

One of the world's great contemplatives

Rich Heffern | Jan. 25, 2010 NCR Today

Mark Twain wrote that his masterpiece *Huckleberry Finn* was a hymn set down in prose to give it a more worldly air. Besides being a wonderfully entertaining tale of a boy's odyssey down the Mississippi River in the pre-Civil War era in America, the book is also an illumination, a wise vision with a depth and mysteriousness that adds greatly to its appeal.

A few pages into the story and we realize we're in the middle of masterfully interwoven texture of character and event. Taken as a whole the book *is* like a hymn -- a celebration of life's comedy and tragedy and of the natural world. It easily infects us with reserves of enthusiasm.

No one fails so pitifully to live up to the expectations of respectable society as Huck Finn. Yet there beats within him a heart filled with compassion. Huck sends help back to two would-be murderers who are stranded on a wrecked steamboat. He feels pity for two swindlers who have been caught and punished by an outraged town. His love for his companion on the river, Jim, knows no bounds.

And, leavened no doubt by a good mixture of society and solitude, Huck has learned in his life to look for beauty, to notice the world around him and to appreciate it deeply. Listen to him describe a summer thunderstorm over the river:

"It would get so dark that it looked all blue-black outside, and lovely; and the rain would thrash along by so thick that the trees off a little ways looked dim and spider-webby; and here would come a blast of wind that would bend the trees down and turn up the pale underside of the leaves; and then a perfect ripper of a gust would follow along and set the branches to tossing their arms as if they were just wild; and next, when it was just about the bluest and blackest -- fst! It was bright as glory, and you would have a little glimpse of treetops a-plunging about away off yonder in the storm, dark as sin again in a second, and now you'd hear the thunder let go with an awful crash, and then go rumbling, grumbling, tumbling down the sky toward the underside of the world, like rolling empty barrels downstairs."

Someone once described contemplation as a love affair with reality. One eye out for the beauty, power and solace of the river he cherishes, the other eye on the foibles, sorrows, and humor in the circumstances of human life wherever it is found, Huck Finn is one of the great lovers, a model contemplative in many ways. This wonderful book is the harvest of contemplative eyes.

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