



Finn

Jon Clinch

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In this masterful debut by a major new voice in fiction, Jon Clinch takes us on a journey into the history and heart of one of American literature's most brutal and mysterious figures: Huckleberry Finn's father. The result is a deeply original tour de force that springs from Twain's classic novel but takes on a fully realized life of its own.

Finn sets a tragic figure loose in a landscape at once familiar and mythic. It begins and ends with a lifeless body—flayed and stripped of all identifying marks—drifting down the Mississippi. The circumstances of the murder, and the secret of the victim's identity, shape Finn's story as they will shape his life and his death.

Along the way Clinch introduces a cast of unforgettable characters: Finn's terrifying father, known only as the Judge; his sickly, sycophantic brother, Will; blind Bliss, a secretive moonshiner; the strong and quick-witted Mary, a stolen slave who becomes Finn's mistress; and of course young Huck himself. In daring to recreate Huck for a new generation, Clinch gives us a living boy in all his human complexity—not an icon, not a myth, but a real child facing vast possibilities in a world alternately dangerous and bright.

Finn is a novel about race; about paternity in its many guises; about the shame of a nation recapitulated by the shame of one absolutely unforgettable family. Above all, *Finn* reaches back into the darkest waters of America's past to fashion something compelling, fearless, and new.

Praise for *Finn*

"A brave and ambitious debut novel... It stands on its own while giving new life and meaning to Twain's novel, which has been stirring passions and debates since 1885... triumph of imagination and graceful writing.... Bookstores and libraries shelve novels alphabetically by authors' names. That leaves Clinch a long way from Twain. But on my bookshelves, they'll lean against each other. I'd like to think that the cantankerous Twain would welcome the company."

—*USA TODAY*

"Ravishing...In the saga of this tormented human being, Clinch brings us a radical (and endlessly debatable) new take on Twain's classic, and a stand-alone marvel of a novel. Grade: A."

—*ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY*

"A fascinating, original read."

—*people*

"Haunting...Clinch reimagines Finn in a strikingly original way, replacing Huck's voice with his own magisterial vision—one that's nothing short of revelatory...Spellbinding."

—*WASHINGTON POST*

"Meticulously crafted...Marvelous imagination...The Finn of Clinch's novel is certainly a racist villain but also psychologically disturbed and disconcertingly compelling."

—*SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE*

"From the barest of hints in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Clinch has created a fully believable world inhabited by fully realized characters. Clinch treads dangerous ground in making one of America's greatest novels his jumping-off point, but he brings it off magnificently...The language of this book is one of its great

beauties...*Finn* is far from one-dimensional, and that is another beauty of the book. Clinch has a knack for putting us squarely inside the heads of his characters...Clinch draws as compelling and realistic a picture as any we're likely to find...*Finn* stands on its own. The richness of its language, the depth of its characters, the emotional and societal tangles through which they struggle to navigate add up to a portrait of life on the Mississippi as we've never before experienced it."

—dallas morning news

"His models may include Cormac McCarthy, and Charles Frazier, whose *Cold Mountain* also has a voice that sounds like 19th-century American (both formal and colloquial) but has a contemporary terseness and spikiness. This voice couldn't be better suited to a historical novel with a modernist sensibility: Clinch's riverbank Missouri feels postapocalyptic, and his Pap Finn is a crazed yet wily survivor in a polluted landscape...Clinch's Pap is a convincingly nightmarish extrapolation of Twain's. He's the mad, lost and dangerous center of a world we'd hate to live in—or do we *still* live there?—and crave to revisit as soon as we close the book."

—newsweek

"I haven't been swallowed whole by a work of fiction in some time. Jon Clinch's first novel has done it: sucked me under like I was a rag doll thrown into the wake of a Mississippi steamboat...Jon Clinch has turned in a nearly perfect first book, a creative response that matches *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in intensity and tenacious soul-searching about racism. I wish I could write well enough to construct a dramatic, subtle and mysterious story out of careful, plodding and unromantic prose, but for now I'm just happy to have an alchemist like Jon Clinch do it for me."

—BOOKSLUT

"*Finn* strikes its most original chords in its bold imagining of possibilities left unexplored by *Huckleberry Finn*."

—austin american-statesman

"An inspired riff on one of literature's all-time great villains...This tale of fathers and sons, slavery and freedom, better angels at war with dark demons, is filled with passages of brilliant description, violence that is close-up and terrifying...Everything in this novel could have happened, and we believe it... so the great river of stories is too, twisting and turning, inspiring such surprising and inspired riffs and tributes as *Finn*."

—new orleans times-picayune

"A triumph of successful plotting, convincing characterization and lyrical prose."

—ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

"Shocking and charming. Clinch creates a folk-art masterpiece that will delight, beguile and entertain as it does justice to its predecessor...In *Finn*, Clinch expands the bloodlines and scope of the original story and casts new light on the troubled legacy of our country's infamous past."

—new york post

"In Clinch's retelling, Pap Finn comes vibrantly to life as a complex, mysterious, strangely likable figure...Clinch includes many sharply realized, sometimes harrowing, even gruesome scenes...*Finn* should appeal not only to scholars of 19th century literature but to anyone who cares to sample a forceful debut novel inspired by a now-mythic American story."

—atlanta journal-constitution

"What makes bearable this river voyage that never ventures far beyond the banks is the compelling narrative Clinch has created. He writes exceedingly well, not with the immediacy Twain imbued to Huck's voice, but with an impersonal narrator's voice that almost perversely refuses to take sides. And the plot is masterful."

—fredericksburg freelance-star

“Disturbing and darkly compelling...Clinch displays impressive imagination and descriptiveness...anyone who encounters *Finn* will long be haunted by this dark and bloody tale.”

–*hartford courant*

“Jon Clinch pulls off the near impossible in his new novel, *Finn*, which brings Huck's dad to life in all his terrible humanness...Clinch vividly paints the origins of the amazing Huck...powerfully told.”

–*winston-salem journal*

“Gripping...he inventively remaps known literary territory...the descriptive riffs are lucent.”

–*chicago tribune*

“The best debut so far of 2007.”

–*men's journal*

“Inventing Huckleberry Finn's father using only the thin scraps of information that Mark Twain provided is a pretty admirable feat, and reading Jon Clinch's first novel provides an almost tactile pleasure...Clinch clearly respects Twain, but he doesn't feel especially cowed by his inspiration, and some of his inventions qualify as genuine improvements on the original text.”

–*washington city paper*

“In this darkly luminous debut...Clinch lyrically renders the Mississippi River's ceaseless flow, while revealing Finn's brutal contradictions, his violence, arrogance and self-reproach.”

–*Publishers Weekly*, STARRED review

“Bold and deeply disturbing. . . A few incidents duplicate those in Twain, but the novels could not be more different; instead of Huck's unlettered child's voice, we have an omniscient narrative, grave, erudite and rich in the secretions of adult knowledge; terse dialogue acts as an effective counterpoint. All along, Clinch's intent is to probe the nature of evil . . . a memorable debut, likely to make waves.”

–*KIRKUS REVIEWS*, STARRED review

“Every fan of Twain's masterpiece will want to read this inspired spin-off, which could become an unofficial companion volume.”

–*LIBRARY JOURNAL*, STARRED review

“This is a bold debut that takes a few tentative steps in tandem with the familiar Twain, but then veers off dexterously down a much more insidious, harrowing path.”

–*BOOKLIST*

“Jon Clinch's first novel *Finn*...succeeds wonderfully because its gritty lyricism is at once authentic and original...reminiscent at times of Cormac McCarthy...the eloquence of the telling will never make the courageous reader wish for a gentler touch. Like any appealing novel, *Finn* achieves the force of a dream with fascinating actions, indelible characters and spellbinding language. Its author is wily, astute and wise... *Finn* is a challenging and rewarding exploration of the suffering human heart. From the ominous shadow that was Pap Finn, Clinch has fashioned an unforgettable, twisted man and a marvelous novel.”

–*ROANOKE TIMES*

“Next month Clinch makes his publishing debut with *Finn*, taking up where Mark Twain left Mr. Finn 120 years ago: dead in a room surrounded by such mysterious oddities as a wooden leg, women's underclothing, and two black cloth masks. It's a great read.”

–*Knoxville News Sentinel*

From the Hardcover edition.

Finn Details

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Teresa says

The prose of the omniscient narrator is abundant and colorful; and is counterbalanced by the spare, realistic (I like how the characters interrupt each other) dialogue, or is it that the dialogue offsets the narration? Regardless; it works, even if the characters do say "I know it" quite a bit.

One scene in a book already full of violence reminded me of the scene in the movie "Pulp Fiction" that's funny despite it concerning a death (the one in the car). Here, it's a well-done, slapstick kind of scene that brings you up short when you realize where it's heading. That led me to reflect that Finn could've been a Quentin Tarantino villain, and the ending is maybe like one of his too, though not nearly as 'explosive' or climatic. (That's a good thing.)

Tarantino is hit-or-miss (mostly miss) for me, most violent stories are (there's absolutely no way I could watch his "Kill Bill") so, needless to say, some of the violence here I wasn't sure about at first, but it all has its purpose; it is far from gratuitous, but rather necessary for the rich characterization of the changing times, place, and, especially, of Finn, who, despite a bit of happiness that might've redeemed him, is (fueled by his father) full of self-loathing, the place where prejudice and racism come from.

Lou says

Read recent interview i had with the author, he talks about his forthcoming novel, THE THIEF OF AUSCHWITZ @ <http://more2read.com/review/interview-with-jon-clinch/>

This novel brings you back to Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain.

The main protagonist is Finn the father of Huck, a bad man in every sense. He's racist, shellfish and violent. He does take to loving a black woman while at the same time looks down on and has a hatred towards black people. There will be sides of him that you will read of where he expresses he wants to repent and do good he does have some humble ways by way of his fishing he is regularly out on the mudflats with a cane pole and a blackened corncob pipe.

The language used fits in with the Mark Twain era as well as the quite frequented use of the 'N' word instead of black purposely in keeping with the characters true behavior. I felt uncomfortable and uneasy when in repeated occasions i read of the racism that a few characters displayed in here, in the end the author has used this in keeping with the racial tension of that time and the fictional character Finn was which will have you disliking Finn.

There is some light and hope and that is with the young brave Huck and his mother.

A time of attentive reading this will be and not a fast paced read as the story is a character study of Finn, Huck's pa, and the history behind the Huck character taken from that classic novel of bygone years.

A great tale that will stir up all kinds of feelings and a sense of place and time.

“Some on the other hand have heard the official story of the boy’s unknowable origins, and some even believe it. This footloose and misbegotten child, with his fortunate pale skin and his experimental corncob pipe, with his intimacy with slave lore and his confounded gift for looking ragged even in clothing freshly pressed by none other than a white woman or so they say, this child can surely be no positive influence on their young,

no positive influence at all. By denying him they make him irresistible, and like a sturdy weed he thrives upon their neglect.”

“As the days go by he watches her in the manner of a naturalist making observations, as if fearing that at any moment she could molt and reveal some alternate self beneath the skin, some raw beast damp and ready for transformation into a different sort of creature altogether. Everything she touches she touches in a manner different from the ways of his mother and the ways of dead Petersen’s dead wife. There is about her a grace and an ineffable sadness that conspire to retard her movements and make them thereby into something almost musical, transforming every act into a kind of prayer or languorous meditation. She seems always to be preparing-not merely his supper or a bucket of washwater or some other common thing, but herself, for that part of her life which is yet to come.”

“Perhaps his kinfolk would uphold him in his efforts. He would readily pledge to reform and swear upon a goddamn bible if they required it. And yet to be truthful with himself he recognises these ideas for the pipedreams that they are, since regardless of such other faults as he may have he is not entirely lacking in self-awareness.”

Melody says

Mesmerising imagining of Pap Finn, Huck's drunken racist pig of a sire. Violent, horrific and astonishingly well-written, Clinch's first novel rushes in where no one's ever dared go. What Clinch has accomplished here is nothing short of breath-taking. Finn's a bad man who isn't the least bit likable, which makes this novel even more remarkable in its humanity and even tenderness. The tone is just remote and scholarly enough to keep one a step away from Finn, but I could certainly smell him. Highly recommended.

Matthew says

Using Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a blueprint, particularly the scene where Jim and Huck discover Pap Finn's body, Jon Clinch elaborates on the life of Huck's alcoholic and abusive father, giving him a whole novel to himself. While some scenes from *Huckleberry Finn* are touched upon again (as when Finn kidnaps - or frees, depending on your attitude - Huck from the Widow Douglas's house), and while Clinch populates this world with an interesting supporting cast (notably: Finn's slave/wife Mary and his imposing father who is known simply as The Judge), this is Finn's book, and we are stuck with him in most every scene, for better or for worse.

Clinch nails the atmosphere - dark, muggy, violent - but his Biblical style gets tired and seems like an impersonation of such better writers as Faulkner and Cormac McCarthy (even Clinch's Judge shares a name and many traits with the domineering and timeless Judge of McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*). This derivative style could possibly be forgiven if the story or characters had enough weight to support it, but there is little narrative push, and the characters, though interesting, fail to come alive.

There's a "twist" involving Huck's parentage, which, in his self-congratulatory author's note at the end, Clinch believes even Twain himself would have admired, and the novel does provide a darker glimpse at life

on the Mississippi back then than Huck's childhood perspective did. But reading it just made me want to re-read the original (and better) *Huckleberry Finn*. Yes, *Finn* is ambitious in its goals, but hopefully for his next book, Clinch won't reach so far past his abilities.

"His penmanship is poor and his spelling is worse and his grammar is the worst of all but these things matter not, because not long after he begins he gives off writing almost entirely and commences to draw in a manner befitting some primitive cave painter working by torchlight to document and dispel demons both real and imagined."

Tom says

A very innovative and captivating approach to the Huck Finn prequel. The author's imagination is well outside the box in the telling of Pap Finn's life and relationships. A dark novel that meshes perfectly with the much lighter *Huckleberry Finn*. Congratulations on a great first novel!

Chris Matsagas says

I had this book recommended to me by a friend when I told them that I was reading "The Adventures of Huck Finn" by Mark Twain for the first time. I'm kind of into these books that give an alternative view of a popular world if done well, and having just finished Mark Twain's story it seemed like as good a time to give it a shot as any, so I picked up the book.

At first it reminded me a lot of *The Road*, which I had also just read. Gone is the first-person speaking style of Huck Finn, replaced by a third-person narrator with an eloquent vocabulary, which is occasionally interrupted by very minimalistic dialogue. Events and phrases tend to repeat themselves over and over, until they almost become variations on a theme. This might become tiresome to some readers, and about halfway through I started feeling like the story was kind of a low-rent version of something Cormac McCarthy would write. But at some point in-between that thought and my finishing the book, the whole thing clicked for me. He's playing in someone else's universe, but Jon Clinch has crafted a very solid story that he can call his own, about America's history of violence, about the conflict of Nature and Law that dwells within us, the ideas of "good" and "evil" that we inherit from our parents, and about just how hard it is for anyone in this world to find peace within ourselves. An early passage about "The Judge," Pap Finn's father, is the book in a nutshell; if you like that, you'll like the book. If not, well, keep reading anyway. It took a while for me to change my mind.

Although I would probably recommend the book to anyone, I can't guarantee you'll like it if you liked Huck Finn, maybe especially if you liked Huck Finn. The book is studiously faithful to the events of Mark Twain's novel, and in fact seeing how the plot works toward several of those events was part of the fun of reading it for me, but it also puts its own interpretation on several characters that's a little controversial. For one, "Pap" Finn (who remains nameless even in Clinch's novel) is the prodigal son of a wealthy judge, and the brother of a wealthy lawyer. Secondly, Huck Finn is revealed to be a quarter black. Both of these have thematic significance in Clinch's story, and I ultimately think that the author honors the spirit of Mark Twain's characters, but if you're a big fan of his classic and what you see is what you get, you might understandably be upset. Other characters from Huck Finn make appearances here (one of which, I was happy to see, was one of the carpetbaggers, who turned up in a brief cameo; whether it was the duke or the king I can't

remember now), though none of them are significantly altered.

Also be prepared for some pretty unflinching depictions of violence. Although I found some (very) black humor in Finn's trying to dig a bullet out of a man's shoulder and killing him by mistake, most of the violent acts in the book, detailed thoroughly and pitilessly, can make the story seem troubling or bleak.

Jonathan Maas says

A Tour-de-Force that is more than worthy of its literary heritage

Finn by Jon Clinch was something of a reading project for me.

My goal? First read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and then read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, and then read Clinch's *Finn* to truly understand the saga as a whole.

My only question coming into *Finn*, was why would Clinch pick such an execrable character to make a book around? Why not Thatcher, or Douglas, or Jim or any of the other characters?

Upon reading it, I understood immediately.

Jon Clinch chose to tell Finn's tale to reveal the true horrors of the time

Part of the zeitgeist around Twain's *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, is that they are both children's and adults' books. The child sees the adventure, the adult sees the adventure but also gets glimpses of what is going on in the antebellum South.

But the adult just gets a glimpse. The tale is still told through a child's vantage point, and the two books are what they are.

Clinch removes this entirely by telling the tale through *Huckleberry Finn's* father, the violent, mean, whiskey-drinking Finn.

And it gets worse from there

Part of the reveal from this is that Finn is a real part of this world. This world is one to rival *A Game of Thrones* in its utter lack of compassion. Finn is mean, but there are a lot of mean people around.

The most disquieting part comes when Finn meets a man who seems friendly, but then is revealed to be much meaner than Finn could ever be, and they do unspeakable things.

The tale takes risks with Mark Twain's classic, but they make sense when you think about them

No spoilers here, but lets just say Clinch infuses the tale with a few twists, and one real twist in particular.

Would Twain approve? Most likely. Clinch lays so much groundwork that after the shock wears off, it all becomes part of the tale - it just fits in.

This is a book that takes recovery time

Like *The North Water* by Ian McGuire, this is a book that shows the true impact of a time, and doesn't hold any punches.

You read it, and then perhaps three months later you have the energy to read another one like this again. But I recommend it to adult readers who want an intense book.

It's incredible - and I give it five stars.

Kate_ev says

Having not read "Huckleberry Finn" I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to understand this book. As it happens I thought it worked perfectly well as a standalone book, I probably didn't get some of the references but it certainly didn't detract from my understanding of the story.

What struck me most about this book is the way the author is able to bring a character to life with very few words, he can use a simple smell and it easily conjures up a picture of a character in your head. I like the fact that it's not in chronological order, if it were, it would be a little pointless but since this story is more about the characters than the narrative itself it works much better. The story could be structured this way because Finn is a raging alcoholic so it's reflecting a drunkard's way of remembering things i.e. all jumbled up.

The fact that Finn refers to his father merely as The Judge and The Laundress, for example, I think shows how Finn is de-humanising them – perhaps because he wants to distance himself from these people, perhaps by giving them no real name, just a title, he can distance himself from the violence he shows them (The Laundress in particular) or because he simply thinks that in his eyes they are not worthy.

I'm unsure about the character of Finn as he is a cold, uncaring, selfish man but small things lead me to question whether he does have empathy. For example when he begins his friendship with The Laundress – is he merely being sadistic and bathing in his own glory of the destruction he has caused her or is he in some warped way trying to make amends? Also the fact that he tells Huck that Mary is not his mother to free him of the troubles of the past – he doesn't show his son fatherly love but he wants him to be free and knows that he can never give him what he really needs.

The fact is that Finn hates himself – maybe it's because he was the son that was ignored in favour of his sickly brother, maybe it's because he loves a woman that he feels he shouldn't due to her colour. I believe he does love Mary, in his own weird way – when she leaves him he doesn't go in search of anyone else and whether it's the basic security he misses when she's not around, he doesn't miss a woman, he misses her.

I did find the story quite suffocating, the monotony of Finn's daily routine – fishing, trading, drinking himself into oblivion and the violence that follows. I think he gets himself into such a state because he wants someone to look after him and he has given up on trying to make his father proud so now the only attention he can get is by screwing up which results in them being face to face in the courtroom.

A very good read, an insight into slavery, shame and brutality all seen through the eyes of one family.

Nicole says

Outstanding. I tend to read 'literary fiction,' but I don't particularly aim for books with a lot of darkness - but this book is pitch black. No heroes, no light, no redemption. What an incredible book. It has been a really, really long time since I felt truly sad when a book was over, but when I turned over the last page of *Finn* I was actually bummed out for a minute because it was over. The author stays within the time frame created by Twain, but creates a backstory for minor characters that adds depth to the familiar story. I can't stress

enough how terrific this book was!

Wendy says

The story of Huckleberry Finn's father, but no light-hearted jaunt down the Mississippi. Dark, but pure poetry to read. Beautifully written. You hate Finn and you know he's going to die, but you root for him, nonetheless. I think this is the REAL story of Huckleberry Finn. A must read for anyone.

Eric says

Every time I read (and I've read it many times), the scene where Huck and Jim find Pap Finn's body in the floating house mystifies me. What's the deal with those masks? The scribblings on the wall? The wooden leg? How did the house come to be floating in the middle of the river? I always wanted to know what happened to Pap Finn. So, apparently, did Jon Clinch.

Clinch reproduces part of the aforementioned scene at the beginning of the book. Then he tells you Pap Finn's story. Pap is the son of a venal, vindictive circuit judge who has disowned him because of his alcoholism and his relationship with a black woman. Finn survives in his hovel by the river by putting out lines for catfish and trading his catches for necessities and whiskey. In the leaner times, Finn gets cheap corn liquor from a blind hermit bootlegger in the woods.

Finn is a screw-up, an abuser of women, a thief, and a murderer. We watch his life dissolve in this dark novel, which takes place in between the beats of Mark Twain's most famous novel. This story fits in seamlessly, like one of the stories in *Pulp Fiction* to the others. The only difference is the darker tone. Twain's novel, for the most part, is written in a comic style. But it would be off-mark to say "Huckleberry Finn" doesn't have its own darkness (remember the conclusion of the feud plotline? Brrr.) It would also be off-mark to say that "Finn" is an adult novel, whereas "Huckleberry Finn" is for kids. "Huckleberry Finn" is a great adult novel that has a lot of appeal for kids, but is often foisted on kids who don't have the maturity to fully understand it.

Probably the most controversial aspect of this book is the revelation that Huck is half black, a "mulatto", in the parlance of the day. I was skeptical, because Huck's narration in Twain's book seems to leave no room for such an interpretation. I kept saying, "Yeah, but...Yeah, but...". Eventually my "yeah buts" were put to rest, and I was willing to accept Clinch's interpretation as a valid one, if not "the" valid one.

A great achievement.

Amanda says

Well, I'm not really sure what to say about *Finn*. I can't say that I loved it, nor can I say that I hated it. I wish that I had read *Huckleberry Finn* before reading the book so that I could make more comparisons between the two, and I would have known more about the story line that inspired Clinch.

I admire that Clinch didn't try to imitate Mark Twain's writing style; to have done so would have robbed his portrayal of Finn (who I understand, even in Twain's work, is hinted at being a dark, morally bankrupt

character) of authenticity. However, Finn is so bleak a character that I really couldn't get into his story. Had he taken more initiative, I might have cared more. Instead, Finn bullies his way through life, allowing himself to be carried along by events rather than attempt to influence those events. I think that is intentional as Finn is like the river that provides him with his identity and his livelihood--cutting its own path through the land, a path that is not always the best or most obvious.

There are some intriguing twists--Finn's black sheep status in a wealthy family, the sadistic and racist Judge Finn (who is the true villain of the novel), the revelation that Huckleberry is a mulatto. While I can't praise the novel, I can admire the craft and care that went into its writing, and I don't think Mark Twain would have been the least bit offended. In fact, I suspect he would have been delighted with Clinch's original take on the story of Pap Finn.

Cross posted at This Insignificant Cinder

[riley] says

Weeks later and I still can't get the images out of my head. *Finn* was a mesmerizing read that I recommend to any Mark Twain fan.

Veronica says

If you can get past the very dark and gruesome first chapter, then you're in for an absolutely fascinating read. Finn is a brazen reimagining of the life and death of Pap Finn, Huckleberry Finn's father.

In Mark Twain's story, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Pap Finn does not appear quite often. When he does appear, he is the embodiment of evil, being the violent alcoholic father who beats Huck, kidnaps him and locks him up in a secluded cabin in the woods. Huck escapes and hides out in a nearby island where he encounters the slave Jim. It is also here that Huck and Jim find a house floating on the river, washed away by the flood. Inside, they discover the body of a man who has been shot in the back. By the last chapter, we learn that the dead man is Pap Finn.

And from this meager and cryptic material, Jon Clinch develops a compelling story on how Finn became the vile, depraved drunk that he was and how he met his mysterious, violent end.

Written from Pap's point of view, the chapters alternate between the past and the present. Clinch seamlessly weaves in incidents and characters from Twain's story. The old characters are there: Huck, the Widow Douglas and Judge Thatcher as well as new ones in the person of the Judge, Finn's domineering, vindictive father whose disappointment in his son is the impetus for Finn's paternal hatred and lifelong affinity with whiskey. We are also introduced to Mary, a young slave he has claimed as a "reward" and, in defiance of his father, has kept her secretly locked up in his shack. It is this relationship that produces the bi-racial Huck which repulses the Judge to no end for he is profoundly racist. This is a trait that is deeply ingrained in Finn as well and that which predictably causes him the most torment.

Finn is one of the most memorable and complex anti-heroes I have ever come across. It is disturbingly fascinating to watch him on the road to self-destruction. He is mean and repugnant, yet there are moments of

poignancy with Mary and Huck that has you hoping for his redemption. These moments, however, are fleeting because he is primarily cut from the same cloth as his father. The shame of his relationship with Mary and Huck constantly overpowers whatever “good” intentions he has for both of them and he reverts to the drunken, sadistic self he is more comfortable with. In the end, his demise will have you pondering who or what was responsible for the madness in his life.

This is definitely one of the best books I’ve read this year. This is the debut novel of Jon Clinch who is, without question, a brilliant writer who had the audacity to spin a gripping story off a great classic. Is it necessary to read Mark Twain’s novel before tackling Finn? Not really, the story can stand alone. You may, however, find yourself reaching for the Twain classic sooner than you think.

Jim says

When I was in the seventh grade, St. James’s drama department put on *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and I was cast as Alfred Temple, Tom’s competitor for the attention of Becky Thatcher. Tom and Alfred come to blows over her affections and on opening night, Tom tackled me and pinned me to the stage. The violence of Tom’s rough attack caught me off-guard. Needless to say, it hadn’t gone quite like that during rehearsals.

On the second night, I punched Tom Sawyer in the face, and it was on. Alfred Temple, it should be noted, was a teacher’s pet and I was costumed as a cross between Alfalfa and Little Lord Fauntleroy. Alfred is not supposed to know how to throw an uppercut and Tom was pretty irate. On the third and final night of the run, Tom Sawyer and I stole the show with a full-on Jerry Springer-style battle royal. Technically, Tom won, but only because I let him, and only because I had to.

The show, after all, must go on, and on it goes in Jon Clinch’s debut novel *Finn*, a compelling retelling of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the point-of-view of Pap, Huck’s alcoholic father. At the heart of the novel is the unsolved mystery that Twain left behind for his readers to mull over: How did Pap come to be shot in a room filled with weird paraphernalia? (Clue: Alfred Temple didn’t do it.)

Although Finn’s fate is known from the onset (he dead) and the plot is defined by the parameters established in Twain’s novels, there is a score of delicious twists and turns that a clumsy summary would risk ruining. Suffice to say, the biggest revelation in Clinch’s novel is the writing, which is as muscular and deliberate as the act of poling a skiff upriver.

With prose that is reminiscent of Faulkner’s early Yoknapatawpha novels, Cormac McCarthy’s Tennessee novels (particularly *Child of God*), and of course, Twain, *Finn* gives us an honest-to-God yarn that’s as pleasing to puzzle over as it is to read. Finn lives in a falling down house by the river and with Clinch’s lush descriptions one can almost smell the gutted cat fish and river rot. There’s something magnificently voyeuristic about Finn’s crimes happening in plain sight of anyone who happens to be taking the air on an upper deck of a riverboat as it chugs up the Mississippi.

From Twain’s novels we know that Finn is a violent, bigoted drunk and Clinch endeavors to explain how he got that way. There’s no question that Finn is as vile a villain that ever skulked on two legs, but once we meet his father we can’t help but look at him with a glimmering—however faint—of sympathy.

One of the paradoxical aspects of Finn’s personality is that early on he manages to escape the yoke of his father’s seething hatred and sets out on a path that is, in its own way, wiser and more compassionate than the road taken by his father. Ultimately, however, Finn repudiates this way of knowing the world and is revealed

to be very much his father's son – to the peril of everyone he comes into contact with, and none more so than Huckleberry, the most cherished outsider in American letters.

(Excerpted from a review published in February 2007 at The Elegant Variation:
[<http://marksarvas.blogs.com/elegvar/2...>])

Izetta Autumn says

I am not even sure where to begin in rating Finn by Jon Clinch. First you should probably ignore my star rating, because this isn't a book whose rating, will give any true indication of the love/hate relationship you may have with the book.

You'll love it, because without a doubt, Clinch has a talent as a writer. He feels like a modern-day Faulkner. His language is fluid, poetic, evocative, and then in an instant, sparse and nearly mechanical in its accuracy and sharpness.

You will hate it because it is so very brutal. Many reviewers have noted the violence of Finn, suggesting stridently, but somewhat obliquely, that they were ill-prepared for the violence in the novel. As a woman of color reading this novel, I felt extremely uncomfortable with the character positioning of women of color: as victims who are viciously mistreated at the hands of Finn.

According to Mary Gaitskill, "Finn is as dark, as brutal, as ambivalent, and as insane as the history and legacy of American racial slavery. It is also graceful, imaginative, and relentlessly intelligent." Finn is indeed brutal and in my opinion, the book goes beyond dark, it is macabre, revealing scenes that literally caused me to have a visceral physical reaction. Yet, without a doubt, Clinch's literary skill is evident. Language pops – is evocative, harsh, subtle, and as Gaitskill notes, graceful – even as it reveals horrors.

It is interesting that while the question of Huck's multiracial heritage is a debatable piece for many readers, the issue of brutal violence - the pornographic violence visited on Mary (Huck's mother) is not as often discussed. For me, this is why I have such an ambivalent reaction to the book. In a literary sense, it is crafted with sophistication and verve - a definite experiment in stretching the narrative style of the novel, and further juxtaposing it from the original. The violence, however, visited on the Black characters in the novel - Mary, her father, the Black people in "the Bottom," I found confusing, gratuitous, and horrifying.

In his review of Finn, William J. Cobb says, "Clinch's story focuses on Huckleberry Finn's father, here identified simply as Finn. Alcoholic, murderer, rapist and world-class ne'er-do-well, Finn is as despicable and unwholesome as they come. In the Author's Note, Clinch acknowledges "this is Finn's book," and the novel is certainly permeated by the whiskey-breath of Clinch's (not Twain's) creation, being a gruesome tale of sexual abuse, murder and dismemberment. As a revisionist statement, it provides an update on the curse of slavery, although at times it reads like a 19th-century classic retold as torture porn." (Reimagining Huck's bad dad: Dark revision of Twain classic could use dose of the master's optimism. WILLIAM J. COBB. <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/1...>). The racialized sex scenes, import so many issues of power and privilege, topped with Finn's, the author's, the society's, (it's confusing to know whose vision of brutality this truly is, and who the author intends us to contribute this vision of violence to) voyeuristic and pornographic gaze turned constantly on the Black citizens in the novel. Too often, I found myself discomfited. Felt an unruly reaction within my gut. As a reader, I felt I had little defense against a truly profound fantasy (made real by Pap Finn's actions) of violence against Black women. I wonder then, is the author trying to bring that abuse to light? Trying to reveal the entanglement of race, class, gender and power

in U.S. society – through one of the most beloved and controversial American novels?

I found myself wondering about the author. Why this level of detail of the violence? Why Black female characters who acquiesce and appear so one-dimensional (for that matter, why such one-dimensional female characters overall. The only female character, truly drawn is the Widow Douglas.) Does Pap Finn have an excuse for his behavior because of his own emotionally abusive childhood? How can the author suggest that he feels the book should be taught in high school classes (and he is actively seeking to get it added to the curriculum), when it has so much degradation - uses the n-word so liberally)? As Clinch explains on his blog, *thehorsehaircouch*, “Now that a lower-cost edition is available, I'm hoping to see it adopted into more and more college and high school classes. The hardcover has already made a good dent -- and that's a tough road, so the signs are good.” This I found particularly troubling.

To assume that high school students will grasp the nuances of such graphic scenes, and that teachers will be able to guide and teach Finn in a way, that those nuances will flatten, evolve and reveal themselves, is, I think, a rather tall (and unrealistic order), which I think places students, particularly students of color at a pedagogical disadvantage. Does that mean the *Huckleberry Finn* will be replaced? What would that mean? What are high school students supposed to pull from the novel? Unlike Twain's original, Finn, is not a period book. It's not placed in a historical context, which make the messages, race dynamics, politics, and themes more rich and bountiful for study and dissection. It makes me wonder if the author truly understands what he's written: the power of the fantasy of the brutalized, captured, raped, and then ultimately submissive Black slave woman; freed only by lies, deception, of the giving up of her own life and body.

Pap Finn, drawn in parallel to his own father and brother, appears pathological. The violence, is pathological. This suggests too that Pap Finn's family was a deeply unhealthy family. His brother never leaves home, the wife is cowed, the Judge has complete control. Another interesting tidbit, that may indeed feel gimmicky, is that the parentage of Pap Finn's mother is rather suggestive of a multiracial identity - afterall she's from Philadelphia. Instead of going down the road of multiracial identity however, the author draws out the class dynamics that spur the judge to work so hard.

I hated *Huckleberry Finn* as a high school student (after having been asked one too many times, for the "Black perspective a.k.a what might Jim think/feel), what I read and pulled from the book always seemed far more complex, tangled, and resonant than the simple story so many of my classmates, all of whom were white, seemed to enjoy about a boy getting out into the wild and having adventures. Twain was far more complicated than that. *Huckleberry Finn* when read for nuance, history, and social dynamics - when taught well, is far more complex than that.

That said, I am not a fan of censorship or banning books. I am, however, extremely uncomfortable with suggesting that Finn would be good to add to a high school curriculum.

For me it's less about the believability of Huck being biracial. In fact, I didn't find it difficult to "suspend disbelief," around at all. Why not? U.S. history is one abundant with tangled race and identity complexities. Huck is so young and traumatized by the loss of his family - by the violence that he witnesses, why wouldn't he forget his parentage? What Clinch does is bring a psychological aspect to the novel, which adds edges and angles to the "wayward" boy that Huck represents. I wonder, how much race impacts how one reads both *Huckleberry Finn* - and now this new take Clinch offers us?

Grace says

I usually have a pretty strong stomach when it comes to fiction. In television and movies, I can handle most anything and am not really bothered by violence, gore, or abuse. Because I don't see pictures when I read, this is even more the case with books than with visual media--give me the nasty stuff, I can take it.

Jon Cinch's *Finn*, however, bothered me. The book is not supremely graphic in its gore, but it does contain multiple murders, one of which includes body dismemberment, and the sexual abuse of both an adult and a child, and something about how these scenes were written stayed with me. So before I say anything else, take that to heart--it's violent, and the violence, for whatever reason, stuck with even my hardened heart.

That being said, it's a hell of a book. The task Cinch sets for himself is not an easy one. While remaining true to events and characters portrayed in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Cinch tells the story of Huck's ne'er do well alcoholic father, "Pap" Finn (who even in Cinch's book is never given a first name). Moving back and forth in time, Cinch weaves the threads of Finn's strange and horrific childhood, his early relationship with Mary, Huck's escaped/stolen slave mother, his loss of Huck to the Widow Douglas, Mary's murder, and eventually Finn's own untimely death.

It has been a long time (two decades, perhaps) since I've read Twain's books, so I don't remember all of the details surrounding Pap Finn, but it seems that Cinch works into his narrative explanations for things that go unexplained in Twain's own work, such as the discovery of Pap Finn's body in a whitewashed room with walls covered in bizarre charcoal drawings (these drawings are done by Finn himself as he descends into madness after murdering Mary). What he does not try to do, however, is take on Twain's tone (as Alexandria Ripley did--poorly--in her less successful *Gone With the Wind* sequel, *Scarlett*). Perhaps because he doesn't spend much time trying to write the same characters on which Twain focused (Huck in particular), Cinch has no need to imitate Twain's style of writing, and I think the book is better for it.

Cinch writes Pap Finn to be as bigoted, mean, and drunk as Twain's supporting character, but fleshes him out in his own voice, making him a real character with a past and reasons for his horrible actions, rather than just a foil for Huck. This (albeit limited) sympathy for Finn, as well as Cinch's original characters, is the strength of the novel. The places where Cinch overlaps with Twain (Judge Thatcher, Widow Douglas, etc.) are a bit weaker. It seems almost as if Cinch is too careful with these characters, perhaps afraid to upset Twain purists. Tellingly, Tom Sawyer doesn't appear at all, and most of Huck's appearances are at a younger age than when we first meet him in Twain.

Please do not think you'll love *Finn* if you loved Twain's books. Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn are children's characters, and though their adventures did get a little wild, and even a little political, their stories are nothing like *Finn*. Cinch's book is almost gothic, the cornerstones of its story are violence, alcoholism, and madness. There are no frolicking adventures here, and what humor there is has a very dark underbelly. *Finn* is every inch a contemporary adult novel, even if its basis is in children's literature from a previous century. However, it's a very good contemporary novel, and if read as such will likely stay with you in a way most contemporary novels don't. Cinch balances the horrific aspects of his story with just enough hope to keep your turning the pages, and at the end you are left feeling as if it was good that you read that, even if reading it was harder than you'd expected it to be. If you think you have the stomach for it, this is a book I would definitely recommend.

Howard says

This review was originally posted in 2010 on another site (which shall remain nameless):

If you are a fan of Mark Twain's "*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*," as I am, you may have wondered

about Huck's parents. Why was his father an alcoholic vagrant who abused his son? How did that father end up dead in a house floating down the Mississippi River? And who was Huck's mother? And what happened to her?

Now we have the answers to those questions and more. They are not provided by Mark Twain, but by Jon Clinch in his impressive debut novel, "Finn."

Finally, we have Huckleberry Finn's back story. It helps us understand him a little better.

I must admit that there were times as I was reading the book that I wondered if it would have held my interest to the degree that it did if it were about a man named Finn who had no connection with Twain's classic. In other words, would it still have merit if it had been forced to stand alone? Maybe not. But it doesn't have to.

I look forward to reading more of Clinch's work.

Dennis Fischman says

This is an ugly, appalling, frightening, cathartic, loving, and beautifully written interpretation of the backstory of Huckleberry Finn. Do not read it if you're not prepared for brutal violence, rape, and racism, or if making an evil man seem fully human is something you cannot abide.

Ruth says

The best book I read last year. This guy can WRITE!

R
