

Book Review: James
By Percival Everett

Let me start by saying I've never read (or if I did, it was so long ago I don't recall) "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." I say that because Percival Everett's novel "James" is labeled a reimagining of that classic. The most important difference is "James" is told from the enslaved Jim's point of view.

Having no basis for comparison, I can only take Everett's novel as a standalone. And while I understand the need – for lack of a better word – to tell the story through Jim's eyes as opposed to those of young Huck, I was left with one nagging question: Was the original as slow and plodding as this version?

The story opens in Missouri in the 1840s. Where in Missouri? That's not made clear until later when Jim says he's from Hannibal. Young Huckleberry Finn (I say 'young' because his exact age is never given, so he seems somewhere in his early teens, but I can't be certain) is living with Miss Watson when he learns of his abusive, alcoholic father's pending return from prison. Huck stages his own murder, and flees to nearby Jackson's Island along the Mississippi River, where he connects with Jim, Miss Watson's slave who has run away after learning of her plans to sell him off, effectively separating him from his wife and daughter.

Using Huck's canoe, and subsequently commandeering other river craft, the two become friends and begin a journey toward the free state of Illinois. Freedom, however, is a relative term. And Jim soon learns he's not only wanted for being a runaway slave, but he's also being charged with Huck's 'murder.' Thus, the two regularly find themselves evading law enforcement while simultaneously escaping the clutches of some white male scoundrels.

There are several issues I have with the narrative. First, Huck and Jim spend the bulk of the story traversing the mighty Mississippi, yet there's little detail provided as to the size and scope of this majestic waterway.

Close my eyes and 'see' their travels over such treacherous terrain?

Not a chance.

Second, character development is thin. Sure, we know that Jim is a slave running for his freedom, but we don't learn much about him other than through a few interspersed dreams he experiences.

The ending comes along so abruptly it seems Everett just wanted to get the book over with. As the reader, I was hoping it would wrap up as well. Especially since it was a bit inconceivable that a group of men and women who were such docile, obedient slaves suddenly take control of their own destinies.

Just two stars for "Jim." Sometimes, it's best to leave the classics alone.