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Staff Writer

‘James’ author Percival Everett discusses reimagining ‘Huckleberry Finn’ and Black narratives with UCSB’s Stephanie Batiste

Renowned author Percival Everett’s celebrated new novel “James” (2024) reimagines the escape of the enslaved character “Jim” from Mark Twain’s (Samuel Clemens) canonical American classic, “Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” (1884). A National Book Award finalist and on the shortlist for the Booker Prize, Everett joins only one other author, Margaret Atwood, in this dual recognition.

UCSB Arts & Lectures, as part of its Justice For All programming initiative, presents “An Evening with Percival Everett” on Friday, Oct. 25 at 7:30 p.m. in Campbell Hall. Free copies of “James” will be available while supplies last (pick up at the event; one per household).

Everett’s version of Huckleberry Finn and the character of Jim isa 21st-century fictional slave narrative or “freedom narrative,” according to Stephanie Batiste, a professor of Black studies and English at UCSB.

“It incorporates characteristics of many such 19th century works with a frank sense of Black feeling within the totalizing confines of fatal racism,” Batiste said. “Readers who have never read a slave narrative get to experience one of the most iconic

novels in the American canon, ‘Huckleberry Finn,’ as this tragically remarkable and transcendent American literary form. Through ‘James,’ Everett probes American character, the enduring legacy of slavery on conceptions of race and power, and the terms of our constriction and freedom.”

In advance of his visit to UCSB, Everett joined Batiste in conversation about the book and his work.

Stephanie Batiste: How long have you been writing?

Percival Everett: Well, I guess I've been writing for publishing for some 40 something years, 41 to 42 years.

SB: How do you find inspiration for your stories and characters?

PE: Oh that’s all magic. It just happens. Honestly, I suffer from what we call, in my house, work amnesia. I don’t remember writing any of it. It just kind of happens.

SB: What do you think is the most important thing for people to know about your work?

PE: That any meaning to be found in it is generated by them.

SB: How would you describe "James"?

PE: When I started, I was thinking that perhaps I would be trying to offer a corrective to the story, but I pretty much abandoned that right away, because I have a lot of respect for Twain and for that novel, failed as it might be in some aspects. So I like to see this novel as being in conversation with Twain.

SB: How close do you feel your engagement with “Huckleberry Finn” is? In some moments it feels line by line.

PE: I would say that it can’t be because it’s narrated and experienced by an adult Black man who happens to be enslaved, whereas Twain’s point of view is as an adolescent white boy, who was free. So even though there are many shared events, the fact that they’re viewed from different vantage points makes it necessarily quite different.

SB: “James” significantly addresses the history of American literature in its address of Mark Twain, and particularly through the terse, consequential “Jim.” I’m

wondering about that address of American literature through Twain that “James” accomplishes.

PE: The book will do what it does in the world. I am a novelist and artist. I’m just trying to represent the world as I see it.

SB: Across your work, you master many types and layers of satire. What kinds of satirical modes are you drawing on and cultivating, and what are some of the things that your work targets for satirization?

PE: Well, I have a, probably, an overdeveloped sense of irony, probably pathologically ironic, so I never think I’m writing satire. I look at the world, try to tell the truth, and the truth is ironic enough and absurd, but my target is almost always in American culture.

SB: James critiques racist philosophies of the Enlightenment around the nature of freedom and equality through Voltaire, Locke and Rousseau. Do you imagine that every slave who contemplated their own freedom was a philosopher on the nature of freedom and equality?

PE: Well, necessarily, no matter how it's articulated, people certainly dreamed and thought about their freedom and being complex human beings, those ideas would have wandered into all sorts of arenas and modes of thought. I'm addressing in the discussions with Locke and Voltaire and Rousseau, not only the enlightenment, but a particular enlightenment figure and that would be Thomas Jefferson, who did not leave any philosophical treatises that would have been available to “Jim” in Judge Thatcher's library. And so these philosophers are stand-ins for a particular hypocrite, having written, “all men are created equal” and then abandoned that notion as the argument progressed.

SB: Abandoned very quickly and conveniently, twisting the terms of U.S. notions of nationhood into knots to accommodate slavery. Jefferson, who helped to write the U.S. Constitution, of course, owned slaves

Throughout the book, you render James a deep contemplation of the nature of language, of writing, of reading, of reading versus seeing. I love how we get an imagination of James' relationship to books in the context of the illegality of a slave having any relationship to reading and writing. And after James’ fever dream, when he is in conversation with Voltaire, he offers a logical progression for himself from

thought, to writing, to the impact of writing on the nature of freedom. He says "my interest is in how these marks I'm scratching on this page can mean anything at all. If they can have meaning, then life can have meaning, then I can have meaning." Would you talk about this vital play with language that you accomplish?

PE: I just thought to start with, the idea that I adhere to quite, quite rigidly, is that the most subversive thing we can do is read, for the mere fact that no one knows what's going into us when we attend to a text. Even if someone reads over our shoulder and sees the very words that we're seeing, they don't know what those words are doing to us.

Maybe the next most subversive thing is writing, but I'm not sure, but certainly reading. It's subversive, which is why fascists always rush to burn books. Which is why the right wants to ban books in several states. Walt Whitman in the poem …[As I Sat Alone] By Blue Ontario Shore, I think is the title, I paraphrase Whitman, but since it's Whitman, it really doesn't matter; he says, If you want a better society, produce better people

And that's what we need.

SB: What, in your mind, is being subverted through the act of reading ?

PE: One of the things when one is acting subversively, one is seeking to take control where control did not exist before. And that's what, that's what reading really does. It allows you to control the meaning.

SB: The educational system is imagined to create able readers who can evaluate civic practice. I've read recently that students are getting to college not having read any complete books. And so that disjuncture between reading as a pathway to a better personhood and the current moment, which I know you experience as an educator, identifies a particular problem about citizenship that James’ concern with language, reading, and expression addresses.

How does this orientation speak to the process and character of thought in this visual age of memes and not just short, but micro forms of writing, reading, and speech?

PE: Obviously, it's a huge problem when our attention span has been so attacked, you know, and attacks need not be conscious, but [they] have been attacked. We've gotten used to things being shorter and shorter. You mentioned memes. I just learned what a meme was not too long ago. Or we have whatever it is. I've never been on Twitter or whatever it's called now, but I know that there is a limited number of characters, not very many, in which you're supposed to say all you have to say, and which sort of plays into the world of fascists. They love slogans. Slogans are short. They stand in the way of thinking through ideas and having discussion.

Probably the saddest thing that's been done to us by a certain figure in our political landscape, is that ignorance and selfishness and stupidity have been normalized. That it's okay. It's something to be proud of and that hasn't been a part of American training or character up until recently.

SB: I mean, it's perhaps an aside, and I don't want to take us too far afield, although I think we're kind of right at the heart of one of the things James is asking us to address in this particular moment. How do you feel your book’s commentary on language and writing, it's great power, impacts this capacity, or urgency, to read well?

PE: I think my kids know a lot more than I knew, but I also try to tell them that “information is not the same as intelligence. How would you process the information? Do you know where to find the information if you want it, do you know what to do with it?”

In a desert, the person who knows how to get water is a genius.

SB: That water, then, that skill and practice in interpreting, is an access to meaning, ingenuity,and survival.

Okay, speaking of water, but shifting a bit, how does the river, water, the rain, and the currents play for you symbolically in this novel? With them, there's barely a moment that's not symbolic, but also not referential of other waters in Black literature. Your work recalls Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Zora Neale Hurston.

How are the waters playing for you?

PE: Well, rivers are fantastic. For one thing, the Mississippi divides the United States. We talk of things being west of the Mississippi. That's a boundary that's important. It's a big river that forges the boundaries of states, can change them, and does change them depending on how it flows, how it floods, and how it reshapes itself. Just rivers in general, starting with Heraclitus, you can't step into the same river twice. It's time. The river is time. It's always moving. It never stops, and, and it is your one opportunity to be in a moment. So there's all sorts of metaphoric import, as soon as one mentions a river. And for anyone whose ancestors were enslaved, and in this country there was a very large body of water that had to be crossed in order to establish our presence here, and that's never far from our thinking.

SB: You mentioned earlier that one of the things that makes James, of course, different from Huckleberry Finn is its literary legacy of slavery that, perhaps, subverts the way Huckleberry Finn gave us that legacy in relationship to white innocence, youth, and mischief. What are some of the things that the perspective of the adult Black man who happens to be a slave gives us instead?

PE: Well, the depiction of slaves well into the 20th century was not only Jim but, but Uncle Tom and Uncle Tom's Cabin, the superstitious, simple minded, person who understands eating, sleeping, procreation and not much more obviously. Of course, enslaved people were every bit as complex and complicated as the people who owned them, perhaps more so because of what they had to endure. And those are the voices that we don't get to see in our literature or on film.

And it's that that I wanted to address. Certainly the language that enslaved people would use to address each other was probably not the standard English I offer in the novel, but it would have been a language that they created that they could speak, used to speak to each other that would not have allowed entry of their enemies. That's what people do. And so, it was that complexity that I most sought to underscore.

SB: James has its layers of access and refusal in its engagement with language and the many layers through which it toys with Black language and Black language play. You are juggling and imagining multiple lexicons at the same time that shape the direction of language, literature, and freedom.

PE: Just doing what black people do every day, essentially.

SB: How does "James" fit into the body of your work?

PE: I don't know if that's for me to say. I know that it's in conversation with the other novels, whereas my very first novel, Suder (1983), I never see that one as in conversation with the rest of them. But I think "James" makes sense to me and in a way, it's almost an object lesson in my own art, imitating my artistic life.

SB: A lesson in your own art, imitating your artistic life?

PE: Yes, and I think about Erasure and "James" and they tie together in some very interesting ways that I won't talk about, but Okay.

SB: The relationship between Huck and Jim is so generous in their elected friendship. Jim chooses to offer a great deal of care to Huck..really guiding him once they get in that boat together, and even earlier when they're playing around the back porch at Judge Thatcher's…

PE: The only positive male model in Huck Finn is Jim. [Their connection] has a lot to do with choice. You said elected, and that was really, that's an interesting word, and that's choice and circumstance and possibilities – all play into to this.

SB: Is "James,", also about contemporary black masculinity. You hinted at this when you put "James" in conversation with Erasure.

PE: Well again, I won't say what the work does in the world.

I hesitate to say anything's about identity, because I'm so sick of that.

I'll give you this one thing that I often talk about with the idea of race and color, and that is Pitchfork Ben Tillman, the racist politician from 19th century South Carolina. First of all, South Carolina was the only state that did not adopt the one drop rule, and it's because of Tillman, who said in a small office at McKissick Library, University of South Carolina, to like-minded, racist men, if we adopt this rule, not one of us in here can own land on record, a recognition then that America is just mixed and it's all about appearance.

SB: Is there a difference between the Huck in "James" and in Huckleberry Finn?

PE: I don't know if Huck is so different, oh, there is a difference. It's that my Huck is more resistant to the lure of Tom Sawyer, okay? And which is why Sawyer doesn't show up. I don't like the character Tom Sawyer and he doesn't show up. It's sad that he shows up at the end of Huck Finn for a couple of reasons, not the least of which

is, he's the driving force behind the torturing of Jim when he really wants to be free, being put in the middle of this, being played with as a toy for The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. But Sawyer, I fear that Twain reinserted Tom Sawyer because he was in need of money, that it was a mercenary move. He abandoned the novel a few years before, and came back to it, and as was his sort of usual circumstance, he was in need of money, and Tom Sawyer was his money making character. And so he reinserts him, and I think tries to save the novel. And that's too bad, because the novel before then has a certain rhythm and a certain gravitas that makes it profound in many ways and deals with that thing that becomes the most important feature of the American experience, which is race. Then it becomes a mere adventure.

SB: Are there inside jokes in “James,” jokes that you feel will particularly or especially resonate with a Black audience? We talked about satire and irony–and there's humor.

PE: Probably. I, being Black, I don't recognize them as inside jokes as much as jokes and not being white, I don't know what I'm missing.

SB: Early on I had this feeling that there was a kind of futurist or contemporary element in James’s relationship to time. Perhaps that feeling has to do with transformation?

PE: Well, you mentioned rivers. You know, if we, if we go put our feet in the river, it's the same river that Jim put his feet in, okay, but it's not the same river.

SB: Time is the same river that Jim put his feet in, that James put his feet in, that we put our feet in when we engage with this new novel.

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About UC Santa Barbara

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