

A Raft of Hopes: Sometimes, half a lesson is better than none



It is, for the two main characters, one of the more tedious moments in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Huck and Jim are saddled with the self-styled "Duke" and "Dauphin," a pair of rogues who fleece the denizens of Mississippi River towns any way they can, among them selling tickets for bogus Shakespeare performances and then skipping town before those denizens can execute their plans to exact revenge. One night after a particularly good haul, Huck and Jim enjoy a rare moment of respite from the increasingly imperious demands of the sleeping hucksters, and converse quietly on their raft.

"Don't it 'sprise you, de way dem kings carries on, Huck?"

"No," I says, "it don't."

"Why don't it, Huck?"

"Well, it don't, because it's in the breed. I reckon they're all alike."

"But, Huck, dese kings o' ourn is reglar rapscallions; dat's jist what dey is; dey's reglar rapscallions."

“Well, that’s what I’m a-saying; all kings is mostly rapscallions, as fur as I can make out.”

“Is dat so?”

“You read about them once—you’ll see.”

Huck is speaking rhetorically here. Even if there was an obvious way to do so, Jim wouldn’t read about them, because he can’t: He’s illiterate and he’s a slave. Depending on his location, learning to read would be discouraged if not illegal (not that it would likely stop Huck from teaching Jim, even if, as his current state of mind in harboring a fugitive suggests, he’d be afflicted with guilt about it).

But Huck *is* literate. We’re told early in the book that he attended school regularly over a period of months, to the point where the tough-loving Widow Douglas, who’s raising him with her sister Miss Watson, says he was “coming along slow but sure, and doing very satisfactory.” She’s not even embarrassed by him anymore, he reports. Indeed, Huck’s education might well have continued a good deal longer had not his n’er-do-well pap returned. Irritated to learn that his son has been in school, pap demands that he read a book. Huck obliges with “something about George Washington and the wars.” Appalled, his father knocks the volume away. “If I catch you about that school I’ll tan you good,” he says. “First you know you’ll get religion, too. I never see such a son.”

To some extent, however, the damage has already been done. Huck summarizes the state of his education this way: he “could spell, and read, and write just a little, and could say the multiplication table up to six times seven is thirty-five, and I don’t reckon I could ever get any further than if I was to live forever. I don’t take no stock in mathematics, anyway.”

But he *does* take stock in history. There’s an unmistakable overtone of pride as he proceeds to explain to Jim why kings of all kinds are mostly rapscallions: “My, you ought to seen old Henry the Eight when he was in bloom. Hewas a blossom. He used to marry a new wife every day, and chop off her head next morning.” Huck not only conflates the factual story of Henry VIII with a fictional one from *The Arabian Nights*; he then goes on to attribute William the Conqueror’s Domesday Book to his Tudor successor a half-millennia later. He also confuses him with George III in the following capsule summary of the American Revolution:

Well, Henry he takes a notion he wants to get up some trouble with this country. How does he go at it—give notice—give the country a show? No. All of a sudden he heaves all the tea in Boston Harbor overboard, and whacks out a declaration of independence, and dares them to come on. That washis style—he never give anybody a chance.

Jim listens attentively to this lecture. But the pupil doesn't understand why the particular king he's currently stuck with smells so much. ("We can't help the way a king smells; history don't tell no way," Huck replies.) Jim notes that the Duke is less troublesome than the Dauphin pretender to the throne of France. But, he concludes, "I doan' hanker for no mo' un um, Huck. Dese is all I kin scan'." Huck agrees. "But we've got them on our hands, and we got to remember what they are, and make allowances. Sometimes I wish we could hear of a country that's out of kings." Huck then goes to sleep, leaving Jim on watch as the raft courses the river. He later observes that Jim did not wake him when it was Huck's turn to cover.



"On the Raft," E. W. Kemble, eng., 1844. Page 95 from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens), New York, 1885. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

This anecdote is funny on so many levels—and so moving in its conclusion—that it would be ham-fisted to try and unpack the reasons why. For our purposes, what matters is the way a sense of history informs the way these two people decide how to handle the situation in which they find themselves. They're going to make "allowances," even if neither believes that the Duke or the Dauphin are using the authority they've arrogated to themselves legitimately. For Jim, such a conclusion is largely the result of moral criteria and situational pragmatism. These considerations are at work for Huck as well, but he also self-consciously applies the lessons of history, for his sake as well as Jim's, and both make an active decision to abide by that lesson, at least for the time being.

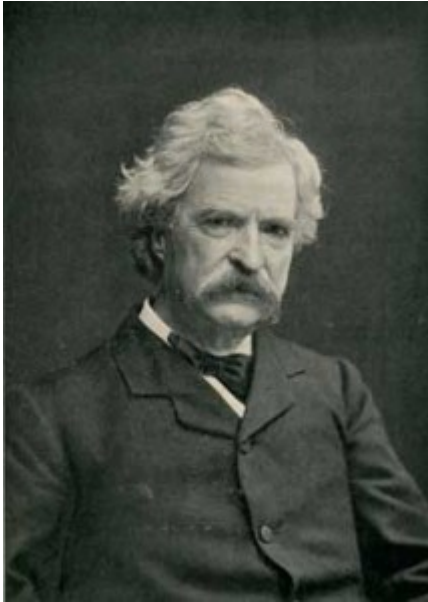
Rarely, however, has a history lesson been so evidently garbled. Of course the key word in the previous sentence is "evidently": in fact, such garbling takes place many multiple times every single day. That's because most people aren't Ph.Ds in history, or history majors. Most have not even taken a history course

since finishing high school (if indeed they took one there). It's also because those who *have* enjoyed such privileges have nevertheless been subjected to bad teachers, inaccurate information, or changing generational sensibilities (if not all three). A sophisticated grasp of history is the exception, not the rule, and one thing that *defines* a sophisticated grasp of history is a consciousness of the way that the past keeps changing, both in terms of how it's interpreted and the information available. Yesterday's common sense is tomorrow's myth, and history is perpetually in between.

Not that this stops any of us from using history. We couldn't stop even if we tried, even if we're told, and accept, that the very concept of a "lesson" is epistemologically suspect. A sense of time is as deeply human as a sense of place—or, for that matter, a sense of smell. It orients us. A person who believes, out of some inevitable combination of lived experience and received wisdom, that you can't fight City Hall is likely to act differently than someone who thinks that history (U.S. history, anyway) is a story of progress, even if the actions of either person in light of such beliefs will not be entirely predictable.

This is not an argument for historical primitivism. As with many things, *informed* instincts, *conscious* thoughts, yield results that we experience as better, just as such disciplined attention can help one blow a horn or swing a bat with greater grace and efficiency. I realize this is not a self-evident truth, and that indeed across time and space many people have argued that intellectualizing experience can actually get in the way and impair our experience of the world. Indeed, one of the painful joys of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is watching a child unlearn a 200-year-old lesson that it's wrong to steal someone else's (human) property.

Though it may appear so, I don't believe the satiric exchange I've cited here finally condemns the value of a formal education, historical or otherwise. However appallingly inept, Huckleberry Finn learned, with the help of books about "George Washington and the wars," that kings are rascallions. Thomas Jefferson, who cared deeply that the next generation of Americans be educated in the ways of republican virtue, would surely be satisfied with—in fact he explicitly argued in favor of propounding—this historical judgment, notwithstanding Huck's attribution of his Declaration of Independence to Henry VIII. But hey, nobody's perfect, least of all Jefferson.



“Samuel Clemens, ‘Mark Twain, ’” photographic reproduction. Courtesy of the American Portrait Print Collection at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

To be sure, Huck’s reading of history confirms both his beliefs and his experience. History almost always does. That isn’t necessarily a bad thing; sometimes, as in this case, it’s helpful to get reassurance. I’m willing to believe that you pay close attention to versions of history with which you strongly disagree. I’m also willing to bet that it doesn’t happen all that often. But even when we place ourselves outside the cozy confines of our predispositions, the limits of the human ability to apprehend reality means that there will always be loose ends, unanswered questions, and subversive propositions in the stories of the past that we tell and hear. It’s these things that give history its vitality, its kick. And there’s always the possibility that the holes in our stories can keep us honest.

Of course, staying honest may seem like the least of our worries. To teach history is to live with two other discomfiting realities. The first is that one must almost always ply one’s trade aware of one’s minority status—that with the possible exception of your colleagues, you spend most of your time among people who know, and likely care, less than you do about the past. You never know for sure if your students are actually performing the tasks you’ve decided are in their best interests, and, notwithstanding the chimeras of assessment that beguile those enchanted by a dream of empirical accountability, you never know for sure if they’ve actually mastered what you hope they have for any longer than the time it takes to complete an exam (if that long).

The other reality is that while you like to think of yourself as part of a community of scholars, more often than not that community is virtual, only fleetingly glimpsed at conferences, or on the pages of publications like this one, whose importance may well be as much psychological as they are intellectual. To a perhaps surprising degree, our labors are reminiscent of a group of people whose work historians have been tireless in deconstructing in

recent decades: missionaries. The gospel we spread is finally a matter of faith, if not in terms of content we know to be true, then certainly in terms of our confidence that our efforts to spread it will bear fruit.

And so we soldier on. But if our goals can only be partially realized at best, they may yet be all the more sweet for precisely that reason. In a time when many of us feel the walls of empire inexorably closing in, we may find satisfaction in the knowledge that for a society born of revolution, there are consequences in condoning and even encouraging children in the belief that kings are rascals. There's always the hope those lessons will persist whatever regime may be in power, and be furthered by those, like Jim, who hear them expressed implicitly and explicitly, often when it's assumed no one is listening. Huck is wrong on the facts and right on the truth when he expresses the wish for "a country that's out of kings." There were still kings in Mark Twain's time; there are still kings in ours. But where there's history, there's hope. It's just a question of where you look for it. With this essay, I complete my labors as columnist and editor for The Common School feature of *Common-Place*. I do so in effect coming full circle; three years after publishing my first piece for the magazine, "[National Character](#)," on Daniel Day-Lewis as historian, I have decided to embark on a book-length exploration of the issues I raised in that piece (and this one). I am grateful to Ed Gray and Cathy Kelly, editors of *Common-Place*, and especially to administrative editor Trudy Powers. It has been one of the great privileges of my career to be a part of this community of readers and writers. -JC

This article originally appeared in issue 11.2 (January, 2011).

Jim Cullen teaches history at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School in New York. He is the author of *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (2003) and other books. The following piece is from a work-in-progress, currently titled "Sensing History: Hollywood Actors as Historians."