

ARTS & LETTERS

THE ANNOTATED HUCKLEBERRY FINN.

Edited by Michael Patrick Hearn.

Norton. 480 pp. \$39.95

Hearn's handsomely designed, album-sized edition of Mark Twain's great novel follows the examples of William S. Baring-Gould's magisterial *Annotated Sherlock Holmes* (1967) and similar treatments of *The Wizard of Oz* (1973), also by Hearn, and *Alice in Wonderland* (1993), by Martin Gardner. Such books have their primal ancestor in the Talmud's commentaries on commentaries. But *Huckleberry Finn* did not come into the world as a candidate for reverential treatment. It is a book born to trouble, a pariah novel denounced in its time as "trash and suitable only for the slums," denounced in our time as racist, but nonetheless not only vindicated but canonized (in several senses). Hearn lists 55 "notable" editions of the book, excluding countless routine reprints in virtually every known language. The subject of an enormous critical literature that has unearthed multiple levels of meaning and intention, Twain's masterpiece has become a sort of freshwater *Moby-Dick*.

Hearn's own 150-page introduction is a model of thoroughness and compaction: It recounts not only the vexed composition of *Huckleberry Finn* but its equally vexed production, publication, and reception, altogether a cautionary demonstration of the agonies of authorship and the vicissitudes of taste. The text of *Huckleberry Finn*—what this ambitious edition is all about to begin with—appears in an exceptionally attractive reprint along with the 174 original sepia illustrations by E. W. Kemble. Hearn's commentary is apt, informed, and engaged, but it sometimes outpaces what it is meant to illuminate instead of trotting alongside. At the outset, for example, Twain's ironic 34-word "Notice"—"Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot"—generates a gloss of more than a thousand words. Perhaps, though, the disproportion is right and proper considering the nature of the prefatory passage.

A major source of trouble for *Huckleberry Finn* has been its 200 or more iterations of the taboo word *nigger*. They have "kept the novel at the center of modern freedom-of-speech disputes," Hearn writes. "Can a book which uses racist language, however subtly, be a great work of literature? Should it have a place in the public school curriculum or library?" The argument over *Huckleberry Finn*'s suitability for impressionable, literal-minded readers with little or no recognition of historical context continues, with occasional ferocity. Hearn is attentive to three of the most crucial and controversial passages in the novel: Huck's initial reluctance to apologize to Jim ("I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards"), his decision not to turn Jim in as a fugitive slave ("All right, then, I'll go to hell"), and his blithe and bitter reply to Aunt Sally's question about whether anyone was hurt in a steamboat explosion: "No'm. Killed a nigger." "Well, it's lucky," she says, "because sometimes people do get hurt." Irony, we need to be reminded, may be the most sophisticated of all literary strategies.

Even readers moderately informed about *Huckleberry Finn* are likely to find themselves surprised by how many rich details they may have simply skimmed over: excursions into riverine social history, customs, superstitions, legends, domestic practices, and idioms. The drawback here, the difficulty inherent in such comprehensive treatment, is that the text itself—this brilliant and gripping story of adventure and moral education—may at times be overshadowed by the commentary it has provoked.

—JUSTIN KAPLAN

THE GREAT AMERICAN PAPERBACK:

An Illustrated Tribute to the Legends of the Book.

By Richard A. Lupoff. Collectors Press.
320 pp. \$60

Mass-market paperback publishing in America got off to a rousing third or fourth start with the debut of Pocket Books in 1939. During the 19th century and then in the 1920s and 1930s, several companies had been