



Penguin
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SECONDARY EDUCATION

Big Jim and the White Boy

An American Classic Reimagined

By DAVID F. WALKER
and MARCUS KWAME ANDERSON

Teacher's Guide written by
Ronell Whitaker, Assistant Principal & ELA Educator

Ten Speed Graphic | Paperback
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ABOUT THE BOOK

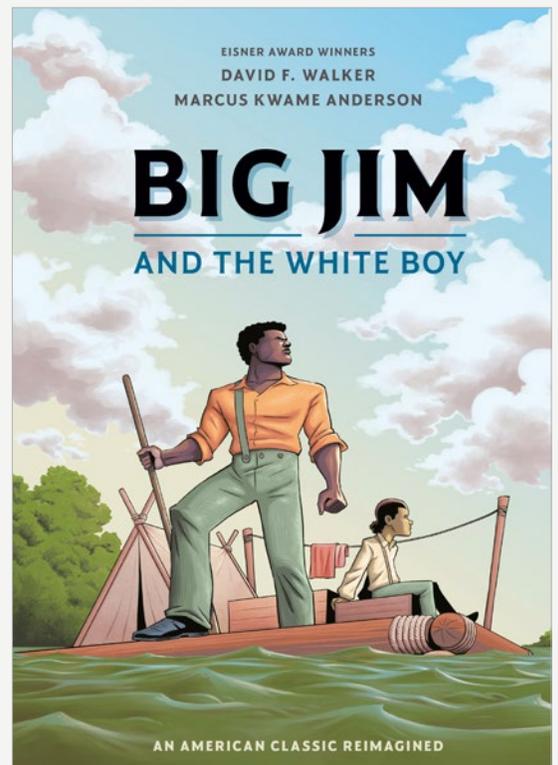
Commonly regarded as one of the great American novels, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has captured the hearts and imaginations of readers since 1885. But since its publication, critics have rightfully condemned Mark Twain's troubling portrayal of Black Americans as stereotypes and caricatures, with contemporary fans searching for a modern update to this iconic tale.

Big Jim and the White Boy is a radical retelling of this American classic, centering the experiences of Jim, an enslaved Black man in search of his kidnapped wife and children, along with his cheeky sidekick, Huckleberry Finn. Jim and Huck's high-stakes adventures take them on an epic voyage across the antebellum South and Midwest, through Confederate war camps and runaway safe houses, into Old West standoffs, and on the road as covert Underground Railroad agents. Intertwined into the story of Jim and Huck are the stories of Jim's descendants in the 1930s, 1980s, and 2020s, making this a multigenerational family epic as well as an adventure story. *Big Jim and the White Boy* takes readers on a journey through Jim

Teacher's Guide

Includes:

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES,
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS,
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES,
AND LINKS TO RESOURCES



“This reimagining of Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* shifts its focus to Jim and becomes a broader examination of enslavement, the American Civil War era, and the power of telling one’s own story.”
—*School Library Journal*, starred review

ABOUT THE BOOK

and Huck's past, present, and future, delving into their incredible friendship and years of adventures—a bond that transcends the gruesome racism of the Civil War era.

With compelling artwork and riveting storytelling, David F. Walker and Marcus Kwame Anderson push the boundaries of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in this incredible graphic novel, exploring the triumphs and tribulations of Jim and his family, and finally giving his due as a hero of American literature.

ABOUT THE CREATORS

David F. Walker is an award-winning comic book writer, author, filmmaker, journalist, and educator. His work in comic books includes *Shaft*, winner of the Glyph Award for Story of the Year; *Power Man and Iron Fist*, *Nighthawk*, *Fury*, *Secret Wars: Battleworld*, *Cyborg*, *The Army of Dr. Moreau*, and *Number 13*. He is also the creator of the critically-acclaimed YA series *The Adventures of Darius Logan* and the author of the Eisner-winning *The Black Panther Party* and *Bitter Root*. Recognized as a leading scholar expert of African American cinema, Walker produced one of the definitive documentaries on the topic of Blaxploitation films, *Macked, Hammered, Slaughtered and Shafted*.

Marcus Kwame Anderson is an illustrator and fine artist. He is the Eisner Award-winning co-creator of *The Black Panther Party*, the co-creator of series *Snow Daze*, and the illustrator of *Cash & Carrie*. His most recent book is the critically-acclaimed *Big Jim and the White Boy*, a collaboration with David F. Walker, published by Ten Speed Graphic.

NOTE TO TEACHERS

The visual nature of comics often makes for a faster reading experience, but it would be a good idea to encourage students to slow down and focus on the visual language of the book as well as the text. Visual literacy is a powerful skill, and having students strengthen their abilities in this area will only add to their understanding and enjoyment of this text. Also, keep in mind when grappling with this material that you and your students will be asked to examine topics that may be difficult for them to navigate without proper preparation and support. If you have your own community norms and discussion protocols in place, you may be in a good place already. However, teachers looking for more support may want to consider resources like Matthew R. Kay's *Not Light, but Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom*, Facing History's "Preparing to Discuss Race in the Classroom" (prhlink.com/discussingrace), and Lorena German's *Textured Teaching: A Framework for Culturally Sustaining Practices*. (Note: While the Facing History unit is designed for use in the United Kingdom, the impact and reach of racism transcends borders. The lessons and resources linked here are relevant in any context where students are tasked with being able to discuss issues of race.)

**IMPORTANT GRAPHIC
NOVEL/COMIC TERMS**

Captions	Contain information about a scene or character.
Speech Bubble	Contain character dialogue; communication between/ among characters. The pointer/tail signifies who is speaking.
Emanata	Text or icons that represent what is going on in a character's head.
Frame	Lines or boxes around a panel(s).
Graphic Weight	A term that describes the way some images draw the eye more than others, creating a definite focus using color and shading in various ways.
Gutters	Space between panels where the reader infers movement/action between panels.
Panels	Squares or rectangles that contain a single scene/image.
Sound Effect	Words that show sound is happening.
Splash Page	One image or panel that takes up an entire comic page.
Thought Balloons	Contain a character's thoughts.
Writer	The person who writes the story and has the overall vision of how the story will go. They write the dialogue and how the story will progress.
Penciler	Primary artist. This person takes the script and draws the comic. They draw the comic in pencil, which then gets inked and colored later on.
Creator(s)	The entire creative team on a book (writer, penciler, inker, colorist, letterer, etc.) that came together to collectively tell and present the story. All of their decisions work together to influence the end product of a comic/graphic novel.

READING A GRAPHIC NOVEL/COMIC

The comic medium is normally read from front to back, left to right, and top to bottom. As you read through the panels, the dialogue bubbles are read in the same manner (highest-to-lowest, left-to-right). This is always subject to change, due largely to the imagination and creativity of the comic creators.



Speech Bubble

Contain character dialogue; Communication between/among characters



Gutters

Space between panels where the reader infers movement/action between panels



Panels

Squares or rectangles that contain a single scene/image

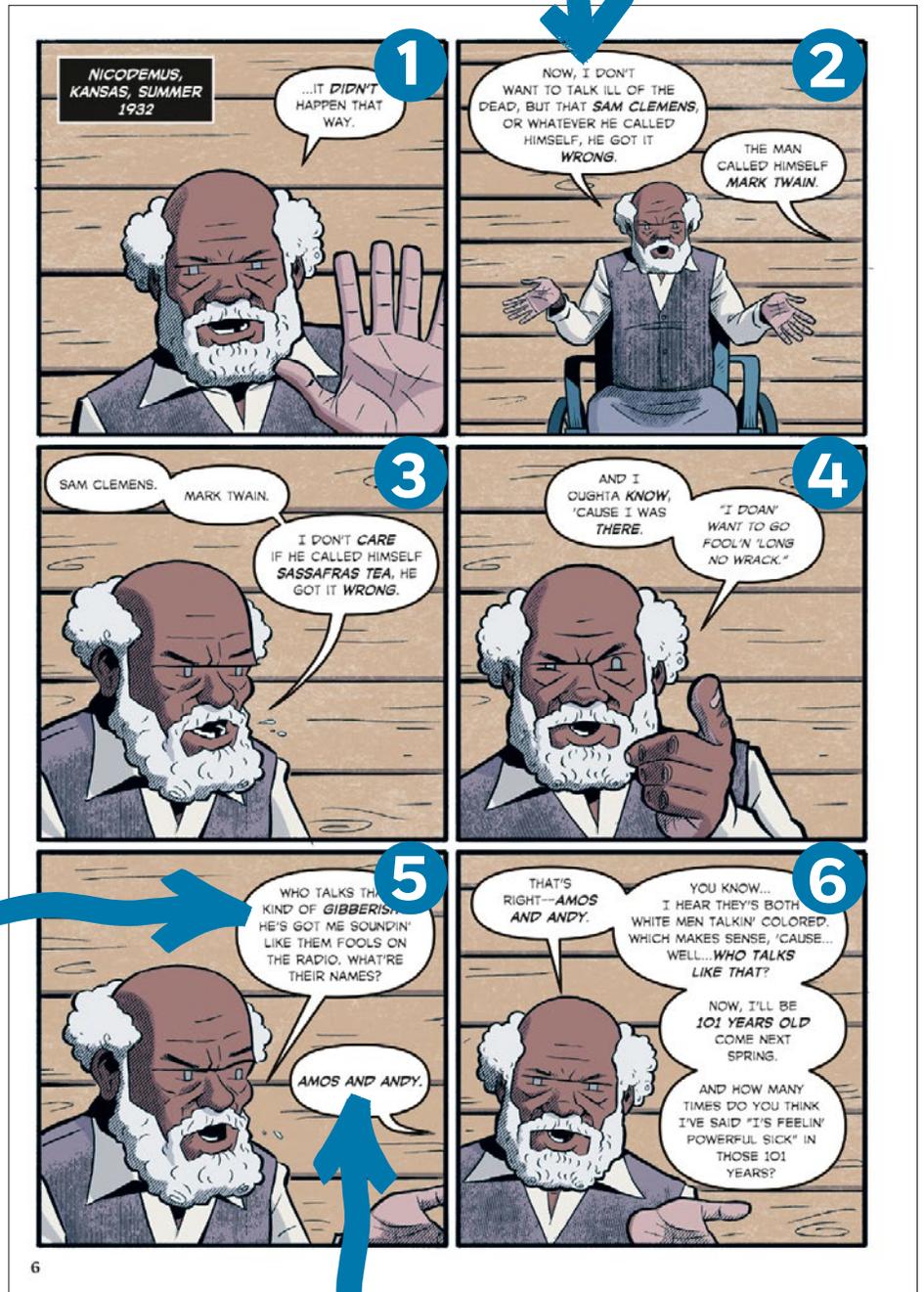
Captions

Contain information (exposition) about a scene or character

READING A GRAPHIC NOVEL/COMIC

Remember:
Read from left to right, and prioritize top to bottom.
The panels below are numbered for reading order.

Start reading the highest or leftmost text first.
Especially when more than one person is speaking.



Left + Highest

Right + Lowest

READING A GRAPHIC
NOVEL/COMIC

Now you give it a try.
Number the panels in their correct reading order.

Panel 1: A man in a white shirt and suspenders asks, "WHAT'RE YA DOIN'?"

Panel 2: A man in a white shirt and suspenders says, "MIGHT BE SOME THINGS WE CAN USE--PROVISIONS AND SUCH!"

Panel 3: A man in a white shirt and suspenders says, "LET ME COME WITH YOU!"

Panel 4: A man in a white shirt and suspenders says, "YOU WAIT HERE WITH THE RAFT. I WON'T BE LONG!"

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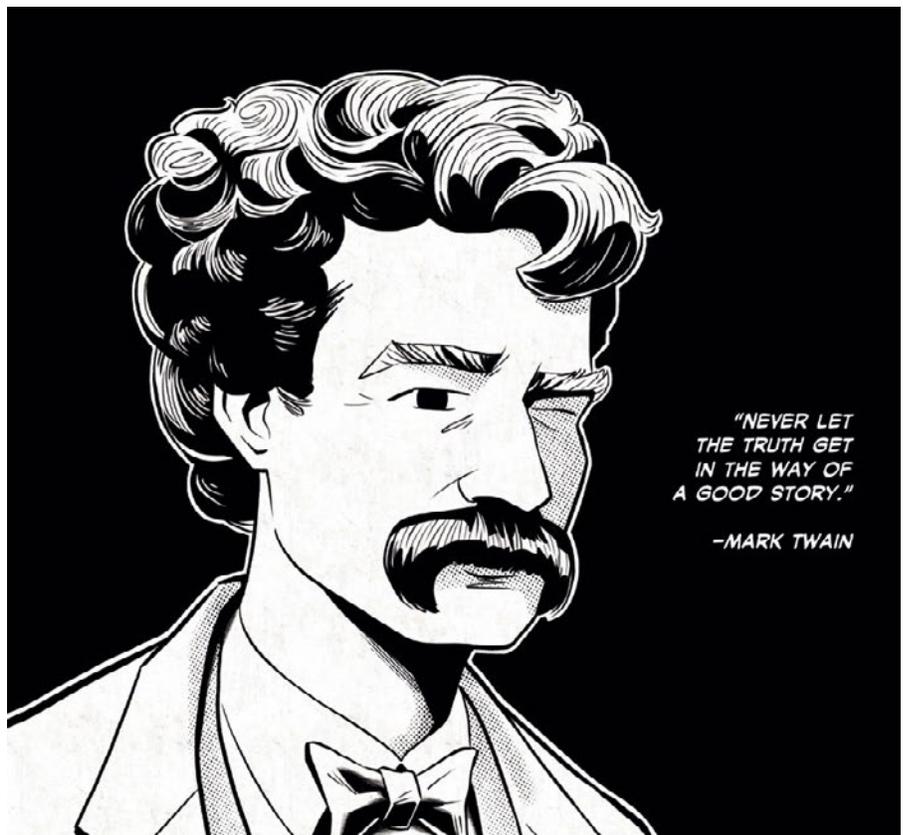
PRE-READING ACTIVITIES**PRE-READING ACTIVITIES**

Read Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" (prhlink.com/dunbarpoem) and Langston Hughes's "Minstrel Man" (prhlink.com/hughespoem). Discuss how these two poets talk about the "mask" that enslaved and oppressed people needed to wear in order to navigate life in antebellum and post-Civil War America. How is this mask sometimes an act of resistance? How can outside perspectives of this mask be misinterpreted?

SHORT WRITING ON TRUTH

The book begins with a quote from Mark Twain: "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story." Look at the following quotes on perspective and the truth. Which do you agree with more? Write a short paragraph explaining how one's perspective has an impact on how one views the truth. Is telling the truth important or is it relative?

- "There is no truth. There is only perception."
—Gustave Flaubert
- "Many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our point of view."
—Obi Wan Kenobi
- "Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is perspective, not the truth."
—Marcus Aurelius



PRE-READING ACTIVITIES**READING COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS ACTIVITY**

Have students reflect on their experience with graphic novels. Have they ever read a graphic novel, comic, or manga? If yes, what did they like and/or dislike about the experience? If no, what do they anticipate they will like and/or dislike about reading a graphic novel? How is the reading experience different between graphic novels and a prose book? How might the reader have to think differently to read a graphic novel than when they read a prose book?

GLOSSARY

While some of these terms are not directly in the text, they are important concepts to know when interacting with and thinking about the text:

- Characterize
- Perspective
- Dialect
- Satire
- Abolition
- Whitewashing
- Canon
- Stereotype

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

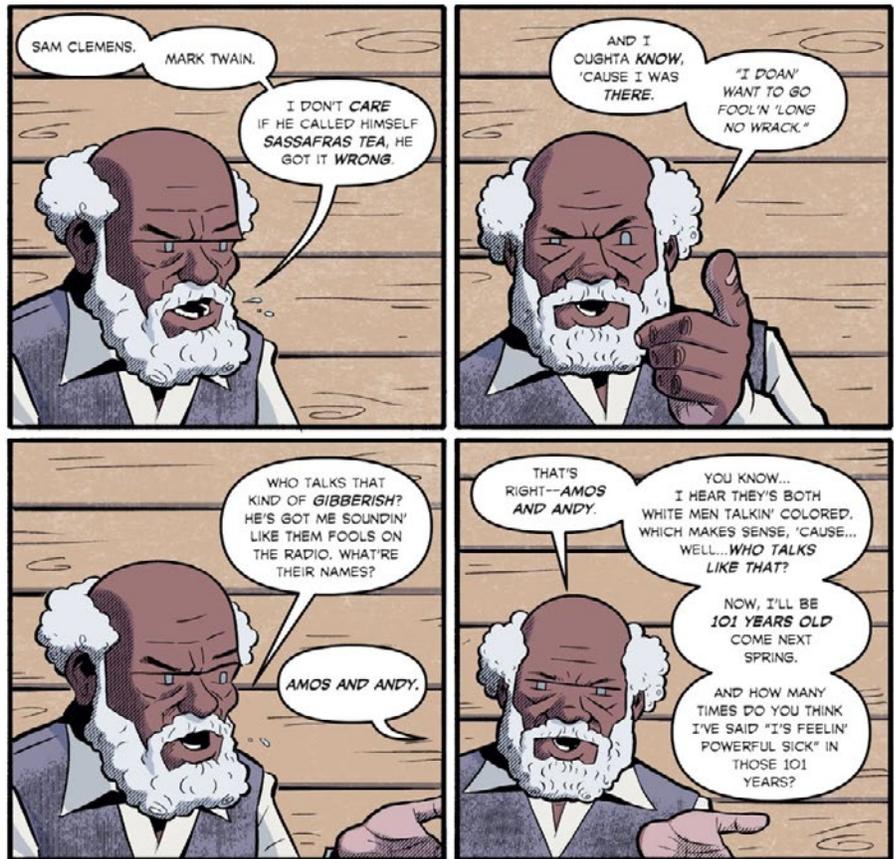
1. In the author's note, Walker references the controversy around the text that inspired *Big Jim and the White Boy*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Why does Walker believe it is important not to censor or remove some of the language in the original text? Why did he use it in his own book?

2. The book opens with Huck and Jim in black and white, with Jim speaking in a dialect similar to how he spoke in Twain's original book. How would you characterize Jim and Huck in this earlier section of the book?

3. With the shift in narrators also comes several visual cues and changes. How do the visual elements (art, color, paneling) in the graphic novel, especially the use of different styles for different eras, enhance or change the emotional impact and understanding of the story compared to a traditional prose novel?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

4. Early in the book, Jim takes issue with how Twain characterizes him, including the way he speaks. How is this an example of how a change in perspective can change the entire story?



5. Describe the difference between Twain's version of Jim and Huck in the beginning of the book vs. Jim and Huck from the rest of this book. What are some of the key differences?
-

6. The graphic novel's structure includes shifts between the 1850s/1860s, 1930s, 1980s, and 2020s. How does this shifting timeline impact your reading experience, and what is the effect of portraying oral storytelling across generations?
-

7. Where the source text is a satirical work of fiction, Walker treats his book as more of a historical recounting, with an older Jim telling his own story and Professor Almena Barnett talking about the historical context of Jim in her class. How does this more grounded format impact the reader?
-

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

8. The art style shifts several times in the early parts of the book, largely in response to who is telling the story. On page 28, Huck begins telling the bandits how he and Jim came to be on the abandoned riverboat. How does the art style here differ from other parts of the book? What is the artist trying to communicate to the reader with this change in art style?



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9. Throughout the book, there is a constant debate about the humanity of Jim and other enslaved people. What are some examples throughout the text where characters respond directly to this question?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

10. Jim and Huck are seen telling their story to children in the 1930s. What does this say about the lasting relationship between the two men? How would you characterize the elder Jim and Huck?
-
11. The book interweaves scenes featuring Professor Almema Burnett, a descendant of Jim, as a critic of Twain's original text. What are some of her criticisms of the original text? Do you agree? Explain.
-
12. Jim nearly dies in his fight with the Packards on the riverboat, and shortly after he comes up with his plan to start liberating slaves. How do you think that near-death experience influenced this new direction?
-
13. Jim and Huck get to New Philadelphia, a settlement of free Black people. Here, the truth behind Huck's lineage is revealed. Why does Jim say he's kept that truth from Huck? Do you agree with his reasoning? Why or why not?
-
14. While Jim makes it known that he does not speak in the dialect Twain assigned to him, he says he knew when to use it to "put on a show." Why did he think it was something he needed to do during certain interactions in the book?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

15. What are two distinct examples of the horrors of slavery that the graphic novel depicts and uses as a driving force for the story? What are some of the visual and narrative ways the creative team depicted this?

16. What impact did these horrific events of the Civil War have on Jim and Huck?

17. The book opens with the Twain quote: "Never let the truth get in the way of a good story." Jim talks about the importance of telling one's own story. How does Jim's point of view clash with that of Twain's quote?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

18. During Professor Barnett's last lecture, she speaks about how people used history and stories to sugarcoat the horrors of slavery. How does this book attempt to combat this sugarcoating?

19. The final pages feature Almena encouraging an audience member to tell her family's story. What is the graphic novel trying to communicate about the power of personal and generational narratives?

20. The graphic novel can be described as a politically charged reimagining of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. What major political or social statements do Walker and Anderson make through Jim's story that are relevant to issues in the world today?

**POST-READING
ACTIVITIES****CHALLENGING THE CANON**

Write a persuasive essay arguing for why *Big Jim and the White Boy* should be read in tandem with or in place of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in a high school curriculum. Your argument should focus on the graphic novel's ability to engage with the "harsh realities" of history and provide a more responsible, historically grounded exploration of race, slavery, and the American narrative.

THE POWER OF THE GRAPHIC NOVEL FORMAT

Analyze how the conventions of the graphic novel medium (e.g., paneling, color, visual metaphor, word balloons, visual juxtaposition of eras) are essential to the storytelling in *Big Jim and the White Boy*. Choose at least three distinct visual techniques and explain how they effectively convey themes, emotional depth, or the complex, nonlinear structure in ways that a traditional prose novel might struggle to achieve.

STORIES THAT NEED TO BE TOLD

Create a three- to four-minute audio or video presentation (podcast or video blog) titled, "The Story That Needed to Be Told." In your presentation, discuss the book's concluding theme: the necessity of telling one's own story. Use the graphic novel to analyze why the unwritten stories of people marginalized by history (like Jim) are essential for cultural understanding. Interview a peer, family member, or teacher about their favorite underrepresented story from history or literature, linking it back to Almena Burnett's final words of encouragement to the audience member.

POST-READING ACTIVITIES

“THE STORY WON’T WRITE ITSELF”

Similar to the podcast/vlog, create your own short comic further exploring a personal or community narrative. This could include a favorite family story, a local legend or story everyone tells about your neighborhood or town, or a favorite memory from growing up. For students who are truly hesitant to draw, this can be modified to a comic script. A comic script template can be found at prhlink.com/scripttemplate and an example script from Fred Van Lente’s *Archer and Armstrong*, provided by Comics Experience, can be found at prhlink.com/examplescript. If you have access to technology, there are multiple online templates to use (you can even use Google Docs/Slides, Apple Pages/Keynote, Microsoft Word/PowerPoint to create the traditional panel grids), but students can just as easily separate their paper into boxes themselves.

PASSING ON THE LEARNING

Write a mini-unit pitch on how you would use the graphic novel to teach one of the following concepts:

- The importance of storytelling
- The impact of perspective in literature
- Re-imagining the canon

Deliver your pitch as if you are presenting it to a school board or department head, persuasively arguing for its intellectual and historical value.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER READING/VIEWING:

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain

James by Percival Everett

My Jim by Nancy Rawles

PBS’s *It’s Lit!*: “Why Do People Think Huck Finn Is Racist?”
(prhlink.com/pbshuckfinn)

PBS’s *Culture Shock*: “Born to Trouble: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”

ABOUT THIS GUIDE’S WRITER

Ronell Whitaker is a high school assistant principal and former ELA teacher for Community High School District 218 in Oak Lawn, Illinois. He has 20 years of education experience and is a champion for comics in the classroom. He has presented across the country at conferences and conventions on the virtues of comics in the classroom. He is a founding member of the Lit-X Teacher Cohort. Ronell believes in comics, and he likes to think that comics believe in him.

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