

## ***James*, by Percival Everett**

### ***Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy***

Generations of writers have been inspired by Mark Twain's classic *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. "All modern American literature," Ernest Hemingway once noted, "stems from this one book." In his new novel *James*, Percival Everett recasts Twain's iconic story from the viewpoint of Jim, Huck's companion on their Mississippi River excursion.

*James* is set in Hannibal, Missouri, just before the start of the Civil War. Jim is enslaved by Miss Watson, who is Huck's legal guardian. To protect Huck from his abusive, drunken father Pap, Judge Thatcher entrusted the boy to Miss Watson's care, hoping to "civilize" the unruly teen.

Unbeknownst to Miss Watson, Jim had taught himself to read, and he spent afternoons reading in Judge Thatcher's library while he was away. "I had wondered every time I sneaked in there," Jim pondered, "what white people would do to a slave who had learned to read?"

One afternoon, Jim's wife Sadie overheard Miss Watson tell Judge Thatcher that she planned to sell Jim to a man in New Orleans. Fearing separation from Sadie and their little daughter Lizzie, Jim decided to escape to a free state and then work to buy his family's freedom: "I slipped into the woods. I didn't run. Running was something a slave could never do, unless, of course, he was running. I was as much scared as angry, but where does a slave put anger?"

Hiding out on Jackson Island, Jim was surprised to find Huck, who was also on the lam. Huck explained that his Pap returned, threatening him in an alcoholic rage, and so Huck faked his own death and bolted. Miss Watson and Judge Thatcher assume that Jim had murdered Huck; now there is a \$300 bounty for Jim's capture. The two runaways—enslaved man and errant boy—fashion a raft and begin their Mississippi River adventure.

Along their perilous journey, Jim and Huck encounter a variety of obstacles, from rattlesnakes and floods to bounty hunters and slave catchers. For comic relief, a pair of con artists from Twain's original story reprise their roles in *James*. Known as the King and the Duke, they were "opposite in every way. The older man was very tall and gaunt, the younger nearly as short as Huck and fat. Older, bearded. Younger, clean-shaven. They had in common that they were white and shifty-eyed."

Reimagining a Mark Twain classic is an audacious endeavor. Percival Everett brilliantly pulls it off, upending Twain's white-savior narrative by making Jim the hero of his own story. Compelling and memorable, *James* is a fine addition to the canon of American literature.