

# Huck Finn and the Power of Words

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**Bill Walsh, Contributing Writer**

E-Mail: [WillWalsh@aol.com](mailto:WillWalsh@aol.com)

It's pretty rare these days when the printed word incites controversy. We're so concerned about the modern media of TV and film and Internet and rap music that a bad word in a book hardly seems to bother us anymore - unless, of course, that book is *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and the word is "nigger."

My English classes just finished the book, and in the course of our study, we also looked at the battles which are still going on over the book and its use of the "n-word." Words are indeed powerful things.

Mark Twain published *Huck Finn* in 1884 and was in trouble for it from the very beginning. The book was first banned only a year after its appearance by the Concord, Massachusetts Public Library - but not for its language. It was characterized as "rough, coarse, and inelegant, dealing with a series of experiences not elevating, the whole book being more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people." Twain (tongue typically in cheek) wrote to the library, thanking them for the ban because it would mean that people would have to buy the book in order to read it.

Since then - and up to this very day - the book has variously been praised and reviled. Some call it the greatest book ever written in America. Others call for it to be removed from libraries and required reading lists in schools. It is one of the most-banned books in America.

As recently as 1995, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People called for the book to be removed from high school reading lists. Five years ago, a group of students in Cherry Hill, New Jersey protested being forced to read the book, and in 1998, a parent sued the Tempe, Arizona School District for requiring students to read the book.

Most objections to *Huck Finn* revolve around the use of the word "nigger" (used over 200 times in the book - mostly by Huck, but also by Jim and others.) People claim that forcing black students (especially) to read and hear the word used in English class legitimizes the slur. When supporters point out that the book is considered an American classic, parents ask why there are no required books which use the word "spic" or "kike" or other racist slurs.

Others suggest that the character of the runaway slave Jim is made to look, act, and sound stupid. When he first finds Huck on Jackson's Island, Jim says, " Doan' hurt me - don't! I haint ever done no harm to a ghos'. I alwuz liked dead people, en done all I could for `em. You go en git in de river ag'in, whah you b'longs, en doan' do nuffn to to Ole Jim . . . "

Supporters of the book point out that Huck is an illiterate Southern boy who would naturally use the "n-word" to refer to Jim and isn't trying to be mean using it. In fact, as he helps Jim escape, he comes to recognize the humanity of this runaway slave and stops thinking of Jim as property and starts thinking of him as a man and as a friend. At one point in the narrative, Jim calls Huck "trash" (for playing a dirty trick on him), and Huck actually apologizes to Jim ( a first for him).

There have been countless attempts to "clean-up" the language in the book - all dismal failures. CBS Television went so far as to produce a made-for-TV version of Huck Finn that included no black cast members, no mention of slavery, and even no character of Jim!

My students were uncomfortable at first confronting the word, but slowly managed to put it into historical context. And at first they just didn't get the attempts to ban the book, pointing out that blacks often use the "n-word" to refer to themselves in language and rap music today, not understanding how people could be offended by a word they use themselves.

But we watched a PBS video on the banning controversy where a concerned mother asks, "How can you ask kids to go home and read the word `nigger' 200-something times in the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and then expect kids to come back to school and not use the word?" We talked about slurs, too.

And so in the midst of studying Huck Finn as an American classic, as a book about traveling through the heartland of America, as a book about maturity and freedom and innocence and experience, we also looked at the awesome dynamite that words still retain.

Twain once remarked, "The difference between the almost-right word and the right word is . . . the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning."

Huck Finn was (and probably will remain) a lesson in the use of language, of epithets, of slurs and how they can change (or not) over time.

Hopefully, never again will my students repeat the schoolyard chant, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."

We studied and got a brief glimpse of the power of words.