

'Huck Finn' a masterpiece -- or an insult

Renton High revisits teaching of book after objections raised

By GREGORY ROBERTS, SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

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RENTON -- At first glance, the fight over "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" at Renton High School fits a conventional pattern.

An outraged parent objects to her child reading a book for class that offends the family's religious, moral or political sensibilities.

School district officials consider the protest, but defend the book's educational merit. The book stays, and champions of freedom of inquiry and expression applaud the decision.

Except the role of unreasoning zealot doesn't quite suit Beatrice Clark or her 16-year-old granddaughter, Calista Phair.

They've led the assault in Renton against Mark Twain's novel, marshaling vigorous arguments against a work that is widely regarded as a masterpiece -- yet that also ranks with the books most consistently challenged in the nation's classrooms, according to the American Library Association.

Although the Renton School District hasn't dropped the book, it has directed teachers to hold off on assigning it until a special committee draws up guidelines for how to present it to students.

'It's not just a word'

"Huckleberry Finn," first published in 1885, chronicles the journey of a rough-hewn, 13-year-old white boy and a runaway slave down the Mississippi River on a raft through the antebellum South. What's wrong with the book, Clark, Phair and numerous other critics have said, is its use of the notorious "n" word -- not once, not a few times, but more than 200 times.

"It's not just a word," said Clark, the guardian for her granddaughter. Both are African American.

"It carries with it the blood of our ancestors. They were called this word while they were lynched; they were called this word while they were hung from the big magnolia tree.

"That word, in the history of America, has always been a degrading word toward African Americans. When they were brought to America, they were never thought of as human beings in the first place, and this word was something to call a thing that wasn't human.

"So that's what they bring into the classroom to talk about. I just think it's utterly unconscionable that a school would think it's acceptable."

Clark, who was president of the Parent-Teacher-Student Association at Renton High last year, took up the battle against "Huckleberry Finn" after Phair reported in April that her 11th-grade language arts teacher had assigned the book.

"I was humiliated and horrified that this book was being taught, when it has the word 'nigger' 215 times," Phair said.

Before the language-arts students turned to Chapter 1 of "Huckleberry Finn," their teacher, Hilari Anderson, led the class in two weeks of discussion about the controversy surrounding the book and its terminology. The class viewed videotapes addressing the issue, researched the definition of the n-word and hashed out ground rules for its inclusion in the classroom.

Clark sat in on one of those classes.

"I just couldn't believe what I was hearing," she said. "That in the year 2003, the teacher was saying, 'Today, we're going to discuss the use of the word 'nigger.' "

"Huckleberry Finn" is listed among the books approved by the Renton School District for assignment in the 11th-grade language arts class, and Anderson has opted to teach it in each of her six years at Renton High. She speaks of her "passion" for Twain's novel.

"In terms of contemporary issues, I think it opens the door to a conversation that we just don't have, in terms of who are we and where do we come from and what does our language mean and why kids in the hallway use the word so frequently," she said.

"We could ignore the book, but then we're ignoring history. We're ignoring that that language exists. I don't think, in the long run, that's helpful to our kids."

Anderson, who is white, said Twain attacks the racism of 19th-century America in his book. Jim, the slave, is a man of dignity, while most of the white characters are ne'er-do-wells, rascallions or criminals. Huck, the product of a society in which even the churches condone slavery, consciously risks eternal damnation to cast his lot with Jim.

Two students object

Black students account for just over a third of the enrollment at Renton High, making up the single largest ethnic group at the school; students of Asian and Pacific Islander ancestry represent 30 percent of the student population, white students 25 percent and Hispanic students 9 percent.

At the end of each unit on "Huckleberry Finn," Anderson asks her students to write an essay arguing for or against the banning of the book from schools. In six years, she said, not one student has written an essay calling for expelling the book from the curriculum.

Phair didn't get that far. She sat in amazement through the preliminary discussions.

"I found it pretty shocking that where the book was supposed to be educational, they were trying to sugarcoat it and say, 'Now that we've done all this, it's OK to read it,' " she said.

"How do you teach a word that's degrading and denigrating to a race with sensitivity?"

Clark said, "The word 'nigger' doesn't change. We don't want to educate our kids in niggerology."

Surely, she said, the lessons taught by "Huckleberry Finn" can be learned from other, less inflammatory sources.

"They're probably are a lot of books that might have the n-word, but I don't think you need to get a book that's saturated with it," she said.

Phair asked to be excused from reading "Huckleberry Finn," and so did a classmate who has since moved out of state (Anderson said they are the only two of her students who have ever sought to avoid the book). Phair was assigned "The Awakening" by Kate Chopin instead, and she attended study hall during the language-arts classes that discussed Twain's novel.

But Clark wasn't satisfied with that. She wants the book ruled ineligible altogether for assignment to any of the 12,600 students in the district, although she does not object if it remains in school libraries.

Phair, too, pressed the fight. She handed out fliers attacking the book in school hallways and at local events. Under the name Students and Parents Against Racial Slurs, she and Clark have sought to round up support.

The squabble became something of a community cause celebre. Phair was interviewed on radio and TV. Ironically, she said, she was instructed by the interviewers not to utter the n-word on the air. Local newspapers weighed in on the dispute; one paper -- the semi-monthly Renton Reporter -- editorialized in favor of the teaching of the book, but specifically declined to print the word at the center of the dispute.

Committee keeps book on list

Clark carried her protest through the bureaucratic channels of the Renton School District. She filed a formal written request last spring for reconsideration of "Huckleberry Finn" as an approved text. She met with Anderson and the Renton High principal, then with central office administrators. Her plea was considered by two curriculum committees.

Ultimately, the committees recommended retaining the book on the list for 11th-grade language arts, and the School Board approved that list this summer. Coincidentally, "Huckleberry Finn" has been adopted as required reading for advanced-placement high school English classes in Renton as well. Administrators have argued that questions about the book appear on AP tests, and it would be unfair to Renton students to deny them access to the text.

But there is a caveat: The book has been suspended from classroom use until a panel of teachers, outside advisers and others specifies procedures for how to handle it.

A spokeswoman for the Seattle School District, the state's largest, said administrators were not aware of any challenges to "Huckleberry Finn," which is taught in some schools and also included on the district's recommended summer reading list for grades 10-12.

The spokeswoman said an informal survey of English teachers suggests they, like Anderson, do not present the novel in isolation. At Garfield High, for example, students in 11th-grade American literature and AP classes begin by discussing the language in the book and the issues around race that are raised by Twain's writing, the spokeswoman said.

Renton administrators said the committee developing guidelines for their schools hopes to complete its work before the time when "Huckleberry Finn" normally would be taught, in the second half of the school year.

Anderson plans to include "Huckleberry Finn" in her junior-year language arts course again this spring. She said she'll be happy to go along with whatever the committee recommends.

"It's a really important book to teach," she said. "It could go away from Renton, but I don't think it's going to go away from the world."