

# *Huckleberry Finn* in the Classroom

By Nat Hentoff

Not long after "*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" was published in 1884, Louisa M. Alcott lectured the author: "If Mr. Clemens cannot think of something better to tell our pure-minded lads and lasses, he had best stop writing for them."

Since then, attempts, often successful, have been made to censure Mr. Clemens and to remove his offensive book from school classrooms and libraries. "*The Adventures of Huck Finn*" has been banished as "immoral and sacrilegious" (Denver Public Library, 1902) and "degrading and destructive to black humanity" (New Trier High School, Winnetka, Ill., 1976).

In recent decades, the accusations at New Trier High School, pressed by black parents there, have been the most common charge against the book -- in large part because the word "nigger" appears at least 160 times.

The black man who did the counting, John Wallace -- a former administrative aide at the Mark Twain Intermediate School in Fairfax County, Va. -- eventually published an edition of the novel with all the n-words omitted.

When I last saw Mr. Wallace at a conference at the Mark Twain Memorial in Hartford, Conn., he thought it might be a boon to black humanity to do away with the original entirely.

## **No longer required reading**

Despite the many troubles that "Huck Finn" has experienced, I was surprised to see -- in Valerie Strauss' story in the March 4 Washington Post -- that such prestigious places of learning in Washington as the National Cathedral School and St. Albans no longer consider the book valuable enough to be on their required reading lists. Instead, the book will be "reintroduced" as part of elective courses taught in the 11th and 12th grades.

So much for Ernest Hemingway's insistence that "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called "*Huckleberry Finn*.'" There was also the comment of Ralph Ellison -- a writer hardly indifferent to black humanity -- that when he was coming up, "I could imagine myself as Huck Finn."

What objecting parents and fearful administrators overlook -- or ignore -- is the story. Huck Finn -- reared in seas of bigotry by whites who used "nigger" as the commonest of debasing words -- transcends all his previous learning when he finally finds a decent, caring adult, Jim.

For this black man, Huck is willing to, as he says, literally "go to hell," rather than return him to his owner. (Huck had been taught that such a betrayal of the property rights of the white race would doom him for eternity.)

## **Book put in context**

Like any book with depth, however, "Huck Finn" needs some context as he is introduced to young readers. Intelligent teachers do just that.

One of them, Rose Reissman, used to teach an eighth-grade class in Brooklyn, N.Y. It had many black students. As the class read the book, the youngsters talked about it freely with her and among themselves, and they also talked about Mr. Clemens -- where he came from and what he thought about racism.

I visited that class one morning after I had debated John Wallace on the "Today Show." The program had been shown to Rose Reissman's students. Waiting for me outside the building were four eighth-graders, all of them black, who were so eager to speak that they could hardly contain themselves.

"What makes us so mad," they said, almost in chorus, "is that there are people out there" -- they pointed in the general direction of Ohio -- "who think that black kids are so dumb that they can't tell the difference between a racist book and a book that's against racism. Like 'Huckleberry Finn.'"

I thought of those youngsters when I saw what Bill Matory -- a 17-year-old senior at St. Albans -- said in The Washington Post story about that school having taken "Huck Finn" off the required reading list.

"It's like taking a big part of America's past away from us," Matory declared. "As an African-American male, you must understand why the book was written, and how it was written. And we are smart enough to understand that."

John Wallace came back to mind when I saw a story out of Omaha about a man named George Wallace suing Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia and its owner, the Tribune Company of Chicago, because of the emotional distress he suffered on finding the word "nigger" a number of times in that CD-ROM encyclopedia.

Among other references were: Joseph Conrad's "The Nigger of the *Marcissus*," Dick Gregory's "Up From Nigger," and Dr. Martin Luther King's recollection of having been called "nigger" by a white woman who struck him when he was 11 years old. The aggrieved man in Omaha is suing for \$40 million in damages.

I once asked a black eighth-grader, who had just finished reading "*Huckleberry Finn*," whether she thought it ought to be required. "Well," she said, "I learned that what "nigger" means depends on how it's used in the conversation."

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