

PURSUING PRESENT-TENSE LITERARY ADVENTURE ON THE MISSISSIPPI

# 21st-Century Huck Finn

Jon Perlmutter

What if Mark Twain's beloved character Huckleberry Finn were brought into the 21st century and outfitted with the latest communications technology? That's one of the many possibilities Gabe Crane, C'08, explored this past summer as he embarked on the Mississippi Project. Crane, an English major with a creative writing emphasis, and three of his friends paddled down the Mississippi River in two canoes and traveled the 2,000-plus miles between Minneapolis and New Orleans. Along the way, Crane wrote about his experiences on a blog that he maintained with a Treo, a handheld cell phone/PDA hybrid. The device was provided by the Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing (CPCW) and the Kelly Writers House, which gives seed funding and sponsorship for a variety of innovative student writing projects.

An avid outdoorsman, Crane had long been enchanted with the idea of a canoe trip that would not only allow him to navigate the American wilderness but would also reveal a novel perspective on American civilization. He was also inspired by the narrative journalism of John McPhee, whom he studied in a Writers House Fellows Seminar taught by Al Filreis, the Kelly Family Professor of English, faculty director of the Writers House and director of CPCW. Crane says he chose the Mississippi because the river's important symbolic and historical role in American culture and literature made it the perfect place to engage in a literary adventure.

Although it employs new technology, the Mississippi Project resurrects venerable literary traditions. Just as Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a classic *bildungsroman* — a novel that portrays the protagonist's journey to personal development — Crane too learned much about himself in what he

calls the “condensed maturation period” brought about by the project. And in the vein of the literary journalism practiced by McPhee, Crane's writing about the real people and places he encountered helps define the life of this country. From the local high school graduation Crane and his friends attended in Minnesota, to the generous stranger who fed and sheltered them in Mississippi, to the devastation that still plagues New Orleans two years after Hurricane Katrina, the trip made plain the heterogeneous character of America.

“It opens your mind to the fact that this country is an incredibly diverse place,” Crane says. “There is something remarkable about the American spirit that we manage to hold it together.”

Filreis, who encouraged Crane to add the technology dimension to his project, says the act of blogging allowed Crane to imbue these traditions with a cutting-edge sense of immediacy because he was able to engage the audience in a literal present tense rather than one that is a fictional construct.

“You have this kid, who can write like a dream, enabled by a little handheld computer to take us on his trip,” Filreis says. “In a way this is the best of reality media — that is to say, it has the new 21st-century Internet-age ubiquitous-connectivity and present-tenseness about it — combined with traditional, thoughtful literary attentiveness and speculation.” ■

*Gabe Crane's Mississippi Project blog can be read at <http://writing.upenn.edu/mississippi.html>.*

—PRIYA RATNESHWAR

**Crane's writing about the real people and places he encountered helps define the life of this country.**