

Phong Nguyen. *The Adventures of Joe Harper*. Outpost19, 2016., Winner of the 2020 Jan Garton Prairie Heritage Book Award\* Available for purchase at [thevollandstore.com/phong-nguyen/](http://thevollandstore.com/phong-nguyen/)

*As the two boys walked sorrowing along, they made a new compact to stand by each other and be brothers and never separate till death relieved them of their troubles. Then they began to lay their plans. Joe was for being a hermit, and living on crusts in a remote cave, and dying, some time, of cold and want and grief; but after listening to Tom, he conceded that there were some conspicuous advantages about a life of crime, and so he consented to be a pirate.*

--Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

That passage from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is the epigraph for Phong Nguyen's prize-winning novel, *The Adventures of Joe Harper*. At a virtual book-talk sponsored by the Volland Store on December 10, the author said that those particular words were what led him to choose Joe Harper as his central character and narrator.

*The Adventures of Joe Harper* had just won the Jan Garton Prairie Heritage Book Award, and the on-line event was held to honor the occasion. The award is a \$1000 prize periodically given for works that illuminate in new ways the heritage of the prairie states.

In Phong Nguyen's novel, Tom and Joe grow up to become pirates for real.

The story opens as a guilt-ridden Joe returns alone to Missouri, unable to forget the people he has robbed and hurt while roaming the high seas. Now he goes back to Plan A, wanting once more to find a cave in which to live as a hermit and suffer for his sins.

His quest leads him to join the sub-culture of individuals riding the rails in post-Civil-War America. His mentor in the hobo-life is Lee, a Chinese-American and former railroad worker who is trying to get back to California. Accompanying the two on the journey west is Ruth, an Amish runaway bride, disguised as a man. In one place after another, the three encounter various aspects of society--the haves and the have-nots, the exploited and the exploiters, the kind and the cruel.

Kansas readers will be particularly interested in Joe's experiences in a tavern in Kansas City, a brothel in Topeka, and a drug den in Salina.

Along the way we learn what eventually happened to Huck Finn, and, as California nears, we encounter Tom Sawyer once again. Tom is no longer a pirate; he is now a US marshal. But he is still robbing and killing—just now from behind a badge.

Tom ends up as a politician. When asked about relevance to today's political situation, the author replied that Tom Sawyer is the original "gas-lighter." He has a gift for getting people to disregard the reality they can see with their own eyes and believe instead the counter-factual accounts which he proclaims as truth. The results can be humorous—but also devastating.

As Joe says, “For relying on Tom Sawyer, I was sentenced to wander, carrying with me more guilt and grief than a mortal man can stand.”

The author said that what most surprised him in his research for the novel was Mark Twain’s advocacy for Chinese immigrants. As a young reporter in San Francisco, Twain wrote about mob attacks on Chinese laborers and police complicity in the racist violence. When his editor at the *Morning Call* ordered him to stop writing about such topics, Twain refused—and paid for his stand by losing his job.

The anti-immigrant violence that Mark Twain exposed plays a prominent role in Nguyen’s novel. Lee had left California to escape a racist mob, and five years later, when he returns to California, he faces a racist mob again. Indeed, violently enforced white supremacy permeates the novel’s milieu. All the main characters—Lee, Joe, Ruth, and Tom--must confront the force of racism. They must decide how to survive it, how to escape its worst effects, whether or not to deploy it for their own advantage, whether to defend each other from it. In the surprising conclusion, all four respond in ways influenced not only by cultural forces but by their individual minds and hearts.

This book can be profitably read on its own, without knowledge of *Tom Sawyer* or *Huckleberry Finn*. But as an homage to Mark Twain, the novel has a double impact. It channels the sense of humor of two authors, not just one--and it tag-teams Mark Twain’s writing in its exposure of injustice.

To read *The Adventures of Joe Harper* is to be amused and chastened and inspired-- and forced to rethink what we know about our culture. There is a vivacious continuity, a thought-provoking resonance, between Mark Twain’s creations and Phong Nguyen’s.

We the readers are the beneficiaries!

A recording of the virtual book talk by Phong Nguyen can be found at <https://thevollandstore.com/phong-nguyen/> .

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\*The Jan Garton Prairie Heritage Book Awards are made possible by a bequest to Prairie Heritage, Inc. from the estate of Jan Garton, the Kansas conservationist who led the campaign to restore water rights to Cheyenne Bottoms in Barton County, Kansas. More information is available at [prairieheritage.org](http://prairieheritage.org)