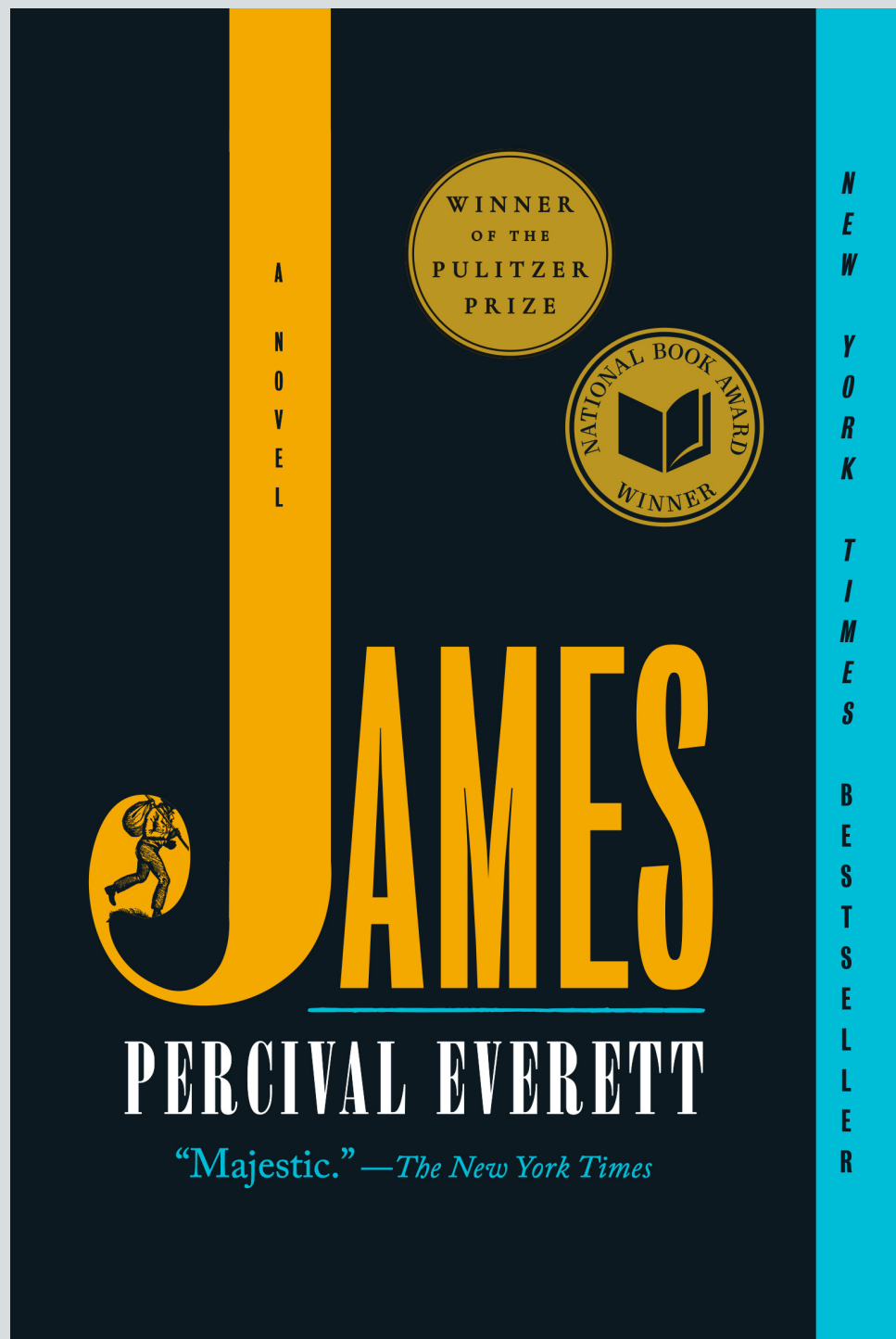




DISCUSSION GUIDE



Lexington Public Library

A discussion resource for readers, book groups, and library programs

About the Book

James is Percival Everett's 2024 novel that reimagines Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the perspective of Jim, the enslaved man who travels with Huck down the Mississippi River. Published by Doubleday, the novel centers Jim—renamed James—as an intelligent, literate, strategic, and deeply feeling person, whose interior life transforms a familiar American story into a meditation on freedom, language, family, violence, and authorship.

Audience note: This guide is intended for adult readers. The novel addresses enslavement, racism, racial slurs, violence, family separation, and other difficult material. Consider beginning the discussion by establishing group expectations for respectful conversation.

Synopsis

When Jim learns that Miss Watson plans to sell him away from his wife and daughter, he escapes to Jackson Island, hoping to find a way to protect his family. There he encounters Huck Finn, who has also fled home after faking his own death to escape his abusive father. Their journey down the Mississippi follows some recognizable turns from Twain's novel, but Everett changes the point of view, stakes, and moral center. James is no longer a supporting figure in Huck's coming-of-age story; he is the narrator of his own survival, his own choices, and his own claim to personhood.

Key Themes to Explore

- **Language as survival:** James and other enslaved people use code-switching as protection, performing ignorance for white observers while preserving intelligence, humor, and community in private.
- **Freedom and family:** James's escape is not simply a bid for individual liberty; it is tied to his obligations as a husband and father.
- **Rewriting the canon:** Everett asks readers to reconsider whose voice is centered in classic American literature and what changes when a marginalized character narrates the story.
- **Performance and power:** The novel shows how racial stereotypes are not only imposed but weaponized, forcing James to manage others' expectations in order to stay alive.
- **Morality under oppression:** James must make choices in a world where the law is unjust and ordinary kindness can coexist with deep complicity.
- **Humor amid horror:** Everett's dark wit exposes absurdity without softening the brutality of slavery.

Discussion questions

- 1 How did reading the story from James's perspective change your understanding of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or of the characters associated with it?
- 2 What is the effect of James and other enslaved characters speaking one way among themselves and another way in front of white people?
- 3 How does the novel connect literacy, language, and freedom?
- 4 James is often forced to perform a role for survival. Where do you see performance as protection, resistance, or psychological burden?
- 5 How does Everett portray Huck? Does Huck grow morally in this version, and if so, what are the limits of that growth?
- 6 What role does fatherhood play in James's decisions? How does family reshape the stakes of the journey?
- 7 The Mississippi River is central to both Twain's and Everett's novels. In James, does the river represent escape, danger, uncertainty, transformation, or something else?
- 8 How did the novel's humor affect your reading experience? Did it create distance, deepen discomfort, sharpen criticism, or make the characters feel more alive?
- 9 What moments most clearly show James's agency? Were there moments when his choices surprised you?
- 10 How does the novel treat white characters who imagine themselves as decent, harmless, or sympathetic?
- 11 What does the ending suggest about naming, self-definition, and the right to tell one's own story?
- 12 Do you think *James* stands on its own for readers unfamiliar with Twain's novel? Why or why not?

Character Prompts

- **James/Jim:** Where do we see his intellect, tenderness, anger, strategic thinking, and vulnerability?
 - **Huck Finn:** How does Everett complicate Huck's innocence, privilege, and moral education?
 - **Sadie and Lizzie:** How does their presence shape James's understanding of freedom?
 - **Tom Sawyer:** What does his behavior reveal about games, cruelty, imagination, and power?
 - **The Duke and Dauphin:** How do fraud, performance, and exploitation mirror larger systems in the novel?
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Read-Alikes

- *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain — for readers interested in comparing source text and revision
- *The Trees* by Percival Everett — for another Everett novel that blends satire, violence, history, and racial reckoning
- *Beloved* by Toni Morrison — for a profound exploration of enslavement, memory, family, and selfhood
- *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead — for a speculative approach to the history and terror of slavery
- *March* by Geraldine Brooks — for a literary reimagining that shifts perspective within a familiar American text

Closing Reflection

Everett's *James* invites readers to return to a famous American story and notice who was denied interiority, authority, and narrative control. A strong discussion may leave the group with more questions than answers: Who gets remembered? Who gets simplified? What does it mean to reclaim a name, a voice, and a story?

Sources

This discussion guide is adapted from current publisher and reading-guide information about *James* by Percival Everett, along with details from The Booker Prizes reading guide and other book discussion resources.

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/738749/james-by-percival-everett/9780385550369/readers-guide/#>

<https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/features/reading-guide-james-by-percival-everett>



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