MELISSA BLOCK, host:

Seattle writer Nancy Rawles has just published a novel called "My Jim." The book takes the character of the runaway slave Jim from Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" and gives him a wife and a family. Alan Cheuse has a review.

ALAN CHEUSE reporting:

When you first pick up this novel and start reading, you may be thinking, as I did, `Oh, it's a gimmick--neat gimmick but a gimmick.' And to tell the truth, it didn't seem all that rewarding at first, stumbling my way, as I had to do, through the first few pages of dialect. The novel's all told in dialect, mostly by Sadie Watson, once wife to Jim. But quite soon, the power of her story becomes nearly overwhelming: human beings treated as chattel; bodies used and bodies sold; children bred like cattle; families torn apart; beatings and torture and sometimes murder. We hear of all these atrocities in Sadie's restrained but never resigned voice.

Rawles studied closely the numerous first-person accounts of slavery in order to get the voice right. And she makes it all come alive as if for the first time, as when, say, Sadie's owner, a miserable white man named Stevens (ph), takes her daughter as his kitchen help and sex slave. "You stay away from my daughter," Sadie says to him. He'd sit up real straight. "Nothing here belong to you," he say, "not even your daughter. Now you goes on back to the cabins 'fore I call Banes(ph)"--that's the overseer--"to set you straight."

By this time in the story Jim himself, to avoid being sold, has run away, taking his trip down the river with young Huck, leaving Sadie to endure the sorrows and miseries of slave life alone. So Jim is pivotal in the creation of this powerful novel, but many other characters, for good or evil, come alive. Says Jim's granddaughter, when she hears her grandmother begin to speak of slavery times, "Spirits come in and fill the room with the cool of thy loneliness." They do. They do indeed.

BLOCK: The book is "My Jim" by Nancy Rawles. Our reviewer, Alan Cheuse, teaches writing at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia.

(Soundbite of music)

MICHELE NORRIS (Host): This is NPR, National Public Radio.


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