

When Reading Ain't Natural

My Jim, A Talking Novel

By Nancy Rawles

"My name is Charles Baker Harris," he said. "I can read."

"So what?" I said.

"I just thought you'd like to know I can read. You got anything needs readin' I can do it...."

"How old are you," asked Jem, "four-and-a-half?"

"Goin' on seven."

"Shoot no wonder, then," said Jem, jerking his thumb at me. "Scout yonder's been reading ever since she was born, and she ain't even started school yet."

From *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

This exchange from the first chapter of Harper Lee's famous novel sums up the difference between folks for whom reading is "natural" and folks who have to work at it. I place myself in the latter group.

As far as I'm concerned, talking is natural. Singing is natural. Tasting, smelling, touching, feeling, laughing, crying, and playing are natural. Reading and writing are about as natural as singing opera and playing the violin.

My favorite books and poems are the ones that take me to a sensual world more primal than words. In other words, I like writing that makes me forget I'm reading, that makes me think I'm seeing or hearing or, better yet, eavesdropping. I like characters who seem so full and real that they continue to live with me after their book journey has ended.

*Excerpted from **RHI: Reaching Reluctant Readers**, a publication of Random House, Inc. To request a complimentary copy of RHI, email highschool@randomhouse.com, subject: "RHI: Reluctant Readers"*

I wrote *My Jim* for readers like me. It's a story of slavery and freedom told by the wife of Mark Twain's famous Jim character in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. I've named her Sadie, and her story of love and longing is so palpable that I hope readers can identify with her losses. Many readers have told me the novel caused them to do just that. Some of these readers have been students, and the book seems to have resonated with them. Here's a sample of some of the comments (sent to me by teachers) that high school students have made about the book.

Heather:

“With this book you got to see this whole other world. It's a great story about Sadie and her life. It was a very sad and heartbreaking story. Sadie went through a lot but she always stood up for what she believed in, and she was always strong no matter what. I really liked her character because of that.”

Dustin:

“Toward the end of this book I couldn't put it down. I think it is a much better book than Huckleberry Finn and should be required to be read rather than Huck Finn. It has good historical information but isn't as boring or hard to understand as Huckleberry Finn. The book was poignant and moving.”

Dixie:

“When I had finished reading this book I couldn't believe how amazing this story was. Sadie's life with Jim and her struggles and heartache without Jim. Sadie wonders if Jim will be in the next life waiting for her or the other way around and all I can say is that I hope there together again someday. When a book can make you feel nothing compassion for the people in the story real or not, means that the author sure knows what they are doing.”

Melissa:

“I like how Nancy Rawles chose to show the treatment of slaves under two different owners. What I love is that she has them explain why they treat their slaves differently.

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The reasoning is very intense with Mr. Stevens, he works his slave to death, literally. He thinks Mr. Watson is a fool for treating his slaves so well. In history there was never just one or the other. There's always middle ground. I think that Mr. Watson is that middle ground and Mr. Stevens is one of the far extremes. The other extreme would probably be abolitionists, in my opinion.”

Kanisha:

“What I didn't like (I hope most people didn't) was how the Mas Stevens would try to get to Sadie by giving her daughter a ribbon. It liked when she told him ‘If you touch my daughter I says your hand gonna fall off. your teeth gonna fall out. then every living part of you gonna fall off till you aint nothing but memory of flesh.’ (pg.112) If I was a slave I would never say that to my mas ever. This part made Sadie seem even braver. She only wanted to protect her daughter.”

Megan:

“There was a quote I read early in the book on page 24. ‘But Mas make them dig a hole for her belly. So they can beat her without killing the baby.’ I thought it was terrible that people would want to beat a pregnant woman even though she was a slave and its ridiculous to go to such measures as digging a special hole so that the baby wont be hurt just so that they can beat her. It's really sad to read how things were in the past. I don't see how it could've ever been ok with people.”

Surinthia:

“I never thought you could get so much detail in this size of a book. It strikes me sad when Sadie loses her mother, because I can relate to that. Also when she become the healer lot of the slaves turn on her, Which is awful. I have a questions after reading both books, and it is freedom. Even if they didn't have a master, were blacks free? For that fact does anybody actually have true freedom?”

Chelsea:

“From the moment I started reading this book, I realized something that I really appreciate: Jim's personality was portrayed in a different way than in *Huck Finn*. I really like this, because in *Huck Finn* although the reader could see Jim's intelligence, he or she never caught a glimpse of Jim's intense personality. In this book he has a fire within him, and a strong heart and will for freedom.”

Reading these comments makes me very happy. Even "natural" readers are reluctant to read books about slavery. I consider it an accomplishment when readers relate to Sadie's story. Students who are reluctant to read novels may have trouble relating to fictional characters. *My Jim* is filled with historical facts and events (including events from Samuel Clemens' childhood) and is told by a fictional character who is herself based upon the lives of countless slave women. I'm honored that *My Jim* received a 2006 Alex Award from the American Library Association. The Alex Award is given to adult novels that appeal to teen readers.

My Jim is written with a minimum of punctuation and includes grammatical mistakes common for people with limited formal education. Many readers feel they're listening to a story rather than reading one.

Reluctant readers are often people who learn with their ears more readily than they do with their eyes. The physical act of reading is stressful for them. *My Jim* has the cadences of speech and the rhythms of music:

"Folks think freedom gonna look one way but it look all kind of ways. Sometime it look like slavery. Folks think freedom something like a button or a tooth. Something you can hold onto aint gonna break. But you can break a button with a tooth and a tooth with a button. And both of them real easy to lose. Even when you know right

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where they drop you still gonna look and cant find them. If freedom a place its a place you pass through."

From *My Jim*, page 140

A good story, simply told, is still the best way to hook me as a reader. If it gives me insight and information, if it makes me care about people who seem remote, if it carries me along to a satisfying conclusion, the time my eyes have spent focusing on letters seems well worth the effort. It's my hope that even reluctant readers will feel this way about *My Jim*.

About the Author

Nancy Rawles writes plays as well as novels. All of her writing is grounded in history. She is the recipient of a Starbuck's Foundation Leading Voices Award for her work teaching writing to children.

My Jim

A Novel

by Nancy Rawles

Three Rivers Press | TR | 978-1-4000-5401-5 | 192 pp. |

\$12.95/\$17.95 Can.

WINNER 2006 - ALA Alex Award

WINNER 2006 - New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age

To help her granddaughter accept the risks of loving, Sadie Watson mines her memory for the tale of the unquenchable love of her life, Jim. Sadie's Jim was an ambitious young slave and seer who, when faced with the prospect of being sold, escaped down the Mississippi with a white boy named Huck Finn. Sadie is suddenly left alone, worried about her children, reviled as a witch, punished for Jim's escape, and convinced her

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husband is dead. But Sadie's will and her love for Jim animate her life and see her through.

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. 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.

"In a spare, naturalistic style that's reminiscent of oral history... Rawles covers territory Twain did not: Jim's early life in captivity, his seemingly endless struggle for freedom, his love for his wife and children, his impossible anguish upon separation.... Certainly if The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is presented to school children as their introduction to American slavery, as it sometimes has been in the past, then the deeply felt and moving My Jim would be a welcome accompaniment." —The New York Times Book Review

"Here, finally, is the Jim we can only glimpse between hijinks and humiliations in Huck Finn--a man who's clever and tender, romantic and tragic. And there's just no escaping his wife's voice. I read some chapters without blinking." --Ron Charles, Christian Science Monitor

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