

Unfit for Children: Censorship and Race

Claudia Durst Johnson

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has the longest, most persistent, and most varied history of censorship of any book in America. It would be difficult to find another work banned by numerous groups in the year of its publication and still being challenged consistently 110 years later! In a study of banned books, Nicholas J. Karolides and Lee Burrell found that it ranks ninth among the thirty most frequently censored books in America (*Celebrating Censored Books* [Racine: Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English, 1985], p. 6). Herbert N. Foerstel's research showed that in the 1990s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was the fourth most frequently banned book in the nation (*Banned in the U.S.A.* [West- port, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994], p. 152).

People have persistently objected to the novel over the years for two major reasons: first, because they feel that it is unfit for children, even though its narrator and main character is a young boy; and second, because they find its language to be unsuitable or offensive. While these two objections have a long history, many of the other reasons for condemning the novel have changed over the years.

Although some reviewers thought well of Twain's novel when it first appeared in 1884, more of them condemned it resoundingly as immoral and unfit for children. On January 20, 1885, *Century* labeled it as coarse and in bad taste (p. 2), and on February 26 of the same year it published a sarcastic review, warning away children and morally upright people from several scenes in the book (119). The action that caused the biggest row, however, was the banning of the book in March by the Concord, Massachusetts, Library committee, which was quoted as saying that *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was "rough, coarse and inelegant". The committee went on to describe the novel as "trash and suitable only for the slums" (quoted in *Chicago Tribune*, March 23, 1885, p. 5). Several newspapers applauded the action of the Concord Library. One of these was the Springfield (Massachusetts) *Republican*, which referred to the low moral level of the book (quoted in *The critic*, March 28, 1885, p. 155). The Boston newspapers were especially unhappy with the book and with Mark Twain's influence on American humorists. On April 2, 1885, the *Boston daily Advertiser* wrote of Twain and his imitators: "Nothing has been sacred with them, and over subjects dignified by age, tragedy and romance they have cast the slimy trail of vulgar humorist" (4).

During Twain's lifetime the novel was banned from the public libraries of Brooklyn, Denver, and Omaha. In 1905 the Brooklyn Public Library took the book out of its children's library on the grounds that Huck was a liar, was dirty and scratched himself, used terrible grammar, and said "sweat" instead of "perspiration". By 1907, when E. L. Pearson of the Library of the Military Information Division in Washington, D.C., wrote an article in defense of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, children's librarians throughout the country were keeping the book off the shelves because they considered the dirtiness, ungrammatical English, vulgarity, mischievousness, and irreverence of Twain's characters to be a terrible influence on little boys. In fact, Pearson claimed that colleges and library schools taught prospective elementary teachers and librarians to get the novel off their shelves ("The Children's Librarian versus Huckleberry Finn", *Library Journal* 32 (July 1907): 312-314). While these unofficial efforts to discourage children from reading *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* seemed to have continued quietly over the years, in many public schools the novel became part of the standard curriculum. But in the 1950s the effort to banish *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from required classroom reading lists came publicly to the fore again, now chiefly on the grounds that its depiction of black characters and the use of the word "nigger" were demeaning to African-American students. These objections continued to be raised throughout the rest of the twentieth century.

Before examining the arguments presented by educators and scholars on the matter of whether or how *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* should be taught in public schools, students should explore the questions that follow. Most of these questions were designed for classroom discussion,

but students who would like to express themselves on these issues in a more private and, perhaps, thoughtful forum, should be encouraged to respond on paper if they wish.