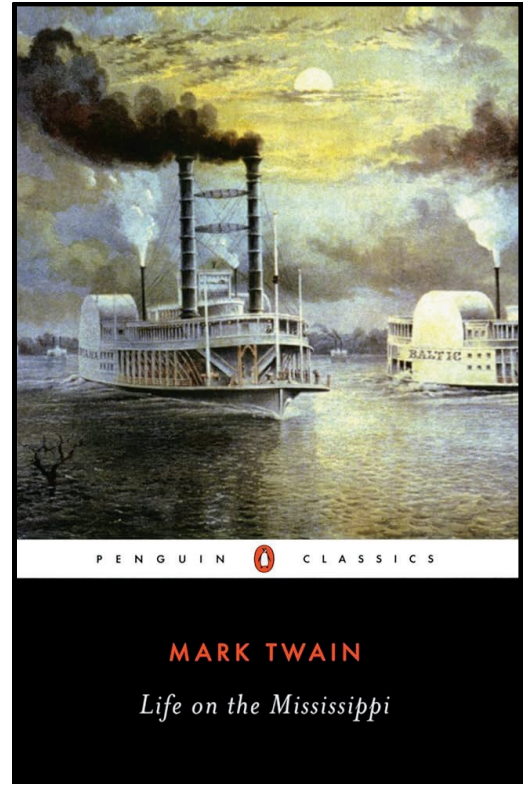
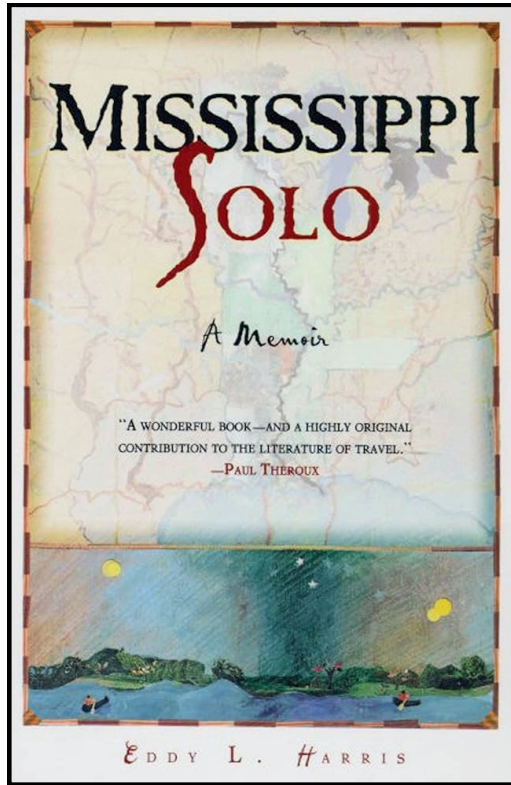


# 2026 BIG BOOK CHALLENGE

## OUR GUIDE TO



**MISSISSIPPI SOLO**  
BY EDDY HARRIS  
&  
**LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI**  
BY MARK TWAIN

Adult Summer Reading  
May 27-Aug. 26, 2026 [www.ucitylibrary.org](http://www.ucitylibrary.org)

# OUR SUMMER ON THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

Welcome to the 2026 Adult Summer Reading Big Book Challenge! This summer, we're traveling down the Big Muddy with *Mississippi Solo* by Eddy Harris and *Life on the Mississippi* by Mark Twain. Although published more than a century apart, both books combine elements of memoir, travelogue, and cultural commentary as the authors recount their experiences on the mighty Mississippi River.

Published in 1883, "*Life on the Mississippi* may not be Twain's best book...but it is in many ways his most characteristic performance,"<sup>1</sup> giving readers views into his world, his writing style, and even including chapters taken from early versions of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. More than a century later, a young Black man, Eddy Harris, took it upon himself to travel the length of the Mississippi River — from its headwaters in Minnesota down to the delta in New Orleans — alone in a canoe. *Mississippi Solo* is the memoir and cultural commentary that came from that experience. Both books offer stories of the river, its people, and the ruminations that accompanied these men on their respective journeys.

Throughout the summer, we'll explore these two classic American travelogues, supplemented by a fantastic line-up of lectures and cultural programming. Readers will begin our journey in June with a focus on *Mississippi Solo*, when we'll welcome author Eddy Harris to UCPL for a special keynote presentation on June 3. That will be followed up with a screening of *River to the Heart*, Harris's documentary about his second voyage down the river, on June 17, and a discussion of the book on June 24. In July, we'll travel back in time to learn about the riverboat era of St. Louis in a field trip to the Missouri Historical Society's Library & Research Center on July 8 and our first discussion of *Life on the Mississippi* July 22. Our summer together will wrap up in August with some toe-tapping Cajun and Creole tunes from the Southside Creole Playboys on Aug. 5 and our final discussion on Aug. 26.

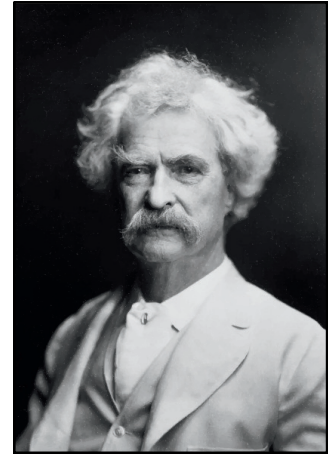
Finally, we would be remiss if we didn't add our thanks to the Library Services and Technology Act, which is appropriated by Congress and administered by the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the Missouri Secretary of State, which makes this program possible. We can't wait to read with you!

<sup>1</sup> Cox, James M. "Introduction." *Life on the Mississippi*, Penguin Books, New York, NY, 1984

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

## MARK TWAIN, 1835-1910

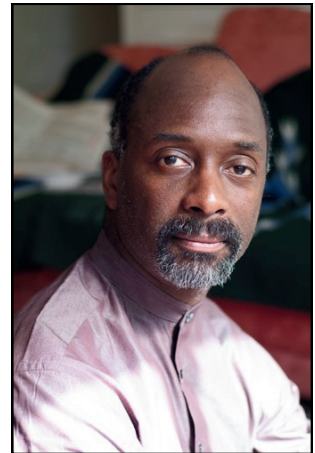
Considered one of the greatest writers in American literature, Mark Twain was born Samuel Clemens in Florida, Missouri, in 1835, and died in Redding, Connecticut in 1910. As a young child, he moved with his family to Hannibal, Missouri, on the banks of the Mississippi River, a setting that inspired his two best-known novels, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.



In his person and in his pursuits, he was a man of extraordinary contrasts. Although he left school at 12 when his father died, he was eventually awarded honorary degrees from Yale University, the University of Missouri, and Oxford University. His career encompassed such varied occupations as printer, Mississippi riverboat pilot, journalist, travel writer, and publisher. Twain and his wife, Olivia Langdon Clemens, had four children—a son, Langdon, who died as an infant, and three daughters, Susy, Clara, and Jean.<sup>1</sup>

## EDDY L. HARRIS, 1956-

Eddy L. Harris is the author of four critically acclaimed books in English, *Mississippi Solo: A River Quest*, *Native Stranger: A Black American's Journey into the Heart of Africa*, *South of Haunted Dreams: A Memoir*, and *Still Life in Harlem: A Memoir*, all of which partake of memoir, travelogue, adventure tale, and cultural reportage.



Born in the American Midwest and educated at Stanford University in California, he has traveled the four corners of the world and has lived and spent significant time in many places. A longtime resident of France, Harris is also the author of two books written and published in French: *Jupiter et Moi* and *Paris en noir et black*.

Harris has been Writer in Residence and professor of English, Creative Writing, and African American Studies at esteemed institutions including Washington University in St. Louis and Goucher College in Maryland. He counts Mark Twain as one of his favorite writers.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from [www.penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/31611/mark-twain](http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/31611/mark-twain)

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from [www.eddyharris.com/about](http://www.eddyharris.com/about)

# THEMES & MOTIFS

## MAN & RIVER: EVOLVING RELATIONSHIPS

Our authors both describe a great change in perspective due to their respective river journeys, though in opposite directions. Harris comes to see the river as an intimate friend, a relationship that culminates in the book's masterfully written closing passage. Conversely, Twain is familiar with the river having grown up in close proximity, but laments that his training as a steamboat pilot requires him to perceive it as a series of dangers to be overcome rather than romanticized.

## RACIAL IDENTITY & RIVER TRAVEL

As Harris and Twain are keen social observers, it is unsurprising that both journeys reflect the conditions of their times. Twain describes the racial stratification of Antebellum and Reconstruction America frankly, contrasting the plight of African-American kidnapping victims and free riverboat employees and passengers with his own delight in the extreme freedom afforded him as a pilot. Harris's identity as a Black man reclaiming space in the great outdoors leads him to a hopeful message of belonging that transcends his physical journey.

## LOOKING BACK VS. LIVING IN THE MOMENT

"I hope to God I'm not out here because I miss the Good Old Days," Harris writes near the beginning of his journey. Perhaps because his task is so dangerous, he has little choice but to be mentally present on the river. Twain's primary objective in *Life on the Mississippi*, on the other hand, is nostalgia. Still, it's easy to imagine our authors in friendly conversation.

## AUTONOMY & COMMUNITY

As St. Louisan Tina Turner once sang, "people on the river are happy to give,"<sup>1</sup> and our authors experience this first-hand. Harris's journey is only somewhat "solo," as throughout his travels he encounters friends old and new. Likewise, Twain describes the untouchable autonomy of a pilot, but also the cooperation necessary to survive such a dangerous voyage. While life on the river has changed dramatically between the two journeys, both connection and silent moments of solitude remain highlights of the Mississippi River experience.

<sup>1</sup> Yes, we know John Fogerty wrote "Proud Mary," but when you get a chance to reference Tina Turner, you take it!

# MEMOIRS OF TRAVEL & TRAVEL JOURNALS

From time immemorial, diaries and journals of travel have been the first draft of history, providing insight into various voyages around the expanding world, as well as into the minds of the writers themselves. Explorers from Leif Erikson to James Cook to the Apollo astronauts created detailed notes that led to further exploration and study of new frontiers.

Prior to the rise of relatively affordable long-distance travel and tourism, reports from abroad submitted by well-known writers and published in popular periodicals were the only way to learn about the world. For example, Charles Dickens wrote about his travels to America, while Mark Twain's many published articles include stories about his journeys to Europe and California. Twain's articles were later collected as *The Innocents Abroad* and *Roughing It*, respectively.

While many of the popular "classic" travelogues tend to represent a more Euro-centric and male viewpoint, they are by no means the only first-person narratives to describe historical eras and episodes, and efforts have been made in recent decades to preserve and publish the historic travel diaries of women, people of color, and indigenous communities. A couple of examples include the 1992 publication (and 2002 re-release) of *The Motorcycle Diaries* by Che Guevara, detailing his two-wheeled travels through Latin America in the 1950s, and *My Journey to Lhasa* by Alexandra David-Néel, a 1927 memoir of the author's harrowing journey into Tibet, which was re-released in 2005.

Travelogues have continued to remain popular, with more recent entries into the genre becoming bestselling books and films (Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods* and Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* are two such examples). Even those that are not as well known offer insight into social topics, such as *How the Word Is Passed*, Clint Smith's tour of historic sites related to slavery, or *Wandering in Strange Lands*, in which author Morgan Jerkins retraces her ancestors' journeys during the Great Migration.

Our Big Book Challenge this summer highlights excellent examples of both types of travelogues. We hope that they inspire you to track down more travel journals and memoirs, many of which are scattered through the 900s of the Dewey Decimal System (the home of travel and history books). Check out the Further Reading list on the next page or ask our reference librarians for more suggestions.

# FURTHER READING

## Books

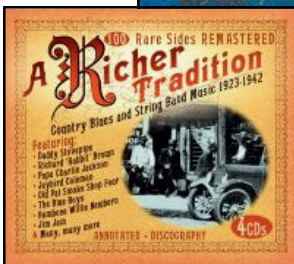
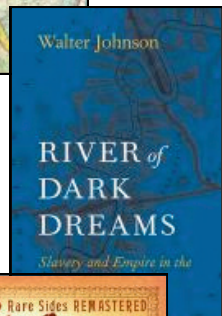
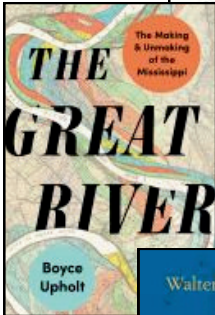
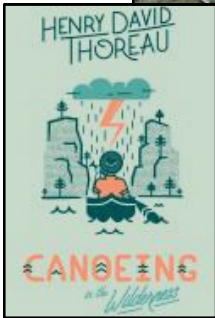
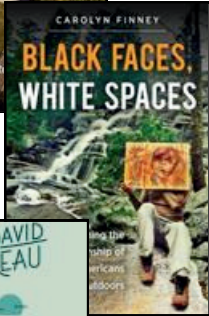
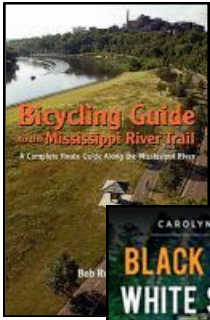
- *Bicycling Guide to the Mississippi River Trail* by Bob Robinson 917.7 ROB
- *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* by Carolyn Finney 304.2089 FIN
- *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World* by Thomas C. Buchanan HOOPLA
- *Canoeing in the Wilderness* by Henry David Thoreau HOOPLA
- *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* by Herman Melville F MELVILLE
- *The Father of Waters: A Mississippi River Chronicle* by Nora Deakins Davis 917.7 DAV
- *The Great River: The Making and Unmaking of the Mississippi* by Boyce Upholt 917.7 UPH
- *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* by John M. Barry HOOPLA
- *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* by Walter Johnson 305.8009 JOH
- *Ship Ablaze: The Tragedy of the Steamboat General Slocum* by Edward T. O'Donnell HOOPLA
- *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* by Mary Seacole HOOPLA

## Music

- *Zydeco: Rough Music Guide* MUSIC CD FOL ZYD 2910392
- *The Best of Clifton Chenier* MUSIC CD FOL CHE 2910327
- *A Richer Tradition: Country Blues & String Band Music 1923-1937* MUSIC CD FOLK RICHER

## Online

- “American Notes: Travels in America, 1750-1920” Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/travels-in-america-1750-to-1920/>



# SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

**Keynote Presentation with Eddy Harris**  
7 p.m. Wednesday, June 3

**Film Screening:**  
*River to the Heart*  
6:30 p.m. Wednesday, June 17

**Book Discussion:**  
*Mississippi Solo*  
7 p.m. Wednesday, June 24

**Field Trip: Missouri Historical Society**  
10 a.m. OR 3 p.m.  
Wednesday, July 8  
\*Reservations required\*

**Book Discussion:**  
*Life on the Mississippi*, chapters I-XXVII  
7 p.m. Wednesday, July 22

**Southside Creole Playboys performance**  
7 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 5

**Book Discussion:**  
*Life on the Mississippi*, chapters XXVIII-LX  
7 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 26

## CONNECT WITH US ONLINE!

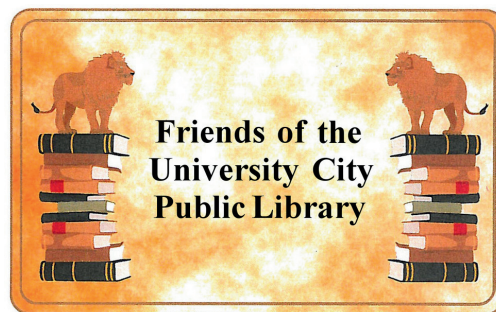


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