



## My Jim A Novel

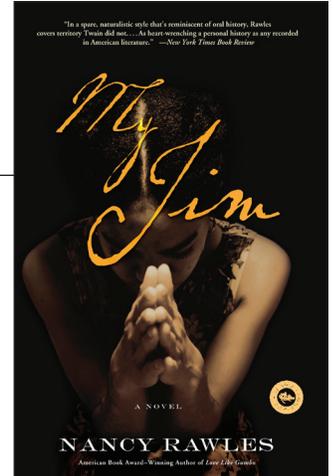
by Nancy Rawles

WINNER 2006 – ALA Alex Award  
WINNER 2006 – New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age

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Reading Level: 3.1



### note to teachers

*My Jim* is one woman's story of surviving slavery and Reconstruction. It is also the story of a powerful romantic love, of love between family members, and of the need for community and knowledge of one's personal history. A short novel that can be read quickly, it is rich with living voices and emotional detail. Much of the detail in *My Jim* is about violence, violence to the body and violence to the psyche. The descriptions are graphic, but not exploitive. Some students may find it painful to read; perhaps more should. But there is a triumph of human spirit that rewards the reader in the end. It is not a political text, but it does raise political issues, for in Sadie's story we see how individual people's decisions and government's decisions affect her and others like her. Perhaps the most powerful lesson of *My Jim* is that we are not in this life alone; our actions always affect others no matter how insignificant we feel or are told we are. Though *My Jim* is a text built out of an idea from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, it can be read and understood without any knowledge of Twain's work. Certainly familiarity with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* enriches Rawles' text, as does knowledge of nineteenth-century America, but it is not necessary for comprehension or enjoyment.

### about this book

Told with spare eloquence and mirroring the true stories of countless slave women, *My Jim* recreates one of the most controversial characters in American literature: *Huckleberry Finn*'s Jim. A nuanced critique of the great American novel, *My Jim* is a haunting and inspiring story about freedom, longing, and the remarkable endurance of love.

### about the author

NANCY RAWLES received a B.S. from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University where she majored in History under Professor Sterling Stuckey and was a Richter Fellow in Theater. She worked for several years as a journalist, most notably for *The Chicago Reporter*, an investigative journal on racial and economic issues. Rawles left journalism to pursue playwriting. Working with Linda Walsh Jenkins at Northwestern University and Valerie Curtis-Newton at the University of Washington, Rawles won several playwriting awards and has had her work produced in theaters around the country. Her play *Keeper at the Gate* (Fjord, 2000) received the King County Arts Commission Publication Award.

## teaching ideas

### historical/critical context

Why does Nancy Rawles write in 2005 a novel about slavery, a novel that enters a dialogue with major nineteenth-century texts (such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Little Women*, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), a novel that creates a historical voice for a figure many Americans feel has already adequately been dealt with and should be put to rest? Why in 2005 did Ms. Rawles find it important to complete Twain's picture, to give the black woman a voice, to challenge the hegemonic view of American history supported by Alcott? To read *My Jim* fully, one must ask both what it says about nineteenth century America and what it says about twenty-first century America, for though it is set in 1884 and addresses the ramifications of legalized slavery and failed Reconstruction, its publication today makes a claim on the relevance of those nineteenth-century values on today's political and personal choices.

### critical response then and today to Twain

Since Rawles' novel is directly connected to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, it is important to understand the vast range of controversy that has surrounded *Huck Finn* throughout the one-hundred-twenty-plus years since its publication.

Upon its publication in 1884, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was banned by the Concord Public Library committee for being the "veriest trash," "rough, coarse and inelegant, dealing with a series of experiences not elevating, the whole book being more suited to the slums than to the intelligent" (*Boston Evening Transcript*, 17 March 1885, p. 6). Still, Twain's book sold some 25,000 copies immediately after its censure and not all library committees and critics were unhappy. A fair number of critics defended Twain and his novel, even praising Twain for his use of the coarseness that got him banned: "One of the most artistic things in the book—and that Mark Twain is a literary artist of a very high order all who have considered his later writings critically cannot but confess—one of the most artistic things in *Huckleberry Finn* is the sober self-restraint with which Mr. Clemens lets Huck Finn set down, without any comment at all, scenes which would have afforded the ordinary writer matter for endless moral and political and sociological disquisition" (Brander Matthews, *London Saturday Review*, 31 January 1885, pp. 153.54). By 1913, H. L. Mencken had proclaimed *Huckleberry Finn* "one of the great masterpieces of the world" and in 1935, Hemingway made his now-famous proclamation: "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. . . . all American writing comes from that" (*Green Hills of Africa*). The place of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in American culture was set, but it was not settled.

The 1940s and 1950s were a heyday for *Huckleberry Finn*, with Lionel Trilling calling the novel "One of the world's great books and one of the central documents of American culture" in 1948 (Introduction to the Rinehart edition of 1948). Still, very reputable critics were troubled by the ending. Trilling, T.S. Eliot, and Ralph Ellison defended the ending on various grounds while Leo Marx claimed the ending "jeopardizes the significance of the entire novel" (1953). Discomfort with the ending would soon develop into full-blown discomfort with the implications about race throughout the novel.

From the 1960s until the present, a majority of popular comment and scholarly work on *Huckleberry Finn* has wrestled with the characterization of Jim and his relationship with Huck. Often, the novel was banned from classrooms because it used the word "Nigger" and was considered racist. This is still an ongoing discussion. The American Library Association cites *Huckleberry Finn* as the fifth most challenged book in the nation between 1990 and 2000.

Scholars in the 1960s and beyond began to read the situations of Jim's impotence as part of Twain's point, not part of an unexamined stereotype. Others made arguments that Jim was really never impotent, or childish, or naïve, but was wearing the mask he needed to wear to survive in the white world of the South. The most famous of these interpretations may be "Run, Nigger, Run" *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Harold Beaver (1979) in which he sites five instances that Jim takes decisive action to manipulate Huck to his own gain. In the 1980s and 1990s African-American scholars addressed *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, continuing the debate, not settling it. One example is the multiple ways minstrelsy was discussed in the 1992 publication *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn*, edited by James S. Leonard, Thomas A. Tenney, and Thadious M. Davis. Though some argue Twain was using minstrelsy as part of his satire, others see it only as the most insulting of parody.

Whatever Twain's book is, it is not easy to ignore. As recently as 2000, the Harvard Education Letter carried an article entitled "Why Huck Finn Belongs in the Classroom." It is because *My Jim* answers many of the concerns about the presentation of Jim and slavery in *Huckleberry Finn* that it is a good companion book for the teaching of Twain's text. Taught in conjunction with *Huckleberry Finn*, *My Jim* expands the reader's view of nineteenth century America, giving a fuller, more accurate representation of slavery, highlighting the limits of Huck's vision, and showing more directly the relationships between blacks and whites in the slave-holding South.

### critical response then and today to Stowe

Though *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was inarguably the biggest seller of the nineteenth-century, it has not been spared critical controversy. Both the literary merit and the historical accuracy of the novel have continuously been under debate. Many still argue that Stowe's characters are types or are overdrawn caricatures. A modern reader can't ignore that some of Stowe's descriptions are antiquated and clearly built on stereotypes. Claims that the book exploited slavery have waned, but criticism of Stowe's crafting of African American characters is alive and well.

Interestingly for a novel that has been discredited as melodrama, scholarship on Stowe still thrives. The claim that Stowe paints her black characters "white" and her white characters "black," first articulated in the 1850s, has not abated. James Baldwin found the character of Harris offensive because he succeeds by concealing his race, by acting and looking white. Discussions of whiteness and blackness took the form of Whiteness Studies in the 1990s and Stowe's novel was recognized as a major disseminator of racial images, and an early acknowledgement of the construction of race. Feminist interest in Stowe's novel in the 1970s began a public debate about the worth of the domestic novel, a discussion which has developed into a contemporary debate about aesthetic standards and who gets to set them. As recently as May of 2005, Stephen Metcalf chose to write about *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in *Slate*, an online magazine of news and culture associated with the *Washington Post* and *Newsweek*. Metcalf claimed the novel "reflects deep, if often deeply unresolved, thinking on the nature of human identity and responsibility," and credited Stowe with challenging the national ideologies that taught it was Providence who chose the black race for slavery, and the economics of a free society that justified it.

It seems the questions Stowe raises about why racism exists in America are still relevant for us today, as are her implied questions about gender roles. In 2000, MLA published *Approaches to Teaching Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin*, defining it as a staple in popular and teachable texts. Nancy Rawles' *My Jim* addresses both gender roles and racism as well, creating a black female character much richer than those offered by Stowe. Though Stowe offers two black male role models, *My Jim* offers a black female role model and a view of domestic life that completes and corrects the picture Stowe began.

### critical response then and today to Alcott

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* is heralded as a domestic novel that demonstrates how an idealized family and home can allow a woman to develop as an individual. Though never free of the domestic sphere in the construction of identity, Alcott nonetheless asserts the need for woman's individuality and attacks definitions of individuality that exclude women. Alcott's strong women crafted individual lives for themselves in and outside the home by valuing kinship structures.

Sadie's story in *My Jim* brings to life the huge toll slavery took on family. If the leading work in the nineteenth-century for women's rights articulated that a woman could be defined as an individual through her home and family, then the freed woman had no structure for crafting self-identity, her family destroyed by the practices of slavery and failed Reconstruction. Still, Rawles shows Sadie crafting a structure of kinship and therefore an identity for herself. In this way, *My Jim* enters the feminist discussion built on *Little Women*, forcing readers to consider the different experiences and needs of white women and black women.

### quilting

There is a long tradition of African American quilting in the United States. However, during slavery, myths circulated claiming quilts made by slaves were of poor quality or had cotton seed in the lining. Gladys-Marie Fry found reliable sources substantiating the well-developed quilting skills of slaves, and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese offers support to the claim that slave women did the majority of quilting on plantations. Diverse oral histories give evidence that plantation owners allowed slaves to have quilting parties and that they were social as well as labor activities. Northern women,

both black and white, offered their quilting skills as a fundraiser for abolitionist activities. Slaves in the South were sometimes able to use their quilting skills to raise money for the purchase of their freedom.

The conception, production, and distribution of a quilt nurtured kinship ties across generations, friendships, and distance for black women as it did for white women. However, Maude Southwell Wahlman and John Scully claim that African American women quilted by a different aesthetic than European American women did. African American quilts tend to juxtapose strong colors and operate without a uniform pattern; European American quilts tend to use complementary colors and operate within a very structured pattern. Though some practical elements such as the availability of cloth and tools could have played into this difference, the connection to improvisation in other African-inspired arts is not to be ignored.

It has been rumored that quilts were used as maps for the underground railroad, but most quilting authorities do not support that claim. There has been no explanation of how such quilts were made available to those seeking freedom nor how the meaning of the symbols was learned. Also, for obvious reasons, routes through the underground railroad changed frequently, making the use of quilts too short-lived to be practical.

Nancy Rawles' use of quilting in *My Jim* seems focused on building kinship. Sadie uses the quilt to connect her past to her granddaughter's future, building a kinship between the enslaved and the free, the dead and the living, the known and the unknown.

## sources

Brown, Elsa Barkely. "African-American Women's Quilting." *Signs* 14 (1989): 921-929.

Cash, Floris Barnett. "Kinship and Quilting: An Examination of an African-American Tradition." *The Journal of Negro History* 80 (1995): 31-41.

## novel summary

### part one: Marianne Libre

The novel opens in Shreveport, Louisiana during 1884. Marianne Libre, sixteen years old, is the first narrator. Nanna Sadie is Marianne's grandmother; Papa Duban is dead. Sadie has been a slave; Marianne was born free.

Marianne must decide whether or not to marry Chas Freeman and go to Nebraska and live with him where he has a position with the Ninth Cavalry at Fort Robinson. Marianne does not want to leave Sadie.

Discussion of Marianne's leaving prompts Sadie to remember a time when she wanted to stay and couldn't. She mentions her husband, Jim, and children, Lizbeth and Jonnie, for the first time to Marianne. Sadie asks what Marianne remembers of her mama and Marianne replies "Her feet in shoes...walking away from me." Sadie's inability to stay with Jim, Lizbeth, and Jonnie, and Marianne's mother's inability to stay with Marianne set up the conflict between self-preservation and family responsibility, a conflict heightened for African Americans because of the rules of slavery and Reconstruction.

Sadie will make a memory quilt for Marianne to take with her to Nebraska as a means to take her family with her. She will show and explain to Marianne the items she has collected in a canning jar. Marianne listens to all that Sadie has to tell of what "grown folks scared to talk bout." She writes down every word and at the end of Sadie's telling, Marianne knows what she must do.

This opening chapter sets up the construction of the rest of the book, giving us the conflict for Marianne and Sadie in 1884. It connects the past to the present of the book, generation to generation, and things to memories. It also introduces the themes of humans against society, the power of love and the importance of risk-taking, and the relevance of family stories/history to present day decision-making.

### part two: Sadie Watson

In this section, Sadie draws an item from the canning jar and tells Marianne about its history and importance. Sadie is now the narrator. Knife, Hat, Bowl, Tooth, Pipe, and Tobacco title the chapters and are the items that spur Sadie's memories.

The knife Sadie has saved belonged to her mother. Her mother used it for doctoring and it came from the original plantation her mother belonged to. This is the one glimpse we get of the attitude that for slaves, a “good” plantation preserved some sense of their value as people, for Sadie’s mother has told her that she came from “a proper Virginia plantation with rich important whites and poor important niggers” and she cried to leave it.

The hat is Jim’s. Mas Watson hires Jim as a longshoreman for a period of time. Mas Watson receives the majority of Jim’s wages, but Jim retains some for room and board. He saves enough to buy a hat, a “white man’s hat,” Sadie describes it. He is never seen without that hat, even after he is back at the plantation, working the fields. It is the hat, Sadie tells us, that gets her to fall in love with Jim. After Mas Watson dies, all of his possessions except Jim are sold to Mas Stevens, a master known for starving and beating his slaves. Sadie, Lizbeth, and Jonnie are sold, but Jim remains because he was a special gift to Miss Watson. Jim sneaks off and visits Sadie at the Stevens plantation, bringing her and the children meat. The last time he goes, Sadie accuses him of loving that hat more than her and Jim playfully fills the hat with water and pours it on Sadie. While Jim is asleep, Sadie cuts a triangle out of the hat because she “can’t stand to think of him gone and me with nothing of his smell” (p. 96). Jim is caught during this visit and beaten. It is soon after this that he runs away. It is only because they found Jim’s hat floating in the water that Sadie believes he is dead.

Sadie’s bowl is the Congo bowl her grandmother gave to her mother when she was sold to Mas Watson. The Congo bowl has an African cross in the middle, one that Sadie is careful to tell us is not a Christian cross, but a Congo cross, “one line up to the gods one line down to the ancestors in the spirit world. One line over for this life right now and this death too. A circle tying it all together” (p. 101). Both Sadie’s mother and Sadie believe the bowl contains its own healing powers. Sadie’s grandmother and mother were healers before Sadie.

After Jim was caught with Sadie and then ran away, Mas Stevens beat Sadie and locked her for days inside the barn where the tobacco was cured. He also took her children away, making them live in a cabin with other slaves. Sadie becomes the cook at Mas Stevens and she stands up to him enough to get more than cornmeal mush for the slaves. It is while she is cooking for Mas Stevens and his workers that she meets Nate who tells her that Jim is alive. Though Mas Stevens repeatedly rapes Sadie while she is in his kitchen, she fights him every time because she “belongs to Jim” (p. 110).

Sadie has been living apart from her children for quite a while when Mas Stevens allows Sadie’s daughter to come up the house and help her. He immediately begins eyeing Lizbeth for sexual prey and Sadie threatens him with death if he continues. Sadie begins to slowly poison Mas Stevens, mixing the poison in the Congo bowl. He gets sicker and sicker and asks Sadie what she is doing to him. Sadie claims many of the slaves are sick and takes a bit of the poison herself to prove that she is not well. Mas Stevens wants a cure from Sadie. He is asleep when she has it ready. It is at this point that Sadie contemplates how to kill Mas Stevens so that she won’t get caught and leave her children alone. As she is holding his cane, trying to draw the power from it and considering using it as weapon, Mas Stevens awakes and jumps out of bed, grabbing the cane. Sadie prepares herself for a beating, but he smashes her Congo bowl instead. It is all dust except for the one shard Sadie has kept all these years. Without the bowl, Sadie truly feels powerless.

“Tooth” tells the beginning story of the button in Sadie’s jar and the entire story of the tooth. After Sadie is caught with Mas Stevens’ cane, she is expelled from the house and sent back to field work. Miss Watson and Widow Douglas come to visit Sadie and the children periodically because they were fond of Jim and believe he is dead. They take Sadie and the children to a church service. On the buggy ride there, Lizbeth admires the buttons on the driver’s red jacket. One is loose and the Widow tells the coachman to give that button to Lizbeth. Lizbeth holds that button every night as she prays for her father’s safe return.

The slaves with whom Jonnie has been living throw him out. He returns to Sadie, who has a cabin by herself, with a bruised face and two rotten teeth. Jonnie doesn’t want to be with Sadie because the other slaves have taught him that she is a witch; he is afraid of her. Still, she pulls the tooth that has been almost knocked out. Jonnie does not want her to bury the tooth, afraid someone will dig it up and put a spell on him. He also doesn’t want Sadie to have the tooth because he believes she is a witch who will conjure him. Still, Sadie keeps the tooth and then goes to the kitchen to look for clove to put on the two rotten teeth causing Jonnie pain. Lizbeth now lives in the house, willing to do what Mas Stevens wants in exchange for enough food and clothes. She lets her mother in the kitchen, glad to see her, and hides her in the pantry. Mas Stevens returns before Sadie leaves, though, and pushes her out of the house with his cane. The next day he sends for Jonnie and sells him. Sadie almost loses her mind.

After Sadie loses Jonnie she can't work or sleep. Feeling she must do something, she sets the tobacco packhouse on fire. She watches it burn and then watches the slaves running to save it. Then she sleeps. Mas Steven wakes her with a boot on her cheek. He hits her in the eye with his cane, putting her eye out. Then he sells her. Sadie sits chained, waiting for others in her lot to be sold to a trader. She says she feels Jim before she sees him. Jim had come to get her. He is free, but when he tried to buy Sadie, Mas Stevens would not sell her to him; she had already been sold to a trader. Jim has seen Lizbeth and gotten Sadie's things to bring to her—the knife, piece of the bowl, Jonnie's tooth, and the piece of Jim's hat. Jim gives her a pipe he got from Huck Finn, telling her it is a good luck pipe. Then he fixes a cure for her eye. He has promised he will go back for Lizbeth; neither can see any way for Jim to save her. He uses Sadie's headscarf to tie a love knot around his waist in order to bind her to him and lifts his new green hat in Sadie's honor as she sails away.

After arriving in Louisiana, Sadie is sold to Old Man Cyprien, the owner of a sugar plantation. When she arrives on the plantation, she is put in a gang with a woman about to deliver a baby. That woman is Gwen, Sadie's long lost friend. They take up as friends immediately and Sadie delivers Gwen's baby. We see Sadie's hope return when she says, "Sometimes you find what you think gone forever" (p. 136). Sadie meets all kinds of slaves here, many who don't speak English. She lives with two German slaves. Sadie goes to the plantation store to pick up her rations and is raped by the man who runs it. That is how she gets pregnant with Marianne Libre's mother. She tries to abort the baby but is warned by Gwen that the master cut off the hand of the last woman who attempted such. Master names the baby Elise and she is kept in a nursery with the other children, away from Sadie. Old Man Cyprien likes his slaves to have babies yearly and after Elise is born, Sadie is put in the cabin with Andrew, his top "breeder." Sadie has four sons by Andrew: Jake, Theo, Roy, Guy. After Guy, Andrew fathers no more babies and must return to the fields. Sadie stays close to him, though, and it is with Andrew that she leaves to seek freedom after the Emancipation Proclamation. Jake and Theo are sold, but Sadie, Elise, Roy, and Guy go with Andrew to find his brother and set up a farm.

It is in this chapter that Sadie experiences the hope of freedom and the failure of Reconstruction. Sadie tells us "You can't trust nobody then. Colored folks as likely to rob you as help you" (p. 142). They walked and looked for food and avoided all whites, Union soldiers and unreconstructed Southerners. Sadie and Andrew work for a while on a plantation in Catahoula for pay until the War is over. Then they join a group of African American farmers at Smithfield Quarter. That is where Marianne Libre is born. Elise has gone to school there and meets a boy studying to be a lawyer. This boy becomes Marianne Libre's father and Sadie makes a point of telling Marianne that she comes from people who loved school. Marianne's father and Andrew are killed in Colfax during a massacre and Sadie, Elise, Marianne, Roy, and Guy spend a year living in the woods with other refugee freedmen. When the Union troops return to Louisiana to establish military rule, the freedmen leave the woods. Elise returns to school. After the troops leave Louisiana and rule is left to the Klan and the White League, Elise heads out west with some church folks.

### part three: My Nanna

The voice of Marianne Libre opens this final section, explaining the sensual connection the quilts make between her and her nanna. Sadie's voice returns as the quilt is being finished, explaining the symbolism of each piece and the connection it creates for Marianne Libre. We learn from Sadie in the final chapter that Jim had come back for her one last time. He found her in Louisiana living with Papa Duban. He tells her of finding Lizbeth after the War, very sick. Lizbeth gave Jim a button and asked him to give it to Sadie when he found her. Lizbeth died that night. Jim never found Jonnie or any information about him. Jim asks Sadie to go away with him, offering to take Marianne with them. Sadie refuses to go on the grounds that she has left enough children, and here she has two sons and a granddaughter still with her. Papa Duban has taken on these children as his own even though they were not, and Sadie will not meet his loyalty with disloyalty. Though Sadie still loves Jim, she cannot betray those who trust her and she lets Jim walk away.

### — references to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Page 23: Identifies Jim's two acts of compassion and whites' opinion of Jim; introduces the Watsons as Jim's masters.

Page 35: Jim sees that young Miss Watson will never marry.

Page 69: Introduction of the character who is called "Widow Douglas" by Twain.

Page 83: Lizbeth can't hear. (*Huckleberry Finn* Chapter 13 in Twain)

Page 95: Jim gets five cent piece from "some white boys" in Hannibal.

Page 97: Jim runs away.

Page 102: Sadie reports that whites believe Jim must have killed the white boy who went missing the same time that he did. This white boy is Huck.

Page 108: Nate from Arkansas is described as a slave of the Grangerfords, the "white folks down there [who] makes a big fight."

Page 117: Miss Watson and Widow Douglas make a visit.

Page 129: Jim gives Sadie the pipe Huck gave him. Jim says he paid his way on a steamer with money a white boy gave him. This refers to the money Tom Sawyer gave him to make up for not telling him or anyone else about Miss Watson freeing him (*Huckleberry Finn*, Chapter the Last).

Page 132: Jim tells Sadie the name of the boy who gave him the pipe was Huckleberry. Sadie remembers him.

## discussion and writing

### discussion questions:

#### american literature

##### characterization

1. Why does Sadie fantasize about killing? (Knife chapter)
2. Why does Jim decide to protect Cora from a beating on page 85? What makes him decide to do this now? Why does Mas Watson let him get away with this without punishment?
3. Based on the sale after Mas Watson's death, what were the possible economic reasons the slaves were not freed? (p. 87-88).
4. Describe the changes in the relationship between Sadie and her children. What caused these changes?
5. What does Fortune mean when she says on page 91, "I owns Mas"? In what ways would you say she is right? In what ways is she wrong?
6. Why is the hat significant to Sadie? To Jim? What does Sadie mean when she says "Was the hat got me" on page 55?
7. Why doesn't Sadie go through with killing Mas Stevens on pages 113-115?
8. Explain Sadie's statement, "Everywhere they look Christians see a black devil. They think God a white mas" (p. 121).
9. Why is it so difficult for Sadie and Jim to take the first step towards escape? What thwarts their plans the first time? What keeps them from trying a new plan later?
10. Why does Sadie refuse to go with Jim in the end? What does this tell us about Sadie?
11. With whom does Sadie have nurturing relationships?
12. The idea that there were any "good masters" is a controversial one. For slaves, what do you think might constitute the relative "goodness" or "badness" of a master?
13. Why is Sadie's daughter able to leave her child and mother behind? What does this tell us about Sadie's daughter and what does it tell us about being black in America in the nineteenth century?
14. What positive values do the characters demonstrate? Are these values reflective of the culture in which these characters live?
15. Rawles has Sadie tell her story in connection with others' stories, but the characters Sadie introduces are not only talked about because they influenced Sadie. Eventually, their complete stories are told as a type of homage to their courage, their perseverance, their suffering, their individuality against unimaginable odds. Explain how and why each of the following characters is shown respect in the text: Marianne Libre, Jim, Liza, Cora/Aunt Cora, Jenny, Emma, Tailor, Gwen, Lizbeth, Jonnie, Fortune.
16. Rawles also has Sadie tell much about her two white masters, Mas Watson and Mas Stevens. These stories, however, are not complete, and are not told as homage. What do we learn from

the pictures of Mas Watson and Mas Stevens that Sadie gives us? What kinds of things are omitted? Why are they omitted? How is the tone of these stories different from the stories Sadie tells of the other slaves?

#### theme

1. How does Sadie define freedom? How does this definition change in the course of the novel?
2. Give examples of the conflicts Sadie experiences between personal freedom and family/communal responsibility. How are Jim's conflicts with these ideals different?
3. How is identity expressed through objects for Sadie? How is identity expressed through objects for Marianne Libre? How is our culture still connected to the use of objects as representations of personal identity?
4. How is the idea of ownership explored in the novel? In what ways are the slaves owned and in what ways can they never be owned by another? How does one own oneself?
5. How are ideas of wealth and ownership tied to personal identity in the novel? How are they connected in twenty-first century American culture?

#### form

1. Slave narratives are typically eyewitness accounts that portray slavery as physically and psychologically abusive. Some personal crises triggers the escape and the response to freedom demonstrates the capability of the black man or woman to prosper without white man's control. In what ways is *My Jim* like a slave narrative and in what ways is it different?
2. What purpose does Marianne Libre serve in the structure of Sadie's story? How would the story be different without her?
3. Sadie's language is written in dialect. In what ways is her speech like poetry?
4. Although Marianne and Sadie are the only two storytellers, there are many other voices represented in the text. How is this representation created?
5. There are many historical references in *My Jim* to real events and places. What does such historical specificity add to a novel that is clearly fiction?

#### american history

1. Draw a map of Master Watson's journey with his slaves from Lynchburg, Virginia to Cape Girardeau, Missouri. What natural obstacles might they have encountered during the early 1800s? How far did they walk and how long would it have taken them to walk it?
2. What was life like on a farm in the Southern states during the nineteenth century? How were sugar cane farming, tobacco farming, and cotton farming different from each other?
3. How did slave owners use religion on the plantations?
4. Who actually used herbal medicine in the nineteenth century? What did "traditional" medicine have to offer at this point?
5. Research the earthquakes (p. 43) and the flood (p. 33) mentioned in *My Jim*. How many people died? Were slaves included in the death count? How much property was lost? Were slaves included in the property count? What were other results of these natural disasters?
6. Examine the images of slaves and slave sales housed at <http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/index.html>. Explain how *My Jim* is an accurate or inaccurate portrait of slavery in nineteenth-century America.
7. How has quilting figured in the history of white America? How has it figured in the history of black America? What is its function in *My Jim*?
8. What image does *My Jim* give of Reconstruction? How are these images accurate or inaccurate based on what we know now about Reconstruction history?
9. What was the Christian church's role in slavery and Reconstruction? How did the role of the white church differ from the role of the black church?
10. Research and map the closest Underground Railroad connection for Sadie and Jim.
11. In the Acknowledgements on p. 166, Ms. Rawles writes that she "owe[s] a debt to historians such as Arna Bontemps." Describe how Arna Bontemps' work is history.
12. What were the social scientists of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s doing that would inspire Ms. Rawles (p.166)?
13. How has the representation of American slavery changed since the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1853? Consider novels, movies, minstrel shows, songs, advertisements, plays, poems, and photographs produced and dispersed widely to the American public. Do they

show a change in how we view slavery? What has triggered the changes in the representation of slavery—historical research, political activism, the collection of first-hand reports, etc.?

## writing prompts

### *My Jim*

1. Summarize the stories Sadie tells readers of Jim and decide both how Sadie judges him and how you judge him. Is Jim a man worthy of Sadie's admiration?
2. Returning to your summaries of the stories Sadie tells of Jim, rewrite them in Jim's voice, from Jim's point of view. How do these stories change because Jim is telling them?
3. Does Sadie merely survive, or does she truly live? What has she accomplished by the end of the novel that justifies your answer?
4. The title of this book is *My Jim*, yet Jim is only one of many characters Sadie introduces to us. Of these many characters, which is most important to Sadie or has the greatest influence on her and why? What evidence in the text supports your choice?
5. Keep a journal of your emotional and intellectual reactions to the novel as you read. When you have finished reading, share your responses with someone of a different race than you. Repeat this sharing process with as many readers as you find helpful. Finally, use what you have discovered through sharing your responses to write an essay about the different responses racially diverse modern readers have to this text.

### *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and My Jim*

1. Considering all of the clues given to a reader through fiction (dialogue, action, setting, physical descriptions, facial descriptions, clothing, etc.), articulate the definition of freedom you think Jim, Huck, and Sadie would each give. Compare and contrast these definitions, explaining to your readers what can be learned by looking at all three definitions instead of just one.
2. Evaluate how Jim, Huck, and Sadie respond to their lack of freedom. Which would you argue gives the "most" moral response, based on your own twenty-first century sense of morality? Explain in which situations you wanted the character to do more, do less, or act differently.
3. Retell Jim's story, creating a voice for Jim and including information from both *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *My Jim*.
4. Create a situation in which Huck gets to meet Sadie. How would that meeting change Huck? What decisions would Huck make differently after meeting Sadie?
5. Explain how the image of slavery differs between *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *My Jim*.

### *My Jim and other texts*

1. Tim O'Brien's short story, "The Things They Carried," tells about what soldiers carried in their backpacks during the Viet Nam war. Compare and contrast the use of those objects to how Sadie used the items she sewed into Marianne Libre's quilt.
2. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs is an autobiography by an ex-slave. Compare the truth Ms. Jacobs brings to her autobiography to the truth Sadie brings to her fiction. Which would you argue captures the times more accurately—the one tied to historical accuracy or the one tied to emotional truth?
3. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* also gives readers a look into the interior life of a female slave. Compare Sethe and Sadie.
4. Consider *Little Women*, a novel popular during the time period in which *My Jim* takes place and reflective of life for middle-class white women during the nineteenth century. Comparing Sadie's experiences with those of Jo March, explain how the lives of black women and the lives of white women were similar during the nineteenth century in spite of class differences.
5. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative*, and Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* are examples of a spiritual autobiography, common in the 18th century. Both show physical enslavement, escape from physical enslavement, and a new life of spiritual and physical freedom. Compare Douglass' and Equiano's sense of spiritual and physical freedom with the freedom Sadie describes during and after Reconstruction. What accounts for the differences?

## • vocabulary

### glossary of terms and historical references

**Ninth Calvary at Fort Robinson Nebraska** (p. 11): Also known as “Buffalo Soldiers,” members of the Ninth Calvary were exclusively black men, led by a white officer. These soldiers built roads, protected crews building railroads, escorted stagecoaches and trains, protected settlers, fought Native American tribes, and subdued outlaws. They played a prominent role in the settling of the West. Fort Robinson, Nebraska was one of the last places to host the Buffalo Soldiers.

**Sharecrop** (p. 11): A farming system common in the Reconstruction South in which a tenant farmer is given credit to pay for living and farming supplies and is then paid a portion of the crop or profits in return for their work planting and harvesting the crop. This system was usually corrupt in practice with many farmers owing the land owner at the end of the season instead of being paid by the land owner. Many saw this as simply a new name for slavery.

**Shucking corn** (p. 12): Peeling the cornhusks off the ear of corn.

**Judgment Day** (p. 12): The day in Christian doctrine when Christ returns to earth to gather His faithful, judging who is worthy of an eternity in Heaven and who has earned an eternity in Hell. Some believe this moment of judgment occurs for each person immediately after death.

**Figures** (p. 12): Computes arithmetic.

**Slopping hogs** (p. 14): Feeding hogs.

**Liberty nickel** (p. 14): Minted between 1883 and 1913, this nickel has the head of Lady Liberty on it. It was first minted without the denomination on it and was sometimes gold-plated and passed off for a five dollar gold piece. This was remedied mid-1883. It ceased production in 1913 when the Indian Head nickel was introduced, but five Liberty Nickels were minted in 1913 under yet unknown circumstances. This was a common coin for 1884.

**Indian head penny** (p. 14): Minted from 1859 to 1909, over 1.8 billion of these coins were produced before being discontinued and replaced by the Lincoln penny. Essentially, this was a common coin for 1884.

**Rile** (p. 15): Show agitation, anger.

**Union troops** (p. 16): Troops that fought for the Union during the Civil War and later entered the South to free the slaves and monitor Reconstruction; President Andrew Johnson pulled out all military support of Reconstruction in 1877.

**General Grant** (p. 18): General Ulysses S. Grant was a general in the Union army during the Civil War. His wins in Vicksburg, Mississippi and Chattanooga, Tennessee were key in the defeat of the Confederacy. He was respected by his adversaries and an extremely popular figure in the nineteenth-century.

**Nigger** (p. 21): The roots of “nigger” can be traced to “niger” in Latin, which means black. Spanish, French, English and Portuguese all have words similar to niger that mean the color black or a person whose skin is black. By the early 1800s, this term was established throughout the slave-holding nations as a derogatory nickname for African Americans, at the very least identifying their inferior status. Its use by African Americans to describe themselves was common in 1884, but still represents the unconscious self-hatred that was developed through treatment by racist whites. It is introduced in *My Jim* by Sadie’s mother who describes her own “nigger” relations as important but poor. Their importance, however, is the result of their white master’s importance. Regardless of how offensive modern readers find this term, any accurate portrayal of colloquial language of the nineteenth-century must include it.

**Fugitive Slave Law** (p. 23): Law passed in 1850 that demanded fugitive slaves found in free states be returned to their masters. In essence, it eliminated every place of freedom to which an escaping slave could run within the boundaries of the United States. However, many individuals and communities (such as Chicago) refused to comply with the law.

**Seer** (p. 23): One who can see into the future.

**Ague** (p. 33): A fever with chills and sweating.

**Sky falling** (p. 34): More than likely this is referring to a meteor shower recorded on November 13, 1833. It could be seen from New England to the Mississippi Delta in the early hours before dawn. It is perhaps the first American record of a recurring meteor shower that we now identify as a Leonid.

**Tote** (p. 35): To carry.

**Falling out** (p. 36): being taken over by a spirit; “falling out” of your conscious mind and into the spirit’s mind; could involve speaking in tongues or languages unknown to those around you, seeing visions, having an “out of body” experience.

**Great light pass in the sky** (p. 37): Haley’s comet, seen in 1835.

**The day the earth tremble** (p. 43): Known as the New Madrid Earthquakes, Missouri experienced a series of earthquakes from December 1811 to March of 1812 that registered 8.0 – 8.3 on the Richter Scale.

**Yellow gal** (p. 64): Light-skinned, mixed race girl.

**Jump the broom** (p. 73): A marriage ceremony employed by African slaves. It symbolized sweeping away the old single life and entering the new life of marriage. Some historians claim the ritual originated in the slave-holding American South as a substitute for legal marriage, others claim it is an African tradition brought to the South with the African slaves. There is also a jumping the broom tradition in Celtic marriage ceremonies.

**Canaan** (p. 76): Many slaves referred to Canada as “Canaan.” Any place that held the promise of freedom might be compared to the Biblical Canaan, a land of milk and honey promised to the Israelites after they leave bondage. St. Louis, Missouri was a logical point in the slave’s search for freedom, as the free state of Illinois could be seen across the Mississippi River. There is evidence there was an active Underground Railroad movement in Hannibal led by free blacks. (See the *Hannibal Courier Post*, February 24, 2001)

**Dred and Harriet** (p. 78): In 1846, Dred Scott sued for his freedom in the Missouri courts on the grounds that his previous residency in a free state made him free. In 1857, the Supreme Court ruled that Scott was a bondsman and not a citizen of the United States; this meant he was ineligible to sue in a court of law and the case was dismissed. Harriet was Dred Scott’s wife and was included in the suit.

**Quincy** (p. 78): Quincy, Illinois was across the river from Hannibal, Missouri. The number one station on the Underground Railroad from Quincy to Chicago was Dr. Eell’s House, located at 415 Jersey in Quincy.

**Moses** (p. 84): Harriet Tubman, a leader of the Underground Railroad.

**California gold rush** (p. 84): Between 1848 and 1864, a half-million people migrated to California in hopes of striking it rich with gold. Since gold was originally discovered in the rivers, many came to pan for gold, a pursuit that required little initial investment and no land ownership. Because gold was discovered in California shortly before it became a state, the miners entered a country generally free of state regulations, police enforcement, and taxes. This made the gold in California very attractive and seemingly free.

**Cholera** (p. 85): An infectious gastrointestinal disease that is caused by bacteria found in water contaminated by improper sanitation. It is often fatal if left untreated due to the severe dehydration it causes. Nineteenth-century Americans suffered many cholera epidemics, most notably in 1832, 1848, and 1865.

**Bloodroot** (p. 101): Plant that produces a red dye and was used by Native Americans to treat fevers and joint pain.

**“Somebody get hold of my tooth and put something on me.”** (p. 121): This reflects a belief by some slaves that spells or curses could be set on people through a piece of their bodies; i.e., some hair, a clip of toenail or fingernail, a tooth.

**Coffle** (p. 128): A group of slave fastened together, usually for transport of sale. This term is also used to describe animals fastened together.

**“We free fore the war over.”** (p. 139): Sadie was on a plantation in New Roads, Louisiana. New Roads was established in 1822 and is part of the Pointe Coupee Parish, a parish already under Union control when the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect. This accounts for Sadie’s memory that she was freed before the War was over.

**“They find you by yourself in them fields they think you a orphan.”** (p. 141): One of the Black Codes instated during Reconstruction allowed whites to take orphaned or unsupervised black children and keep them until adulthood, theoretically giving them a trade. In reality, this Black Code allowed whites to take “ownership” of black children, as they had done in slavery, and to use the threat of taking black children as a means of keeping adult freedmen on the plantation.

**Smithfield Quarter** (p. 143): The name of a small black settlement, this reference reminds us that land was opened in Louisiana for African American settlers and Louisiana, which early in the War had sections under Union control, was a place for experimentation in Reconstruction policies.

**Colfax** (p. 144): The Colfax Riot, today understood as a massacre, occurred on April 13, 1873, Easter Sunday. The clash between the White League and the almost all black Louisiana militia resulted from a variety of hostile situations caused by Reconstruction, the primary one being the results of the 1872 elections. Having lost the election, whites created a shadow government and worked to put it into place. Fearful that local white Democrats would take over the government and end all Reconstruction advances, Civil War veterans and freedmen joined forces and took over the courthouse in Colfax, the seat of Grant Parish. Members of the White League arrived and blasted the courthouse with gunfire. After it was clear they were losing the battle, the protestors put up a surrender sign, but the shooting never stopped and the courthouse was set on fire. The costliest of all Reconstruction Riots, three white men died and more than one hundred freedmen died in the Colfax Massacre. Nearly half of the freedmen killed were killed under their flag of surrender. Violence continued in Louisiana after the massacre to the point that President Grant ordered a return to military control.

## reviews

"A wonderful first-person narrative . . . both a love story and a chronicle of a brutal time in American history." —*Chicago Tribune*

"*My Jim* is a compelling, eloquently written novel that can stand on its own merits beside the great works that inspired it." —*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Rawles's affecting spin-off of Twain's classic gives the resilient Sadie Watson a harrowing story and a powerful voice to tell it." —*Entertainment Weekly*

"In a spare, naturalistic style that's reminiscent of oral history, Rawles covers territory Twain did not. . . . As heart-wrenching a personal history as any recorded in American literature." —*New York Times Book Review*

## beyond the book

### slave narratives

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## about this guide's writer

MARGARET E. WRIGHT-CLEVELAND, author of this guide, is a student in the doctoral program in American Literature at Florida State University (FSU) in Tallahassee, Florida. She has taught *My Jim* in conjunction with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to upper level college students. She also teaches interdisciplinary American Studies courses as well as literature and writing courses at FSU. In addition, Margaret writes and edits curriculum and professional development materials for Adult and Community Education with Leon County Schools and the Florida Department of Education.