

IN PRAISE OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN

By LANCE MORROW

Instead of banning Twain's novel, we should teach youngsters how to appreciate it

READING THESE LISTS OF THE PROSCRIBED IS a little like walking into a police station and seeing an unexpected lineup of suspects under glaring lights: The authors, who had seemed to be familiar, even admirable citizens, now look shifty and disheveled, their respectability torn aside to disclose their secret lives—corrupters of the young.

Isn't that John Steinbeck, guiltily clutching a copy of *Of Mice and Men*? J.D. Salinger—who would have thought it?—cringing there with *The Catcher in the Rye*? Roald Dahl, the filthy beast, holding *The Witches*? Shifty-eyed Maya Angelou trying to conceal *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*?

These authors and books are at the top of the list of those most frequently challenged or removed from course lists and shelves, or otherwise anathematized in public schools and libraries across America. When I see the lists I am amazed and half-amused. *Of Mice and Men*? Really!? (Ah: The notorious glove.)

When I find Mark Twain in the lineup (and he is always there, around No. 5 in the rank of suspects), holding a copy of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, I am appalled and saddened. To sweep Salinger or Angelou from the shelves is bush-league intellectual folly, mere vigilante provincialism. But it is an act of real moral stupidity, and a desecration, to try to deprive the young of the voice of Huck Finn.

Most of the challenges to the books in the lineup come from religious conservatives. It is easy to sympathize with them, up to a point. The first rule of life is to protect the young—to do so even fanatically. In a culture saturated with sex, violence, drugs and other secular recreations, all pouring out of televisions or otherwise vividly displayed in technology that goes dazzling up toward virtual reality, it seems quaint for parents to get exercised about Holden Caulfield's bad example. I would be thrilled to learn that a kid was reading books at all, not stir-frying his neurons in MTV. Still, if schools and libraries stand *in loco parentis*, one understands beleaguered parents trying to draw some lines inside the small remaining sanctuaries.

The objections to *Huck Finn* arise mostly from African-American parents, who are also trying to draw some lines. With *Huck*, the argument focuses not upon sex or profanity but rather upon race, and the deepest, most painful American memory, slavery. The

institution of slavery ended, of course, during the Civil War. The institution of racism still flourishes. And it is in the context of enduring racism that black parents naturally enough may wish to protect their children from *Huck Finn*.

I hope, however, that it is possible to honor the wishes of some black parents while at the same time keeping *Huck* on shelves and reading lists. To do so, it may be necessary to stipulate that children of 12 or so are a little too young to absorb the book's complexities. Better to wait until they are 14 or 15.

If *Huck Finn* were merely a 19th-century minstrel show—the n-word slurring around in an atmosphere of casual hatred above a subtext of white supremacy—then no one could object to African-American parents removing the book as a precaution to keep gratuitous germs away from their children. Taking books out of the hands of children, after all, does not raise the same absolute censorship issues posed when an adult audience is involved.

But American life, hardly a sanitary environment, harbors millions of germs that may be dangerous to the young. Black children should be judged quite capable, I think, of making certain moral and artistic distinctions. To focus upon *Huck Finn* as some kind of racist tract, and to suppress the book with all its countervailing glories, seems to me, in the end, both unimaginative and wrong.

The Merchant of Venice, an old staple of sophomore high school English, presents an analogous moral dilemma. Should it not be taught because Shylock is such an evilly cartoonish Jew? Surely Native Americans are entitled to take all the works of James Fenimore Cooper to the dumpster? To carry dilemma mongering further, I can see a clear feminist argument against teaching any of the novels of Ernest Hemingway, on the perfectly accurate grounds that his women are offensively two-dimensional. Would a Spanish-speaking constituency be justified in removing *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, with all of its preposterous what-passes-with-you-Little-Rabbit diction?

In any case, permit me to argue that *Huck Finn*—intelligently taught, and understood—belongs on an infinitely higher artistic and moral plane. A teacher should be able to show the young of any race the book's graces and virtues.

In the story of Huck and Jim and the river, Twain confronts the American problems. *Huck Finn* is one of the earliest and deepest texts

on race and slavery, on violence, on child abuse, alcoholism, class distinctions in America, hatred, hypocrisy, fraud, gaudily manifold stupidity, backwoods brainlessness, and lying in all its forms—creative, vicious and otherwise. *Huck Finn* is about American civilization and about what it means to be civilized in a vast, experimental, provisional and morally unsettled territory. Huck, who spells it “sivilized,” is one of the most truly civilized characters in American letters. For a work often paired with *Tom Sawyer* as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of idealized American boyhood, *Huck Finn* carries an almost magic cargo of deeper grownup meanings. How racially condescending to assume that such meanings of American civilization—even as they are relayed by Huck through his white genius/ventriloquist, Mark Twain—cannot concern blacks. A number of black writers in the past, uncontaminated by the ideologies of correctness, have agreed.

Huck Finn is also, as Hemingway understood, the source from which modern American literature has flowed. Twain turned the American vernacular into literature, and an enormous number of later American writers, black and white, have been in his debt. Huck’s voice echoes in Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison and Alice Walker as well as in William Faulkner. In an interview with Shelley Fisher Fishkin, professor of American studies at the University of Texas, Ellison said that Twain’s use of comedy and vernacular “allow us to deal with the unspeakable,” meaning “the moral situation of the United States and the contrast between our ideals and our activities.”

Is *Huck Finn* about kids’ adventures on the Mississippi? In the same sense that *Moby-Dick* is about commercial fishing. Everyone should understand what is lost in shelving *Huck Finn*. On one level, it operates as a children’s book, but if it were merely a children’s book, then we would not miss it when we put it aside. No: Twain (to make the sort of grand claim that he would have had fun with) created in *Huck* an origin myth of the nation’s moral struggles.

Huck Finn is also one of the funniest books to be written in America. Sometimes the humor is gentle enough, and spoofy at the *Tom Sawyer* level of prankery. Much of the wit is deliciously literate, as in the duke’s magnificent compression of the Shakespeare soliloquy:

*To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin
That makes calamity of so long life;
For who would fardels bear, till Birnam Wood do come to Dunsinane,
But that the fear of something after death
Murders the innocent sleep,
Great nature’s second course,
And makes us rather sling the arrows of outrageous fortune
Than fly to others that we know not of.*

But more often the humor has a philosophical savagery about it—as in this exchange toward the end of the book, when Huck shows up at Aunt Sally’s, impersonating Tom and lying about a mythical steamboat trip downriver:

Huck: “We blowed out a cylinder head.”

Aunt Sally: “Good gracious! anybody hurt?”

Huck: “No’m. Killed a nigger.”

Aunt Sally: “Well, it’s lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt.”

Twain comes down to the moral core of *Huck Finn* in a chapter called “You Can’t Play a Lie,” wherein Huck wrestles with his conscience about whether to turn Jim in as a runaway slave. Huck’s most attractive quality—one worth calling to the attention of school-children—is that for an inveterate and accomplished liar, he has a powerful need to find the truth, and to act on it.

Huck’s two-page struggle over whether to betray Jim is a masterpiece of metaphysically comic inversion, a sardonic, hilarious examination of conscience. Huck accuses himself of low-down, ornery wickedness “in stealing a poor old woman’s nigger.” The law—righteousness, the society’s definition of good—says Huck is doing an awful thing in harboring Jim. Huck tries to pray, but “my heart warn’t right.” At last, Huck decides he cannot turn in his friend Jim. In one of the great moments of American literature, a cousin to Melville’s “No!

In thunder!”, Huck says, “All right, then, I’ll go to hell.” He tears up the note to Miss Watson in which he meant to betray his friend. He has done the loneliest, bravest work there is—making a life-or-death decision against the law and custom of his own tribe.

For all its deep indignation, *Huck Finn* is the tenderest and most decent of stories. When the king and the duke are finally caught, tarred and feathered, and run out of town, Huck, who has every reason to cheer the spectacle, instead reacts this way: “Well, it made me sick to see it; and I was sorry for them poor pitiful rascals, it seemed like I couldn’t ever feel any hardness against them any more in the world. It was a dreadful

thing to see. Human beings *can* be awful cruel to one another.”

The book is an inventory of essential values: kindness, courage, loyalty to friends, abhorrence of cruelty, independence of conscience, the need to think through moral choices, and, of course, the inexhaustible power of creative lying—which is to say (putting a more edifying light on it) the inexhaustible power of imagination.

Let me propose a way of teaching *Huck*.

The key to appreciating *Huck Finn*’s moral dimensions (and, for a black pupil, the key to tolerating the disturbing universe of white supremacy in which the story is told) is to understand that here, nothing is what it seems. At the beginning of *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain placed his famous “Notice”:

“Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.”

Meaning: Watch out for all three of those items, for they will surely turn up—motive and moral unfolding just as plot unfolds. The “Notice” was the trickster declaring himself. Twain was saying one thing and meaning the opposite, lying and yarning his way along, spinning the moral landscape into a sort of *trompe l’oeil* tapestry wherein lies and the real thing play hide-and-seek with one another.

Twain’s pseudo-stern, eyebrow-wagging opener (*I’m just here to tell some colorful provincial stories, so don’t you dare go deep and moralistic on me*) goes to the secret of his game: the narrative sleight of hand, with the reversal that sets up one expectation in the reader’s mind and then (*poof!*) replaces it with another. A theater of dancing contraries.



ROSS MACDONALD

Huck Finn savages racism as thoroughly as any document in American history

The minstrelsy is the surface stuff, just as the boys' adventure story is the shallowest dimension of the book. The first lesson to teach is that, in some immense metaphysics of democracy's beatitudes, virtues, everything and everyone swaps places and meanings: The first shall be last; the civilized shall be uncivilized; the king and the duke shall be white trash (these two white con men are, in fact, the Amos 'n' Andy of the plot—another racial switcheroo); the slave shall be free, betimes, on the river, and the free whites shall be enchained in various ways (by hereditary blood feud, by their own casually institutionalized hate, by alcoholism, by sheer bucolic idiocy); the child shall be wise and the grownup irresponsible; the boy shall be a philosopher and the father, Pap, a monster of the American id; the sub-adolescents' lark shall be profound in its consequence (Jim's life is at stake), and the allegedly profound (the Shakespeare soliloquy, for example) shall be a travesty.

In other words, *Huckleberry Finn* is, among other things, a complex, serious book. And it should be taught as such—to children old enough to think and read with imagination. The supposedly racially insensitive tale, with its repeated use of the word "nigger," is the most devastating portrait of American white trash and white-trash racism that has ever been written. *Huck Finn* savages racism as thoroughly as any document in American history.

But all of this is a lot for students to take in. I would suggest that in order to stabilize *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in students' minds, and to neutralize the surface bursts of apparent minstrelsy and race epithets, it should be taught

with two accompanying texts that will

serve, so to speak, as moral outriggers: (1) *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and (2) *Was Huck Black?: Mark Twain and African-American Voices*, by Shelley Fisher Fishkin.

Twain and Douglass were friends. I would use Douglass's autobiography, a noble document by a noble man, as a kind of stringent reality enforcer. The narrative is, after all, a loftily pitiless record of what it was like to be a slave on Maryland's Eastern Shore in the first half of the 19th century. *Huck Finn* is slavery and the rest of the rural America of that time seen fictionally through the eyes of a kind of wild child. Frederick Douglass's narrative is an adult former slave's recollection of what it was like to be a slave child in that world.

At one point an eerie intersection occurs between Twain's novel and the ex-slave's story. Douglass records that on the plantation where he lived, property of a Colonel Lloyd, there was an overseer named Austin Gore. One day, Gore was whipping a slave named Demby, who "to get rid of the scourging, . . . ran and plunged himself into the creek, and stood there at the depth of his shoulders, refusing to come out. Mr. Gore told him that he would give him three calls, and that, if he did not come out at the third call, he would shoot him." Gore gave the three calls, then "raised his musket to his face, taking deadly aim at his standing victim, and in an instant, poor Demby was no more. His mangled body sank out of sight, and blood and brains marked the water where he had stood."

This incident is strangely similar to the Colonel Sherburn story in *Finn*: In the street of a river town, a drunk named Boggs starts railing and hurling boozy abuse against a local merchant named

Colonel Sherburn. Sherburn finally comes out of his store and warns Boggs that he has until one o'clock to shut up. One o'clock comes. Boggs rants on. Sherburn coolly shoots him dead in the street and walks away.

In both stories, there is a note of absolute authenticity, a kind of savage Americana that is perfectly recognizable today.

Frederick Douglass's eyesight is clear and merciless on the subject of slavery. His story of painstakingly and surreptitiously learning how to read and write—activities that were forbidden to slaves—casts a complicated light on efforts in the late 20th century to keep other children from reading a book, *Huck Finn*, on grounds that it might offend them. Any kind of censorship, of course, implies a condescension toward the audience being "protected," but the ironies here are especially poignant.

The second book, Fishkin's *Was Huck Black?*, explores a fascinating thesis. The author's tabloid-headline title does not mean that

Fishkin thinks Huck had African blood but rather that Huck's speech, the splendid, never-before-heard American voice that was Twain's great contribution to the stream of American letters, was based, in very large part, upon the vernacular and speech rhythms of blacks. *Le style, c'est l'homme*. Dr. Fishkin argues that *l'homme* in this case, meaning Mark Twain/Huck Finn, owed a huge debt, in vocabulary, syntax, verbal strategy and style, to the blacks who were young Samuel Clemens's preferred playmates in Hannibal, Missouri, and to other blacks whom Mark Twain knew and listened to

attentively in later life.

The result, argues Fishkin, is that Huck,

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in his speech and his point of view, was black to a significant degree. And if that is true—Fishkin makes a scholarly and fascinatingly plausible case—then the most original voice in American literature, the source from which so much else has flowed, is black, or half-black, or anyway immensely tinted by precisely the African consciousness so long excluded from the official cultural life of the country.

All of that is worth teaching to schoolchildren, once they are old enough to absorb it. Fishkin's thesis is not another dreary exercise in political correctness. When you have read her book, you say, Of course. The black component of *Huck*—and of the immense literature that derives from it—becomes as self-evident as the influence of African voices in American music.

After *Huckleberry Finn* was published in 1885, the Public Library in Concord, Massachusetts, banned the book. As the *Boston Transcript* reported: "One member of the committee says that, while he does not wish to call it immoral, he thinks it contains but little humor, and that of a very coarse type. He regards it as the veriest trash. The librarian and the other members of the committee entertain similar views, characterizing it as rough, coarse and inelegant."

The ambient light in Concord at the time was the Transcendental Emersonian moonbeam. The prevailing light in American education at the moment, unfortunately, is that pitiless, accusatory glare—flat and harsh as a zealot's mind—that pours down upon the lineup of suspect authors at the police station. That light is blinding. It is time to turn it off, at least where *Huck Finn* is concerned, in order to appreciate the novel's amazing play of intelligence and morality and shadow. ■

