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## Bowdlerizing Huck

by [Allen Mendenhall](#) | Posted June 08, 2011

Professor Alan Gribben, who teaches at Auburn University in Montgomery, has introduced a sanitized version of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Controversy has gathered around this latest incarnation of the novel because of its substitution of the word "slave" for the "n-word." Somehow lost in the controversy is the editor's decision to change "Injun" to "Indian." At any rate, Gribben's book has become a media sensation and has resurrected long-buried arguments over the legacy and import of one of American literature's greatest works.

So much has been made of the words "political correctness" that it is difficult to know just what meaning they retain. If they mean anything, surely they apply to Gribben's editing, which seeks to satisfy modern taste and decorum at the expense of accurate knowledge about the past. Of course the novel is problematic — American history is problematic — but erasing problems of the past will do little to aid our understanding of history and culture in the present and future. In light of the number of scholars working at the intersection of race and culture, America today hardly risks, as it once did, suffering from historical amnesia. Yet bowdlerizing texts could affect the way we remember racial history.

One thing that Twain probably wanted his novel to do was address the multivalence of racism by viewing it through the eyes of a young boy. Doing so would allow him to critique Southern race relations while avoiding offense. This unfortunate edition undercuts Twain's critique.

None can challenge the idea that the "n-word" is hurtful and strong. But editing it out of *Huck Finn*, however understandable and well-meaning the effort may be, simply removes the book from its social and historical context. It is an historical text — not just a delightful work of fiction. It follows that reading the actual text can give us insights into the past.

Twain's prose mimicked the vernacular of folks in the Mississippi valley. What other word than the n-word would someone in Huck's time and place have used to refer to black people? Apparently the editor thinks the answer to that question is "slave." But of course, this is nonsense, as even a cursory acquaintance with contemporary documents will show. Like many if not most of Twain's contemporaries, the characters in his novel use the n-word casually. Examining its use is more than an exploration of authorial intent. It is studying a way of life in a world in which some people are grappling to overcome the racism that others casually accept. Twain's book has that overcoming as its goal. Twain's use of the "n-word" is ironic. He isn't endorsing the word. He's criticizing it. The way the n-word is used in *Huck Finn* shows very clearly Twain himself never would have applauded that word in "real" life.

Of course the novel is problematic — American history is problematic.

If *Huck Finn* is a narrative seeking out racial understanding — and this is a plausible and common reading — then Gribben's editing undermines themes of racial and cultural understanding. Jim, a black slave and a principal character in the novel, is a courageous and complex figure. His place in Southern culture — both the fictional culture of the novel and the real one upon which the novel was based — is critically compromised by a whitewashing of the offensive diction that he is forced to confront.

Huck is also a complex character. The n-word may mean one thing to Huck at the beginning of the book, but it means something different to him at the end. At first, Huck never considers what the word might signify to Jim, but as Huck himself develops as a personality, and as his bond with Jim grows stronger, he begins to think, well, differently. Huck decides to “steal Jim out of slavery” despite his belief that he'll go to hell for doing so (“All right then, I'll go to hell,” he says). That grave decision seems less morally significant when Huck's culture becomes, with the sweep of an eraser, less racist than it actually was.

It will not do to pretend that distasteful epithets did not exist in history. Nor will it do to sugarcoat history or historical texts in order to validate one man's legacy, even if that man is a cultural and literary father figure (Faulkner called Twain the “father of American literature”). Twain hardly needs us to validate his legacy, especially since his sophistication is apparently far beyond that of today's editors, who seem to miss the irony and criticism with which he loads his words.

I suppose the editor has a point when he claims to want to avoid teaching children that the n-word is OK, because Twain used it. But this little touch up — substituting “slave” for the n-word — risks undoing the racial tension in the novel and in the culture that influenced Twain. The deepest understandings come from investigating tensions. Even Huck learns that, as he challenges racism in subtle and nuanced ways.

We are not products of culture, but we are, all of us, influenced by it. Culture does not excuse our actions or beliefs, but it does help to explain them. Readers of *Huck Finn* would benefit from understanding the culture of the novel and of the novel's author. How can we understand the present if we don't understand the events and attitudes that shaped the present? Rather than altering Twain's text, we should teach the novel, with all its fraught diction intact, to students who are mature enough to handle it.

The edited version of *Huck Finn* forces young students to skip over critical thinking about race relations in America. Yet the classroom is the very place where students are supposed to confront harsh realities and to learn from them. Isn't it the point of critical learning to hold social and cultural phenomena under a microscope, so as to understand them better? If students in schools or universities are not allowed to consider harsh truths about the past, even truths about offensive lexica, where will they learn about truths? Contemporary and popular film, television, and music are rarely good sources for learning about the past.

Changing the “n-word” to “slave” does not redeem Twain or *Huck Finn* — not that they need redeeming — but it does rob students of the opportunity to learn from history. Worse, it robs students of the opportunity to become, like Huck, more racially sensitive as they experience, with Huck, life on and around the Mississippi — as they read, in other words, about Huck's gradual coming to “terms.”

That's what this whole debate is about: coming to terms. The particular term at issue is the “n word.” The larger issue is American history. I'm not sure I would say that the bowdlerized novel sets us back, because I'm not convinced we're moving in the right direction anymore, but I would say that blotting out history never lends itself to social progress.

### **About this Author**

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