Mark Twain's legendary prefatory notice to the reader of "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" was altered from manuscript to first edition by the insertion of the phrase italicized below: "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot." It was as if Twain could smell the mess of trouble Huck would stir up and, like his own warts-and-all protagonist, was looking for a way out of it. While long seen as an American masterpiece, "Huck Finn" was also banned from libraries and public schools early on because of its coarseness and bad grammar, and more recently for its alleged racism.

But that's the kind of guy Huck is and was, a rapscallion of the first order, a brutalized, abandoned, lonely kid with a love of adventure, a healthy mistrust of an untrustworthy world and a signature scattershot morality. His voice -- singularly spirited and colloquial -- described unspeakable horrors in the most ironic, satirical and shockingly casual manner, its flippancy laying bare some of the violence of his time. But wherever one falls on the love-hate Huck continuum, it would be hard to argue that the runaway slave Jim, Huck's companion, was looking for a way out of it. While long seen as an American masterpiece, "Huck Finn" was also banned from libraries and public schools early on because of its coarseness and bad grammar, and more recently for its alleged racism.

In Nancy Rawles's third novel, the sad and gripping "My Jim," Jim not only lives on as a character but shoulders the burden of inspiration. Thus Rawles's novel joins a now copious literary tradition of writers building their books on antecedent texts -- "The Hours" ("Mrs. Dalloway") by Michael Cunningham, for example, and John Gardner's "Grendel" ("Beowulf") -along with what I've come to think of as the fiction of reaction, like Sena Jeter Naslund's feminist response to Melville, "Ahab's Wife," and "The Wind Done Gone," by Alice Randall, a "parody" of "Gone With the Wind." But unlike Randall's flat-footed novel, which was conceived in righteous anger as a correction, "My Jim" is meant, I think, as an illumination.

In a spare, naturalistic style that's reminiscent of oral history (the story is largely told by Jim's wife, Sadie, to her granddaughter), Rawles covers territory Twain did not: Jim's early life in captivity, his seemingly endless struggle for freedom, his love for his wife and children, his impossible anguish upon separation. But more of the book is focused on Sadie's story, and it is, in its particulars, as heart-wrenching a personal history as any recorded in American literature.
Sadie's life as a slave is an endless nightmare of rapes, beatings and impoverishment; her children are ripped from her arms, sold off and murdered. There isn't a lot of new information here, historically speaking, but these well-documented crimes never fail to astonish and sicken. For a novel, historical accuracy isn't enough, of course. It is a testament to Rawles's skill that Sadie's experiences feel all too painfully real, and sadly, this is a world without happy endings. Even when Jim is freed, and then -- finally and far too late -- Sadie as well, emancipation feels a lot like slavery. "The wars over long time ago but I still aint tastes my freedom," Sadie says.

Rawles's approach to this material is heartfelt and earnest (as evidenced by the 10 pages of acknowledgments in this 174-page book). Jim remains a prince among men, loyal, loving and relentless in his efforts to reunite with his family -- he is almost too good to be true, but in that way he resembles Twain's portrait of him. This novel takes its inspiration from "Huck Finn" but does not wholly depend on it -- Twain's characters and Rawles's interact only long enough to keep the trope going. Still, it's hard not to wonder if it is the brush with Twain and Finn that give Sadie's story its jolt of vitality.

Certainly if "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" is presented to school children as their introduction to American slavery, as it sometimes has been in the past, then the deeply felt and moving "My Jim" would be a welcome accompaniment. But it is also important to note that "My Jim" lacks -- to quote Morrison again here -- "the combination of delight and fearful agitation lying entwined like crossed fingers in the pages" to provoke 120 years of fierce literary argument, passion and opinion. "My Jim" is far too straightforward, and as Huck would say, too "sivilized," for that.

**CAPTION(S):**

Drawing (Drawing by Polly M. Law)

By Helen Schulman


**Gale Document Number:** GALE|A127910994