

James Discussion Questions

(Sources include the publisher and the Booker Prize)

1. Have you ever floated any part of the Mississippi River by any means? If not, would you like to?
2. The Mississippi River is central to the landscape of the novel. How did it shape the political landscape of the region and the events of the novel?
3. Discuss the importance of Jim renaming himself James. How is his name change symbolic of many of the themes of this novel? Does your name hold any deeper significance to you?
4. Why was code-switching necessary? In what ways does the author portray code-switching as an act of irony?
5. Throughout the book, Everett throws in many literary motifs. James has read Voltaire and appears in conversation with John Locke in his dreams. What does Everett's decision to present James in this way say about the expectations placed on Black characters in literature?
6. A central theme in *James* is identity: the identity given to us, versus the one we claim as our own, and the extent to which we reveal our true identity to others. How does *James* explore the tension between these identities and how does this theme shape James' journey throughout?
7. Talk about 'the pencil'. What does the pencil represent to James? Have you ever assigned a deeper meaning to a physical object?
8. What do you think about Norman's decision to maintain his identity as a black man and runaway slave, even though he was white-passing? Why do you think the author chose to include this narrative?
9. Have you read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and if so, how did that impact your reading of *James*?
10. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* contains more than 200 occurrences of the N-word. In *James*, Everett chooses to follow suit. How does this deliberate use of the racial slur affect the reading experience? Discuss the response Everett may be trying to evoke and its purpose in *James*.
11. Huckleberry Finn is sometimes banned by school districts because of its use of the N word. Do you think books portraying specific themes, language, or viewpoints should be banned and who, if anyone, should make that decision? Can 'problematic' books still teach us something?
12. Were you surprised by Jim's revelation in chapter one of part three?? Have you ever learned something shocking about your family's history?
13. Like much of Everett's work, *James* contains elements of satire, alongside serious reflections on societal and racial oppression. How, and why, does Everett leverage humor amongst the darker

issues he tackles in *James*?

14. “Good ain’t got nuttin’ to do wif da law. Law says I’m a slave.”

Despite his relationship with James, Huck grapples with the fact that, by law, he is ‘stealing’ James by not returning him to Miss Watson. Should individuals hold themselves accountable to laws that violate a moral code?

15. *James* features an ensemble of fugitive and enslaved characters. Was there one who was particularly memorable to you?

16. What do you think about the way religion is portrayed in *James*?

17. *James* is one of many adaptations of Huckleberry Finn. NPR described it as ‘a startling homage and a new classic in its own right’. In your opinion, does *James* have the potential to stand the test of time and be considered a classic? Why or why not?

18. After reading *James*, can you think of another character from a classic text that you would like to read as the narrator of their own story?