

## Discussion Questions for *James*

by Percival Everett

1. Some critics have suggested that *James* is a “corrective revision” of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Everett has countered that, instead, it is a conversation with Twain, a “contrapuntal” novel which attempts to express simultaneously both the oppressed and the oppressors’ points of view. To what degree is Everett successful both in this, and in challenging readers to go beneath the surface-level narrative to consider underlying power dynamics and ideological assumptions that shape the narrative?
2. As part of his “conversation” with Twain, Everett borrows a few of his minor characters: the Duke and the King. In Twain’s portrayal, the characters are largely comedic, but Everett darkens their personae in *James*. What function do these characters play, particularly in contrast to James himself?
3. James (as do other characters in the novel) “code-switches” between dialects depending on his audience. How does this linguistic ability reflect his survival skills and his sense of self? What might have been Everett’s motivation for including extensive references to this verbal fluency?
4. In what ways does James assert his agency throughout the story, despite the constraints of slavery? How does Everett redefine the concept of “freedom” through James’ experiences?
5. Everett is known for his sharp (and sometimes caustic) wit. How does humor function in *James*? What role does it play in addressing serious topics like racism, violence, and dehumanization? How does it keep readers engaged?
6. James’ literary and philosophical reflections through his dreams are central to the novel. How do these elements challenge the stereotypes imposed upon James by other characters and society? On a deeper level, how might Everett be using these reflections to contest (and even criticize) assumptions of some of the “essential” documents of the Western Canon and thought?
7. Everett sets *James* in the Antebellum South but with modern sensibilities. What are examples of the elements of contemporary insight within the novel? How does the blending of contemporary thought with the historical setting affect the reading of the story?
8. Masterfully and playfully, Everett blends genres and defies expectations. What is the ultimate result of this historical, fictional, satirical, adventurous, thrilling, philosophical, and vengeful novel? How does *James* blatantly dismiss the “White Savior Narrative?”

9. In addition to the philosophers, Everett makes numerous other allusions—Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Herman Melville’s slave revolt in *Benito Cereno*, Homer’s *The Odyssey*, American slave narratives, and The Bible. These allusions often infused with irony and commentary on race, identity, and language. What, if anything do these allusions contribute to the novel?
10. The exploding riverboat has captured the attention of many readers. What symbolic significance might Everett have intended with the inclusion of this scene?
11. Another notable question readers have is about the big SWERVE in tone and plot when James puts down the pencil and picks up the gun. What instruction may writers take from this about employing the development of an emotion as an arc for the entire narrative? Additionally, why does Everett write Sammy into the story?
12. At the core of the novel, the essential question seems to be “what is the power of language?” So, Guilders, what IS the power of language?
13. It has recently become popular for contemporary writers to rework classic works both in novels and screenplays. Why might writers choose to do this and to what degree are these rewrites successful?

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