



Was Huck Black?: Mark Twain and African-American Voices

By Shelley Fisher Fishkin

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Ernest Hemingway asserted, "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*." Lionel Trilling said the novel was "not less than definitive in American literature." Published in 1884, *Huck Finn* has become one of the most widely taught novels in American curricula. But where did *Huckleberry Finn* come from, and what made it so distinctive? Shelley Fisher Fishkin suggests that in *Huckleberry Finn*, more than in any other work, Mark Twain let African-American voices, language, and rhetorical traditions play a major role in the creation of his art.

In *Was Huck Black?*, Fishkin combines close readings of published and unpublished writing by Twain with intensive biographical and historical research and insights gleaned from linguistics, literary theory, and folklore to shed new light on the role African-American voices played in the genesis of *Huckleberry Finn*. Given that book's importance in American culture, her analysis illuminates, as well, how African-American voices have shaped our sense of what is distinctively "American" about American literature.

Fishkin shows that Mark Twain was surrounded, throughout his life, by richly talented African-American speakers whose rhetorical gifts Twain admired candidly and profusely. A black child named Jimmy whom Twain called "the most artless, sociable and exhaustless talker I ever came across" helped Twain understand the potential of a vernacular narrator in the years before he began writing *Huckleberry Finn*, and served as a model for the voice with which Twain would transform American literature. A slave named Jerry whom Twain referred to as an "impudent and satirical and delightful young black man" taught Twain about "signifying"--satire in an African-American vein--when Twain was a teenager (later Twain would recall that he thought him "the greatest man in the United States" at the time). Other African-American voices left their mark on Twain's imagination as well--but their role in the creation of his art has never been recognized. *Was Huck Black?* adds a new dimension to current debates over multiculturalism and the canon.

American literary historians have told a largely segregated story: white writers come from white literary ancestors, black writers from black ones. The truth is more complicated and more interesting. While African-American culture shaped *Huckleberry Finn*, that novel, in turn, helped shape African-American writing in

the twentieth century. As Ralph Ellison commented in an interview with Fishkin, Twain "made it possible for many of us to find our own voices." *Was Huck Black?* dramatizes the crucial role of black voices in Twain's art, and takes the first steps beyond traditional cultural boundaries to unveil an American literary heritage that is infinitely richer and more complex than we had thought.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Elaborating on a thesis that made news last summer, Fishkin, professor of American Studies at the University of Texas, convincingly argues that Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn was influenced by African American voices. Mixing historical and literary research with close analysis of Twain's writings, Fishkin cites a newly discovered 1874 article by Twain that describes his encounter with a black child whose voice was later echoed by Huck; she also assesses the impact of his childhood friendship with a "signifying" slave named Jerry. Fishkin suggests Twain's blending of black and white voices was unconscious and maintains that his portrayal of "nigger" Jim was more subversive than racist. Though the book seems mainly aimed at academics, it also considers the question of whether Huckleberry Finn should be taught in high school. Black students might now more easily identify with Huck, Fishkin states, but the major African American figure remains the minstrel-voiced Jim. Therefore, she suggests that teachers also expose students to more powerful black voices, such as those of Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. Illustrations not seen by PW.

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From Library Journal

Here is that rarity in criticism, a monograph almost sure to be definitive. Fishkin (American studies, Univ. of Texas, Austin) argues compellingly that an 1874 sketch by Mark Twain, about the black ten-year-old "Sociable Jimmy," served as the model for Huck Finn's African American-rooted dialect--along with "A True Story" (1874), based on a tale by an ex-slave, Mary Ann Cord. There was also a slave Twain knew in boyhood, Jerry, who taught him the African American art of "signifying" satire. Twain's genius with vernacular has always been acknowledged, but Fishkin shows, with formidable scholarship, how black speech (and life) influenced white culture and how, in American literature, the Twain do indeed meet. Recommended for informed readers and scholars. For a perspective on Twain's humor, see Mark Twain's Critical Humor, reviewed below.--Ed.

- Kenneth Mintz, Hoboken P.L., N.J.

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From Kirkus Reviews

Direct, brief, well-informed, and polemical ("How will Americans respond to the news that Huck...was part black?"), Fishkin (American Studies/University of Texas, Austin) provides a questionable but dramatic genealogy of Huckleberry Finn's African-American ancestors as a gesture toward "desegregating" American literary history. Inspired by David Bradley's 1985 lecture, "The First 'Nigger' Novel," Fishkin argues that the prototypical American literary hero in what major writers have considered the archetypal American novel was based on a black child named Sociable Jimmy; that Twain's language ("raised to a level of literary eloquence," as Ralph Ellison said in 1970) is derived from African-American voices; and that his satirical social style was inspired by a black boy named Jerry whom he knew while still a child. But although Twain enjoyed black culture enough to appropriate it for his writings, he repressed the sources because, Fishkin says, he wanted to be respectable--and in the age of p.c. (of which this study is a monumental example), that makes Twain a hypocrite, a character-type that he himself found particularly contemptuous. To prove that an imaginary hero in a work of art (or even a popular commercial novel, as Huckleberry Finn was originally conceived) is multiracial, multicultural, even androgynous, would be to explain his perennial appeal. But Fishkin treats the novel and its lead character as a social commentary or textbook, referring often to its presentation in the classroom and shaping her argument for literary critics. Isolating Huck's African-

American traits--some based on stereotypes, others uncovered through sophisticated linguistic analysis-- seems to create its own form of segregation, to oversimplify a complex literary character, and to compromise the universality to which a wide range of authors (whom Fishkin quotes) have paid tribute--authors such as Ellison, Faulkner, Hemingway, Toni Morrison, and others, who claim to have learned their language and acquired their voices from Twain. In spite of the confused motives: an exhaustive and provocative work, already creating a stir. (Eighteen halftones) -- *Copyright ©1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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