**Reaction to Huckleberry Finn**

(from KQED)

Ernest Hemingway declared that "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn.*" T. S. Eliot called it a "masterpiece." Now an accepted part of the American literary canon, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is required reading in over 70 percent of American high schools and is among the most taught works of American literature.

Yet *Huck Finn* has been in trouble almost continuously since the day it was first published in America in 1885. The Concord Public Library in Massachusetts immediately banned it as "the veriest trash, suitable only for the slums." A newspaper account described the library's objections to the novel:

It deals with a series of adventures of a very low grade of morality; it is couched in the language of a rough dialect, and all through its pages there is a systemic use of bad grammar and an employment of rough, coarse, inelegant expressions. It is also very irreverent. . . The whole book is of a class that is more profitable for the slums than it is for respectable people.  
-St. Louis Globe-Democrat, March 17, 1885

The Brooklyn Public Library followed suit in 1905, removing it from the children's room because Huck was a liar who "not only itched, but scratched," was dirty, used terrible grammar, and "said 'sweat' when he should have said 'perspiration.'" By 1907 libraries in Denver, Omaha, and Worcester (Massachusetts) had removed the book because Huck and Tom were "bad" role models. During the 1930s many libraries purchased expurgated or "junior" versions of the novel, which omitted sections and simplified the language.

Over the years the novel has been declared "unfit for children" on a number of counts, but the indictment that has proven most persistent began in 1957, when the NAACP charged that *Huck Finn* contained "racial slurs" and "belittling racial designations." Since then, the book has been called "racist" for both the pervasive use of the word "nigger" and a portrayal of blacks that some people consider stereotypical and demeaning. It has been removed from reading lists in schools ranging from Texas to Pennsylvania (including, ironically, the Mark Twain Intermediate School in Fairfax, Virginia). Public libraries also continue to deal with requests that the book be removed, although the focus of the controversy has shifted to the classroom.

Huck Finn has historically been one of the most banned/challenged books in America, topping the list during the 1990’s.

One of the most outspoken opponents of *Huck Finn* in the 1980s was John Wallace, then a school administrator, who went so far as to rewrite the novel without the word "nigger." He spoke for many of the book's critics when he wrote, in a 1982 Washington Post editorial,

"The reading aloud of *Huck Finn* in our classrooms is humiliating and insulting to black students. It contributes to their feelings of low self-esteem and to the white student's disrespect for black people. . . For the past forty years, black families have trekked to schools in numerous districts throughout the country to say, 'This book is not good for our children' only to be turned away by insensitive and often unwittingly racist teachers and administrators who respond, 'This book is a classic.'"

Margo Allen, in an article titled "*Huck Finn*: Two Generations of Pain" (*Interracial Books for Children Bulletin*, 15, 1984), described her negative experiences with the book: "I need not tell you that I hated the book! Yet, while we read it, I pretended that it didn't bother me. I hid, from my teacher and my classmates, the tension, discomfort and hurt I would feel every time I heard that word or watched the class laugh at Jim. . . "

Champions of the novel reply that it is a satire, a scathing attack on the hypocrisy and prejudice of a society that pretends to honor virtue while condoning slavery. Although state NAACP organizations have supported various protests against the book, the NAACP national headquarters' current position paper states:

You don't ban Mark Twain-you explain Mark Twain! To study an idea is not necessarily to endorse the idea. Mark Twain's satirical novel, *Huckleberry Finn,* accurately portrays a time in history-the nineteenth century-and one of its evils, slavery. Not only is it not racist, says scholar Shelley Fisher Fishkin, it is "the greatest anti-racist novel by an American writer." Through the story of a friendship between a white boy and a runaway slave who search for freedom together on a raft down the Mississippi River, Twain explores friendship, loyalty, morality, freedom, race, and America itself. With a "sound heart" triumphing over a "deformed conscience," Huck decides he'll "go to hell" rather than give his friend Jim up to slavery. As writer David Bradley says, "*Huckleberry Finn* should be taught because it is a seminal and central text in White American Literature. *Huckleberry Finn* should be taught because it is a seminal and central text in Black American Literature. *Huckleberry Finn* must be taught because it is a specific point of intersection between these two American Literatures."

**As you read *Huckleberry Finn,* consider whether you believe the novel should continue to be taught in American high schools.**