



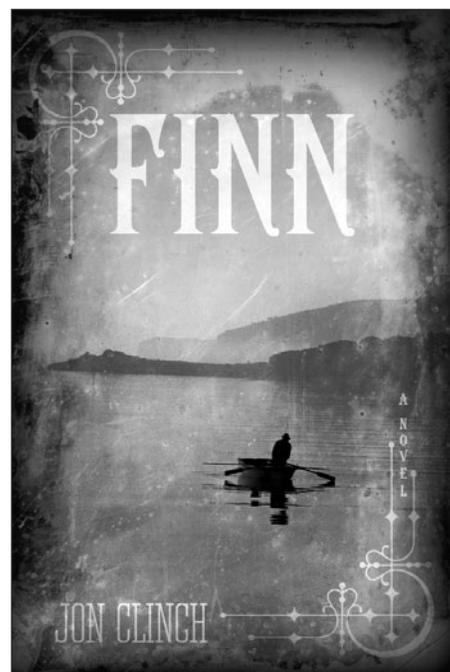
Finn

A Novel

by Jon Clinch

Random House | Hardcover
978-1-4000-6591-2 | 304 pages | \$23.95/\$29.95 Can.

READING LEVEL: 9



• note to teachers •

When considering *Finn* for use as a classroom tool, it quickly becomes evident that this book has a lot going for it. *Finn*, which tells the story of Huckleberry Finn's infamous father, has the approachability of a contemporary novel, but it also possesses that most desirable magic of good and enduring classic literature: versatility and an inherent penchant for border-crossing.

Like the great Mississippi that inspired Twain—a river which functions in *Finn* as both primary setting and grand symbol—this book flows well beyond its natural borders. It reaches outside of the world of literature and into the realms of sociology, psychology, cultural studies, history, and religion. *Finn* also functions as a bridge, drawing important connections between our cultural past and the world in which we now live. *Finn's* origins in early American literature can help students understand why the writing of the past is important, how and why we still relate to good literature today, what this literature tells us about our nation and our history, and why our past is important—whether we are speaking of our collective history as a nation or our own personal histories which lie in our genealogy and in our experience.

Finn is ultimately a dynamic exploration of paternity. The novel investigates the explosive impact that fathers have on their children and the sly but definitive impact of the legacy of a nation's history (including its greatest mistakes) on contemporary society and the individuals that are, as its citizens, its sons and daughters. *Finn* explores themes of race, freedom, and identity, most notably through the complex relationship between Finn and Huck's mother Mary.

In case you needed just one more reason to share *Finn* with your students, this book is both thoroughly enjoyable and utterly appalling—a combination which makes it difficult to put down. It is a swift-moving ride with action, murder, adventure, mystery, and more. *Finn's* ultimate magic lies in the fireworks-display revelation of the shocking birth, life, and death of its characters.

• about this book

In 1884, readers sat down with Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (now one of the most famous and frequently-read books in American letters) and pondered the fate of Huckleberry Finn's father. By the conclusion of the book, it was revealed that Pap Finn was dead—murdered, it would seem—and readers were left with no more than a few clues to satisfy their imaginations: whisky bottles, masks made out of black cloth, a woman's clothing and undergarments, a baby's bottle, and a boy's straw hat.

In 2007, Jon Clinch picks up where Twain left off, revealing not only the secrets of Pap Finn's death, but also the disconcerting details of his life. The novel opens with a disturbing introduction to the three main characters—Mary, Finn, and Huck—followed by the brief, foreboding appearance of the undertaker Swope.

A woman's corpse, which readers will later discover is Mary's, is found by a group of young boys as it floats down the Mississippi River. It is missing its skin.

Finn makes his first appearance in the woods with Bliss, the blind bootlegger. He is carefully disposing of the evidence of a murder.

"He is between worlds, this boy." Thus are we introduced to Huck, a young boy seeking his place in a society not yet capable of realizing equality.

As the story unfolds, Finn is pulled aboard a steamboat after it crashes into his raft, sending him into the water. Once on deck, Finn realizes that several African American passengers are planning to commandeer the boat in order to escape to the free state of Iowa. Included in this group of potential hijackers are a young slave named Mary and her father. When Finn foils their plot, he claims Mary as his reward. Together they develop a strange life, which exhibits some characteristics of the ordinary domestic habits of a married couple, including an enduring if not misplaced loyalty to each other. As the relationship reveals itself, a pattern of violence and abuse is evident, as if Finn cannot make up his mind if Mary is wife or slave. This unsettling relationship ultimately gives way to the birth of Huck, unleashing the startling premise that Huck is, in fact, mulatto—a heritage never literally bestowed on Huck by Mark Twain, but one which the author constructs carefully, so that readers of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* may find themselves asking "how could we not have known?"

Like a net full of floundering fish, the characters in Finn struggle in their interactions with each other and in their efforts to find a place in society. Finn himself is a slippery character, and readers can never be quite sure of him. He is an alcoholic, a brute, and the illiterate son of a vehement racist. Although the book presents some moments of strained hope for Finn (most notably those instances when we can at least entertain the possibility of honorable intentions as he acts out in defense of Huck and Mary), Finn is never quite able to conquer his own demons or quell his desire to both please and defy his father. He is unable to make his way in a society that he believes has no place for him. The result is a cycle of violence and murder, which eventually leads to Finn's own demise and leaves readers wondering: how much of one's self is one responsible for?

• about the author

JON CLINCH's fiction has previously been featured in *MSS* magazine. In addition to having taught literature, Clinch was the creative director for an ad agency in Philadelphia before he founded his own ad agency. Although he now lives in Pennsylvania with his wife and daughter, Clinch hails from upstate New York.

• about the muse

Pap Finn was originally a product of the imagination of American humorist and satirist **Mark Twain**. Now considered one of the most important figures in American literature, in no small part because of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain penned stories of the American experience with humor and wit. Born in Missouri in 1835 and having spent time as a child along the Mississippi River, Twain's life inspired his art. His writing not only captured the American experience, it utilized the American vernacular, allowing his stories to speak in the very voice of the society that it sought to characterize.

• teaching ideas

Many teachers may choose to use Finn in conjunction with its predecessor and source of inspiration: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The stories have many characters in common, in addition to sharing a setting, and the classic can, therefore, assist a reader in getting their bearings. Preceding Finn with Twain's classic will also certainly help to answer any questions about why an author today would want to refer back to it. However, the stories differ significantly in their tone and narrative choices, which gives each book its own distinct personality. It is this place where the books diverge that is most interesting. *Finn's* dark, wild tone and anonymous narration give the book its independence and its validity, and with due recognition to Twain's original, the fact is that *Finn* is able to stand on its own.

Jon Clinch's *Finn* has the benefit of touching on many subjects, which makes it an excellent text for interdisciplinary study. While the list below is not comprehensive, some suggestions for the book's applications follow.

Students of **literature** and **general readers** alike can use *Finn* to examine a rich tradition of American story-telling. Consider how an author constructs a novel. Why does an author choose to do it? What is the author trying to say? What themes would he ultimately like us to consider? More importantly, why would an author in 2007 choose to write a novel about a character from the 1800s?

History or **American/Cultural Studies** students might examine *Finn's* representation of the shift in civil rights and the disintegration of slavery, as well as the realities of early frontier life along the Mississippi.

Students of **religion** might concentrate on the many Christian allusions, including references to the Old Testament. Look at tales such as the fall of Satan and the expulsion of Adam and Eve, or the stories of Lazarus, Jonah, Lot, Abraham and Isaac. The novel contains many references to the varieties of faith, reconciliation, and redemption. One might consider the religious traditions that were prevalent during this time, and the beliefs shared by two different cultures. Continue on to examine the idea of personal faith, which extends beyond the bounds of inherited beliefs and into the realm of experience.

Psychology students might focus on the development and interaction of the characters—for instance, the heavy hand that the Judge has in Finn's troubled identity as an adult. They might look at the patterns of abuse and subsequent violence. Consider the role of genetic legacy and the weight of societal influences on self and community.

This guide begins with suggestions for breaking the novel into its most basic and digestible parts. Use the prompts that follow as a base for comprehension. You may then wish to move on to the prompts for discussion, exposition, and further analysis.

• teaching ideas (continued)

Characters

- Consider the main characters. How does the author describe them? What literary devices does he utilize to help readers become acquainted with these characters?
- Each of the main characters is dealing with their own internal struggles and with problems passed down by their families or by society. Compare and contrast the characters, their backgrounds, their struggles. Discuss their relationship to each other. What do they share in common and what sets them apart?
- Discuss the symbolic relevance of some of the minor characters like Bliss and the Judge, including the choice of their names, their professions, and the settings in which we find them.

Structure

- Examine the structure of the novel. Discuss the number of chapters and why the author might have chosen this amount. Talk about this structure and how it creates a sense of the cyclical nature of things and the natural passage of time.
- The author chooses to use alternating chapters to tell the story of Finn's life before Mary's murder and after. Discuss why the author might have chosen this approach. How does this back-and-forth approach help to heighten the sense of conflict and suspense and draw connections between past and present?

Tone

- Discuss the tone of *Finn*. How does the author achieve this tone?
- Discuss the author's use of foreshadowing to accentuate the tone of the novel by citing passages which include this device, such as Clinch's introduction of oncoming thunderstorms, the appearance of the undertaker Swope, and the flaming steamboat that hurtles towards Finn.

Imagery and Symbolism

- How does the author use symbolism and imagery to help tell his story? Discuss his use of metaphors and similes to describe characters and create a distinct sense of place.
- Discuss the recurring motif of black and white throughout the novel. Show how this motif is not simply utilized to signify tensions between race, but also, to show the struggle between two elements—whether they be good and evil or a person's past and the decisions one makes in the future. Show how this motif also unifies the characters, as it is applied in reference to both white and African American characters throughout the story.

Narrator and Voice

- *Finn* is told in the third-person with an anonymous narrator. Discuss how our idea of the story would change if Finn was the narrator, or Huck.
- Discuss the significance of the reliability of a narrator.

Plot

- Review the plot of *Finn* as if it were occurring in chronological order.
- What are some of the most significant actions and events in the novel? Why do they happen? What leads up to these climactic events and what are their consequences?

Setting and Cultural Context

- Discuss the setting of *Finn*. What was life like at this time in America?
- Discuss slave culture and the way that this culture was changing as slaves began to attain freedom in certain states.
- How was life different than now? What aspects remain the same?

Themes

- Discuss the prevalent themes of paternity, freedom, and identity.
- How do the Judge's views affect Finn's development? How did the Judge's own father impact his way of thinking? How do all of these things impact Huck's life and identity?
- Talk about the different kinds of freedom and slavery—for example, the slavery that Mary experiences and Finn's illiteracy.

• discussion and writing

1. What does the first sentence of the novel tell us about what we should expect from this story? What imagery does the author use in this sentence? Why? How does it set the tone of the novel?
2. Describe the overall structure of the novel. Why might the author choose to utilize twenty-four chapters?
3. Why might the author have chosen to alternate the chapters so that we take turns reading about Finn's life before Mary's murder and his life after this? Does this back-and-forth movement tell us anything about Finn's mental state or internal struggles?
4. Describe some of the metaphors and similes that the author uses in the first chapter. How do they help to create a sense of place?
5. In Chapter 1, we learn that other children have been ordered to stay away from Huck; they find Huck's "dark history as dizzying as a leap from some great bluff, into a Mississippi pool." What does this mean? Why do they feel this way about him?
6. Why might the author have chosen the name "Bliss" for the blind bootlegger? What might he represent?
7. In comparison to Finn's relationship with other bartenders and proprietors, why is Finn so comfortable with Bliss?
8. Discuss some examples of foreshadowing in *Finn*.
9. Finn catches fish for a living. What skills and characteristics does Finn need in order to be successful at this and to survive in the wilderness?

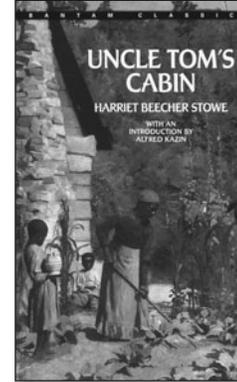
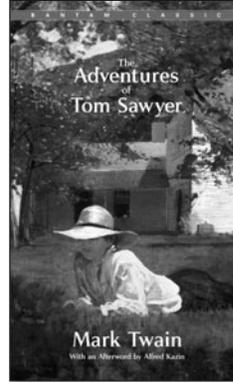
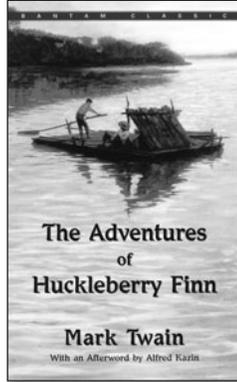
• discussion and writing (continued)

- 10.** Why does Finn whitewash the room? Is it simply to cover up his crime or does it represent something more? Later in the story, he covers the walls in charcoal drawings and words. Why do you think that he does this? What does it signify?
- 11.** When Finn tells Huck that Mary is not his mother and that his real mother was white, why doesn't Mary tell Huck the truth? Is her decision helping or hurting Huck?
- 12.** After Mary is murdered, Finn becomes interested in another African American woman. Why do you think the author chose to make her a laundress? Accordingly, what might she represent?
- 13.** When Finn drinks, he sees spiders and snakes. These kinds of visions are indicative of alcoholism and of symptoms such as delirium tremens, but what might these apparitions further symbolize?
- 14.** How does the Judge view African Americans? How does this affect his son's view of African Americans? What other childhood experiences may have contributed to Finn's troubled identity as an adult?
- 15.** There are many references to reconciliation and redemption in *Finn*. Describe some of the opportunities that Finn has for reconciliation or redemption. Is Finn able to capitalize on these opportunities? Why or why not?
- 16.** In Chapter Six, the author introduces us to a pair of professors of different heritages. One of them states that "change is afoot." What do these characters tell us about the changes taking place in American society at this time?
- 17.** When Judge Stone invites Finn over for dinner, they eat huckleberry pie. What do the huckleberries represent and what information does this give us about Huck and what he symbolizes?
- 18.** Why were Mary and her father trying to escape to Iowa? When they are caught, Mary's father is stripped of his white suit. What might this represent?
- 19.** What do we discover about Huck's true heritage? How was this perceived during Huck's lifetime? How would it be perceived today?
- 20.** Finn is a very violent man. What do you think causes him to be so violent? Why do you think that he kills Mary? What is significant about Finn's method of killing Mary and disposing of her remains?
- 21.** Did your perception of Finn fluctuate throughout the story? If so, what made your opinion of him change?
- 22.** In Chapter Sixteen, there is an important exchange between Finn and his brother Will. Finn makes a comment: "The way people look at me." Will corrects him: "The way you look to them." What are they talking about? Why is this exchange significant? Who is right?

• beyond the book: suggested activities

- 1.** Choose a character from a book that you have read and write a story using them as your central character. How would you change them? What characteristics would you leave the same? Why?
- 2.** Have your students delve into their own genealogy by investigating their family history and making family trees. Utilize resources such as local records and online tools in conjunction with Ellis Island etc. Discuss their backgrounds and how this may have had an impact on their own life.
- 3.** Research early American frontier life and the history of slavery. How have these experiences impacted our current society?

• other titles of interest



The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

by Mark Twain

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

by Mark Twain

My Jim: A Novel

by Nancy Rawles

Plays 1937-1955 and Plays 1957-1980

(Library of America)

by Tennessee Williams

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

by Frederick Douglass

Uncle Tom's Cabin

by Harriet Beecher Stowe

The Holy Bible: Genesis, Book of Job, Abraham & Isaac, Lot

As I Lay Dying

by William Faulkner

Light in August

by William Faulkner

The Sound and the Fury

by William Faulkner

Collected Works

by Flannery O'Connor

Greek and Roman mythology— the River Styx

The Old Man and the Sea

by Ernest Hemingway

Paradise Lost

by John Milton

Beloved

by Toni Morrison

The Castle in the Forest

by Norman Mailer

Siddhartha

by Hermann Hesse

Heart of Darkness

by Joseph Conrad

The Varieties of Religious Experience

by William James

• about this guide

This guide was produced by JENNIFER BANACH PALLADINO, a writer from Connecticut. Jennifer was the main contributor to *Bloom's Guides: The Glass Menagerie*, edited by Harold Bloom for Facts on File, Inc. She also recently completed a guide to Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* for DemiDec, Inc., a producer of guides and study materials for the Academic Decathlon (USA) and the Scholar's Cup (Korea).

• other guides available

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Fiction:

Achebe, Chinua. **Things Fall Apart**
Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. **Purple Hibiscus**
Asimov, Isaac. **I, Robot**
Bradbury, Ray. **Fahrenheit 451**
Brooks, Terry. **The Shannara Trilogy**
Butler, William. **The Butterfly Revolution**
Cather, Willa. **My Antonia**
Cisneros, Sandra. **La casa en Mango Street**
Cisneros, Sandra. **The House on Mango Street**
Clark, William van Tilburg. **The Ox-Bow Incident**
Clarke, Arthur C. **Childhood's End**
Cook, Karin. **What Girls Learn**
Crichton, Michael. **Jurassic Park**
Dunn, Mark. **Ella Minnow Pea**
Ellis, Ella Throp. **Swimming with the Whales**
Ellison, Ralph. **Invisible Man**
Gaines, Ernest. **A Lesson Before Dying**
García Márquez, Gabriel. **Chronicle of a Death Foretold**
Gibbons, Kaye. **Ellen Foster**
Guterson, David. **Snow Falling on Cedars**
Hansberry, Lorraine. **A Raisin in the Sun**
Hayes, Daniel. **Eye of the Beholder**
Hayes, Daniel. **The Trouble with Lemons**
Homer. Fitzgerald, Robert, trans. **The Odyssey**
Kafka, Franz. **The Trial**
L'Amour, Louis. **Hondo**
Le Guin, Ursula K. **A Wizard of Earthsea**
Maxwell, William. **So Long, See You Tomorrow**
McCarthy, Cormac. **All The Pretty Horses**
Mori, Kyoko. **Shizuko's Daughter**
Mullen, Thomas. **The Last Town on Earth**
Naylor, Gloria. **Mama Day**
Otsuka, Julie. **When the Emperor Was Divine**
Potok, Chaim. **The Chosen**
Pullman, Philip. **The Amber Spyglass**
Pullman, Philip. **The Golden Compass**
Pullman, Philip. **The Subtle Knife**
Rawles, Nancy. **My Jim**
Remarque, Erich Maria. **All Quiet on the Western Front**
Richter, Conrad. **The Light in the Forest**
Shaara, Jeff. **Gods and Generals**
Shaara, Jeff. **The Last Full Measure**
Shaara, Michael. **The Killer Angels**
Shute, Neil. **On the Beach**

Sinclair, Upton. **The Jungle**
Smith, Alexander McCall. **The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency**
Sparks, Christine. **The Elephant Man**
Spiegelman, Art. **Maus I**
Tan, Amy. **The Joy Luck Club**
Tolkien, J.R.R. **Lord of the Rings Trilogy**
Tolkien, J.R.R. **The Hobbit**
Twain, Mark. **Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**
Voigt, Cynthia. **Dacey's Song**
Voigt, Cynthia. **Homecoming**
Wartski, Maureen. **Candle in the Wind**
Wolff, Tobias. **Old School**

Nonfiction:

Armstrong, Karen. **Islam**
Baldwin, James. **Nobody Knows My Name**
Baldwin, James. **The Fire Next Time**
Bible. **The Five Books of Moses**
Blank, Carla. **Rediscovering America**
Cary, Lorene. **Black Ice**
Chen, Da. **Colors of the Mountain**
Collins, Billy. **Poetry 180/180 More**
Conway, Jill Ker. **The Road from Coorain**
Farrow, Anne, et. al. **Complicity**
Frank, Anne. **Diary of a Young Girl**
Haley, Alex. **The Autobiography of Malcolm X**
Hickam, Homer. **October Sky**
Hunter, Latoya. **The Diary of Latoya Hunter**
Hunter-Gault, Charlayne. **In My Place**
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Kennedy, Randall. **Nigger**
Kidder, Tracy. **Mountains Beyond Mountains**
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Santiago, Esmeralda. **Quando era puertorriqueña**
Santiago, Esmeralda. **When I Was Puerto Rican**
Suskind, Ron. **A Hope in the Unseen**
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