

1-1-1994

## Book Review: *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices*

Shelley Fisher Fishkin  
*Grand Valley State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr>

---

### Recommended Citation

Fisher Fishkin, Shelley (1994) "Book Review: *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices*," *Grand Valley Review*: Vol. 10: Iss. 2, Article 22.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol10/iss2/22>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. 270 pages

So this is that polemic we read of in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *People* magazines: the claim that a ten-year old black servant Twain described in an 1874 *New York Times* essay called "Sociable Jimmy," was the model for Huck Finn, "the voice which would change the shape of American literature" (15). Quite a boast! No wonder the *New York Times News Service* fed the story to papers across the country. Even *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, no doubt not wanting to be scooped, carried a center-fold interview with Professor Fishkin. All this almost a year before the book appeared. Clearly, the ballyhooing alone made this a major publishing event, and Oxford University Press was ready with a sizeable first printing. Alas, the full text of *Was Huck Black?* drew only modest attention, and the book was quietly remaindered, selling at deep discounts; publishers know when to cut their losses.

Why the disappointing reception? One reason could be that readers discovered that Fishkin's polemic thesis is merely one essay in a collection of four—"Jimmy," "Jerry," "Jim," and "Break Dancing in the Drawing Room"—the latter three, taken together, purporting to justify the book's sub-title, *Mark Twain and African American Voices*. Another reason could be that despite the media hype, the book is still an academic treatise, its "proofs" buried in over 600 end notes, spanning seventy-one pages. A scholar with unflagging devotion, Fishkin (Professor of American Studies at the University of Texas) is nothing if not thorough. But perhaps the main reason for the disappointment was that readers found not proof, but a tendentious argument that passes swiftly from supposition to assertion. Here are a few typical examples:

[!]It is tempting to think that a fleeting memory of this high-spirited..."black Huck Finn," may have encouraged Twain to forge ahead with his daring project of blending, in *Huck Finn*, the voice of the black child with the status and actions of a white child (29).

Something else helped make Huck who he was, helped catapult him beyond the ephemeral popularity...to immortality. That "something else" may turn out to have been Jimmy and the memories of African-American speech he helped Twain recall (40).

Clearly Twain's ability to take a black child named Jimmy, a black teenager named Jerry, and a white child named Tom Blankenship [Twain's acknowledged model for Huck]...and transmute them into a white child named Huck Finn—who would transform the shape of American literature—involved a measure of racial alchemy unparalleled in American literature (80).

And speaking of alchemy, Fishkin practices her own brand, as evidenced in her

"Coda," where she asks,

How will Americans respond to the news that the voice of Huck Finn, the beloved national symbol and cultural icon, was part black? (144)

Quite a leap forward, but is it supported by the evidence provided? I think not.

In the collection's title essay, Fishkin sets out to prove that in creating Huck Finn, Twain was influenced by the speech and character of Jimmy, a ten-year old black servant who once waited on him. To do this, she relies not on Jimmy's dialect (i.e., pronunciation and vocabulary), but his *voice*, which she defines as

syntax and diction, the cadences and rhythms of a speaker's sentences, the flow of the prose, the structures of the mental processes, the rapport with the audience, [and] the characteristic stance as regards the material related (16).

Fishkin's examples of Huck and Jimmy's shared *voice* are hardly compelling, especially as they are drawn from 300 pages of Huck's narration, compared with the few snatches of dialogue Twain provides in his 1500 word essay, "Sociable Jimmy." Fishkin's efforts to find similarities in the two boys' characters is equally tenuous. She points to their shared interest in cats and their both having drunken fathers, but these connections are superficial at best; of superstitiousness, there is more in comparing Jimmy to Jim, than to Huck.

Readers of "Sociable Jimmy" will find little that reminds them of Huck, though plenty—especially in pronunciation and vocabulary—that reminds them of Jim. Not surprisingly, Jimmy's speech shares much with the Missouri negro dialect Twain mastered and employed for the black characters in his novel. To test my impression of this, I did a computer search of *Huck Finn*, using almost two dozen words and phrases drawn from Sociable Jimmy's speech (such as "git, wid, mawnin', dishyer"), and found that almost all of these (97%) were used by the black characters in the novel: either Jim, Jack (the Grangerford's slave), or Aunt Sally's female slave. Only rarely did Huck use such pronunciations or expressions. Small wonder Fishkin rejects dialect as an identifying characteristic of speech and concentrates on what she calls Jimmy's *voice*.

In the book's second essay, Fishkin argues that Jerry, a black youngster Twain *might* have known, was also used to form Huck's character. Her admission that there is no certainty Jerry even existed—he appears briefly in the opening paragraphs of Twain's essay, "Corn-Pone Opinions"—doesn't deter her from arguing that Twain learned his satirical method from this master of the African-American rhetorical device called "signifying." For this essay, she draws generously on Henry Louis Gates' *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), and his definition of the term: "texts talk to other texts [using] repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference" (46). (If this looks to you like a definition of irony, you may have a gift for deciphering modern literary theory.) To anyone who knows Twain's career and his extensive use of irony long before he wrote *Huck Finn*, there is little need for the mysterious Jerry. Fishkin herself saw this clearly in her earlier book, *From Fact to Fiction: Journalism and Imaginative Writing in America* (1985), when she noted Twain's first extensive use of irony "in a series of three peices [he] wrote for the *Keokuk Saturday Post*

between November 1856 and April 1857....[There he] first hit upon a voice which would eventually be transformed into that of Huck Finn" (58). It would be interesting to know what changed her mind and motivated her to "discover" the lost Jerry.

The remaining essays are devoted to defending Twain against unfair charges of racism. The first of these is a splendid analysis of his portrait of Jim, the second an accurate account of Twain's attitudes toward race. Fishkin rightly concludes that for Twain, race was a "meaningless category." These last two essays of the book are, I believe, Fishkin's best work, despite her urging that Jim is Twain's adaptation of some *undiscovered* African-American source.

By the time readers reach the book's "Coda," it will be clear that *Was Huck Black?* represents Fishkin's passionate desire to elevate African-American folk material to the front rank of American literature. In a conclusion that sums up the spirit of the book, Fishkin sees an American future in which her part-black "Huck Finn, the beloved national symbol and cultural icon," will

become an emblem of a society that is now, and has always been,  
as multiracial and multicultural as the sources of the novel that we  
have embraced as most expressive of who we really are (144).

A touching conclusion, but unfortunately one not supported by the evidence provided.

**GIL DAVIS**