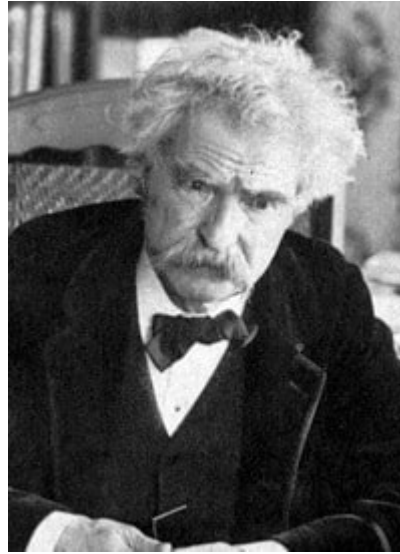




Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on January 7, 2011

Huck Finn and the “N-Word”

Understanding and implementing what is acceptable and what is forbidden with regard to language with racial connotations has become a highly specialized discipline in today’s politically charged culture. Witness, for example, that one may generously donate to the United Negro College Fund, or stand in solidarity with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, but one must never refer to blacks as “negroes” or “colored people.”



Likewise with the dreaded “n-word.” Of course, thinking people with an ounce of decency automatically shun the term as insulting and derogatory. Nonetheless, not so long ago in the popular music genre known as “hip hop,” [N.W.A.](#) — short for “Niggaz Wit Attitudes” — was one of the hottest groups going. At the same time some “African-American” youth were in the habit of referring to each other using this racial pejorative, while it was understood that others were forbidden from doing so. Eventually, even many blacks were shamed by Oprah and other approved black spokes-models into ceasing to denigrate themselves in this manner.

In fact, over the past 20 years or so, uttering the “n-word” has devolved in our culture from being merely insulting and unacceptable to being downright obscene and even criminal. Thus, while the “f-word” and “g**d***” have been unofficially downgraded to mild swearing — and are dropped with impunity on radio, television, in movies, and even in casual conversation — the saltiest sailor or hippest Hollywood celeb wouldn’t be caught dead letting the “n-word” slip past his lips.

Now we have learned that, in an effort to make Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* more palatable to young readers conditioned to hypersensitivity toward slurs both real and imagined, a team of literary editors is preparing an edition of the beloved literary classic with all 219 instances of the word “nigger” deleted.

According to [Publisher’s Weekly](#), for decades Twain’s classic “has been disappearing from grade school curricula across the country, relegated to optional reading lists, or banned outright, appearing again and again on lists of the nation’s most challenged books, and all for its repeated use of a single, singularly offensive word: ‘nigger.’”

Twain scholar Alan Gribben told the publication that rather than see Twain’s most enduring work



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disappear as irrelevant, he and NewSouth Books are working on a new version of the novel, along with an updated version of another Twain favorite, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, that replaces the racial pejorative with the kinder, gentler word “slave.”

“This is not an effort to render Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn colorblind,” assured Gribben, who is chairman of the English department at Auburn University. “Race matters in these books. It’s a matter of how you express that in the 21st century.”

Gribben sanctimoniously explained that he grew up never having heard the dreaded word, and only became aware of its “jarring effect” when he moved to the South. “My daughter went to a magnet school and one of her best friends was an African-American girl,” he recalled. “She loathed the book, could barely read it.”

Apparently, Gribben never considered the alternative of explaining the historical context of the word, and why Twain didn’t think twice about peppering the book with it. Instead, Gribben explained, the experience of how Twain’s novel dramatically impacted certain readers (something most authors long for in response to their works) prompted him to begin replacing the n-word with “slave” when he read Huck Finn in public. Since, by his count, the n-word appears 219 times throughout the book, the changes to Twain’s original manuscript are significant.

Gribben is not concerned that his changes defile the novel’s context, denying readers young and old the opportunity to discuss the implications of using denigrating language in reference to other groups and people. One Twain scholar, Dr. Thomas Wortham of UCLA, compared Gribben’s efforts to those of Shakespeare authority Thomas Bowdler to publish a cleaned-up version of the bard’s works for family reading. Wortham told *Publisher’s Weekly* that a version of Twain’s classic “like Professor Gribben has imagined doesn’t challenge children [and their teachers] to ask, ‘Why would a child like Huck use such reprehensible language?’”

[USA Today](#), which courageously refuses to print the dreaded word in any of its editorial content, quoted legal blogger [Jonathan Turley](#), who called Gribben’s editing an “offense” against Twain’s creative efforts, arguing that like other great works, *Huckleberry Finn* “must be read with an understanding of the mores and lexicon of its time.”

Similarly, writing on [RightPundits.com](#), Shannon Bell argued that sanitizing the n-word from main character Huck Finn’s running dialogue eliminates from the novel a crucial juxtaposing of what Huck has been taught about blacks, and what he discovers through his relationship with another of the book’s characters, the escaped black slave Jim.

“Huck Finn learns throughout the book that most of what he’s been taught about blacks is not correct,” wrote Bell. “He also learns that Jim, his friend and companion who happens to be black, is a man worthy of respect and admiration. He learns he’s not at all like those with prejudices towards blacks have made him out to be.”

One could be more blunt and say that changing the wording in the book cheapens it: The book, from beginning to end, is a satirical condemnation of individuals who consider themselves to be better than others — from the starched, crisp, and wealthy-appearing Colonel Sherburn, who kills a man for merely insulting him, to the wealthy Grangerfords and Shepherdsons, who bring their guns into the church that both families share so that they can have them handy to kill each other when they exit, to every other smug character in the book’s pages. The use of the n-word in the context of the book sarcastically denigrates every person who utters it and indicts the society that allows its utterance.



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The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn offers readers of all ages a window on a world long dead, where racism was a fact of life, but where honest and perceptive individuals could nonetheless discover the God-given seeds of courage, goodness, and nobility residing deep within the hearts of others regardless of their skin color.

Sadly, in his well-intentioned efforts to buffer young readers from a harsh and denigrating term that has mostly disappeared from the vocabulary of civilized people, Dr. Gribben will, through his sanitized edition, deprive those introduced to *Huckleberry Finn* of the full and unvarnished impact of this timeless American classic.

Photo of Mark Twain: AP Images



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