

# U.Va. Professor Tackles Racial Issues in New Edition of 'Huck Finn'

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What's new about Mark Twain's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn"?

Stephen Railton, an English professor in the University of Virginia's **College of Arts & Sciences**, has just published a new edition of the 1885 novel, which he calls "one of the most frequently taught and banned."

"Even as we're sitting here, there's a very good chance that someplace, some group is trying to ban 'Huck Finn' from the classroom, and some other group is trying to get it reinstated into a school system that has already banned it," said Railton, whose book was just released by Broadview Press.

From its publication, it was sometimes criticized for its coarse characters and language, but it found favor with many reviewers. Twain's treatment of race didn't become the subject of the novel's controversy until the late 20th century, when critics began taking another look at it.

Railton said that in the 1980s, African-American critic John Wallace called "Huck Finn," "the most grotesque racist trash ever written." Meanwhile, Twain scholars, led mainly by Stanford University professor Shelley Fisher Fishkin, fiercely defend the novel. Fishkin called it "the greatest anti-racist novel by an American writer."

Wallace and his followers say the people who want to teach it are insensitive to the feelings of black students and their parents; Fishkin and the Twainians, as the scholars are called, say the people who want to ban the book aren't reading it correctly, Railton explained.

"In my own mind, both sides are right up to a point," he said. "I think 'Huck' is both racist and anti-racist at different places."

Railton said he hesitated when Broadview Press asked him about two years ago if he would produce a new edition.

"There have already been a lot of editions of 'Huck Finn,' including a very fine one by the University of California Press, so I wasn't sure it made sense to do another one," said Railton, who created the website, "**Mark Twain and His Times**," about 15 years ago..

"I asked them if I could focus this edition on the specific issue that has been so inseparable from the novel in its public life for the last 25 or 30 years – the issue about whether it's racist or not.

"The great story that it tells – Huck and Jim going down the river on the raft – if you simply look at the surface of the novel, is the story about whether this white boy can help this black man be free from slavery. But underneath that, the story that Twain is much more interested in telling is whether this black man can help this white boy be free – not from the institution of slavery, but from the way that racial prejudice and social conventions have enslaved his mind," he said.

Part of the problem is Huck's use of the "n" word some 220 times. "That makes us wince," Railton said. And the way that African-Americans are represented is a problem, regardless of the words used. For example, the ending of "Huck Finn" brings in Tom Sawyer, and the two boys stage what is called "the evasion," helping Jim escape when he is already free, which treats the whole issue of freeing the black man as a kind of burlesque joke. Railton said Twain wrote it that way because he knew it would make his white readers comfortable.

Coincidentally, another edition just came out last month that fanned the flames of the debate once again. Twain scholar Alan Gribben of Auburn University and NewSouth Books released a version of "Huck Finn," combined with Twain's "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer," that replaces the epithet with "slave" and "Injun Joe" with "Indian Joe."

Railton's edition does not change the author's words.

"I think Twain set out to explore racism. That's why you can't change the language of the novel," he said.

Changing certain derogatory words changes the context of the story, Railton said. By the time Twain finished the novel in 1885, slavery had been abolished, but black people were still being demeaned with that epithet, and Jim Crow laws were coming into existence.

"What to do with freed slaves, what role former slaves were going to play in American society – that was a major question in 1885," he said.

Huck Finn, a poor white boy growing up in the antebellum, slave-holding South, believes the corollary on which slavery depended, Railton said: "That African-Americans are somehow less than human, which is what that 'n' word means to him. He uses that word very thoughtlessly to refer to black people, but Twain is using that word very carefully to reveal how before you can enslave somebody, you have to deny their humanity, and so that particular word has an enormous amount of work to do to keep blacks from being seen as human."

Although the novel has been called a satire, Railton said Twain wanted it to be a successful book "with that same white American audience whose racism he was undertaking to explore." He said most readers and reviewers did not address the issues about race in the novel when it was published.

As publisher as well as author, Twain selected the artist E.W. Kemble to illustrate the book. Kemble's drawings of Jim come straight out of the minstrel show tradition and received praise from readers. "Although the novel, I think, at times makes Jim very powerfully human and impressive, and then at other times makes him a kind of figure of burlesque fun, the illustrations keep Jim in that demeaning role all the way through," he said.

Railton's edition includes reviews of the book and other popular material written at the time to explain the social and cultural context – from a tract on equity for freed black people to scripts of minstrel shows. It also includes other texts written by Twain, including the 1874 essay, "A True Story Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It," of how slavery had cruelly split African-American families.

"My edition's goal," Railton said, "is to give both sides fresh ways to hear what the other side is saying, and to put 21st-century readers in a position to explore how much the novel can teach us about both the best and the most benighted aspects of our cultural legacy."