twain, what were your inspirations?

JC: William Faulkner, obviously. I'd always wanted to write a novel with a powerful motivating character who remained just behind the scenes, like Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!* The Judge fills that role in *Finn*, although as draft turned into revised draft he moved more and more out of the shadows. Herman Melville was a great inspiration, too. The Santo Domingo sequence where Finn abducts Mary is in some ways a retelling of his novel *Benito Cereno*.

Then there's music. Many rhythms and phrases and references in *Finn* come from the magnificent gospel hymns of Fanny Crosby, Charles Albert Tindley, and others. I came to love these as a child, and they stay with me to this day. Other musical touchstones are the fine banjo-and-fiddle recordings of John Hartford and Texas Shorty, whose plaintive and stately melodies form the secret soundtrack of this book. You can hear one of them, "Midnight on the Water," at www.ReadFinn.com.

Q: How have people responded to the notion of a biracial Huck?

JC: *Finn* definitely has Twain scholars talking, and by and large their opinion is that although my book's revelations won't satisfy everyone, they provide some important and convincing answers to questions posed by Twain's novel. This gratifies me, not because I set out to please the academics or to advance some kind of scholarly agenda, but because I set out to write a book that was true to its raw materials and true to its deepest impulses and true to my own worldview—particularly to my understanding of how human nature functions at points of extremity. That it's being received as a convincing extension of Twain's world seems to me a great reward for my efforts.

All of which leads me back to the central question of Huck's blackness. As Shelley Fisher Fishkin demonstrated in her provocatively titled monograph *Was Huck Black?* Twain's worldview was much influenced by the black children with whom he grew up. Their manner of speech—their manner of thought, come to that, since language both reflects and influences cognition—was enormously important in shaping his own modes of expression. Particularly his taste for satire and irony, without which we wouldn't have much in the way of a Mark Twain at all. With Fishkin, I believe that there is most certainly a whole black culture at work behind the character of Huck Finn, regardless of the particulars of his pigmentation.

Q: What about the level of violence in *Finn*? How does it align with the world of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*?

JC: While he was composing *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain lamented that the strictures of polite culture—and the limits of writing for an audience of boys—kept him from describing in its pages the hair-raising violence that he had seen on the Mississippi of his youth. He

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felt constrained, in other words, from telling a truth that I was free to describe.

But I was more than *free* to describe it, really. I was *obliged*. First because of my commitment to Twain, and second because of my deeply held belief that we live in a world where it's easy—in fact, almost inevitable—to become inured to violence. There is plenty of brutality in *Finn*, but there's nothing in its pages that you can't see on the evening news or in a thousand other less serious corners of popular culture: movies, cop shows, video games, the latest thriller on the library shelf. If some of *Finn* makes readers flinch, and I hope it does, it's only in the service of awakening a kind of primal human reflex that I fear we may be on the verge of dulling to extinction.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 Finn (the character) is both sympathetic and unsympathetic. How do his various traits and actions make him that way? Did you find yourself rooting for him or against him? For what reasons? How did your reactions to him change as the book went on?
- 2 Finn is deeply conflicted on issues of race. Which of his impulses are good? Which are bad? What could he have done to change the outcome of his circumstances?
- 3 Finn is also fiercely conflicted in his relationship with his father, the Judge. He wants desperately to please him, but subverts his own intentions time and again. How does this make you feel about the two of them—and about their relationship?
- 4 The author chose to give Finn no first name and to give certain other characters either no names at all or names that identify them as archetypes (e.g., the Judge, the preacher, the laundress). Why do you suppose he made this decision? How did this unusual naming convention affect your understanding of and involvement with the story?
- 5 The events in *Finn* are told out of sequence. How would the novel have been different if it had been told chronologically?
- 6 Although the action in *Finn* is closely tied to the events of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, the novel stands by itself and takes some very different directions from Twain's work. Did that surprise you? If the author had chosen to stay closer to Twain, how would the book have been different?
- 7 If you have read *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* recently, how did the world envisioned in Twain's novel compare with the world in Clinch's? Which seemed to you more realistic? Why?
- 8 *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has a first-person narrator (Huck tells the story himself), while *Finn* has an omniscient third-person narrator. Huck is told in the past tense, and Finn in the present. How do these differences affect your understanding of the novels and your connection to them?
- 9 *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is widely regarded as a masterpiece of dialect writing. Did the author of *Finn* choose wisely in avoiding the use of dialect in his novel? What tricks did he use to give the impression of dialect speech without actually rendering it?
- 10 What images—either from memorable scenes or through vivid language—stand out to you? The author has said that much of the inspiration for the language of this book came from William Faulkner, the King James Bible, and old gospel hymns. Does that make sense to you?

11 Some minor characters from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* reappear in *Finn*. Which of them did you recognize? How are they different, if at all?

12 One important theme of *Finn* is paternity: the things we take from our fathers and pass to our children. There are several father-and-child combinations in the book, both real and symbolic: Finn and the Judge, Finn and Huck, Judge Thatcher and Huck, Judge Thatcher and Becky, the Judge and Will, Judge Stone and his children, Mary's father and Mary, the laundress's husband and the murdered child. How do they compare to one another?

13 The last sentence of *Finn*—"He will take what he requires and light out"—echoes the end of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: "...I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest. . . ." Yet it also refers to the issues of paternity raised in *Finn*. Twain's ending was hopeful. Is Clinch's? How are the endings different?