

Here's a worthy goal for novelists everywhere: Write a book that's challenging enough and important enough and, above all, *true enough* to be banned by more than one generation. And for more than one reason.

Mark Twain managed it famously with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The ink had barely dried on *Huck* before libraries and school boards began to close their doors to it. Not because it used the n-word—that ugly coinage was common currency in those days, even if not always among the highbrows who protested Twain's work—but because of Huck's unsophisticated speech and poor qualifications as a role model. The boy used the ordinary language of a frontier childhood, and he spoke without regard for proper grammar. He prized the friendship of a black slave, and he repeatedly concealed him from the adult authorities. Today, of course, we recognize these two elements as chief among the qualities that earned *Huck* its central place in American literature. Twain eschewed his own complex and educated authorial voice, and dared to tell this deeply serious story in the lowest vernacular—and in the voice of a child, at that. No other author, in this nation just then finding its literary feet, had seriously pursued such a project, and no one else could have succeeded half so well. Further, and at even greater risk—for *ideas always trump technique in the risk department*—Twain dared to give us a subversively humane portrait of the runaway slave, Jim.

So it was Twain's daring invention, both in form and in content, that confounded readers of his own time. (One of

our first great media creatures, by the way, Twain understood the value to be mined from protests against his work. Controversy sells books. So he was quick to write needling and very public letters to those who dared rail against Huck's lowbrow language and independent opinions, once advising the Children's Department of the Brooklyn Public Library to consult the *Bible* for instances of real misbehavior in print, and asking that Tom and Huck be removed from the "questionable companionship" of "Solomon, David, & the rest of the sacred brotherhood.")

For most novelists, to have drawn fire based on innovation alone would have been achievement enough. But in Twain's case it went further; as his work endured, our understanding of it altered. Aspects of *Huck* that were unremarkable on publication became burrs under modern saddles. Specifically, Huck's use of n—. It's an ugly term, offensive to contemporary ears, and as the Civil Rights movement took hold, Twain's use of it was criticized. Utterly out of context, of course—as if he might have anticipated our distaste and cut the word in advance so as to spare our sensibilities; or, nuttier still, as if he might have done mankind a favor by forbidding Huck to speak in the language of his own time and social class.

And thus, *Huck* got his creator banned twice over: First for revealing a secret truth to his own generation, and then for speaking a well-known truth to ours. A person's lifework can't get much better than that.

I have always half-expected my novel, *Finn*, to get banned from a school or a library somewhere, either for its use of n— (a mere sixty-some instances, as opposed to more than two-hundred in the text of *Huck*), or for its handling of Huck's racial heritage. Had I managed to follow in Twain's footsteps, the more likely point of contention would have been the one that overturned current thinking; that is, my bi-racial Huck. Giving America's Favorite White Kid a black mother—a kidnapped slave, in fact—provided the answer to a number of problems that had long nagged me about Twain's text. First, it explained what kind of woman, under what straitened conditions, would bear a child

## Dangerous Words, Dangerous Ideas

A Prescription for  
Literature that Lasts

by JON CLINCH



to the brutal, bigoted, and alcoholic Pap Finn. Second, it provided a defining circumstance that could unhinge and unleash Finn himself, turning him from an ordinary tap-water racist into a Niagara of bigotry.

More than that, though, it placed upon Huckleberry Finn himself—a magical figure in our literature—some of the mingled grace and burden of black culture. This was a job worth doing, and one that I was fairly certain would rankle some readers. But here in the age of Barack Obama, the response everywhere was far more measured and welcoming than I had dared hope. May it always remain so. The Twain scholar R. Kent Rasmussen, writing for the Mark Twain Forum, concluded his remarks on a bi-racial Huck this way: “There is little doubt that Clinch’s making Huck part black will, at the least, irritate scholars and devotees of Mark Twain’s novel. Why, however, should that be so? Instead of objecting to what Clinch has done to Huck, perhaps we should ask ourselves why the idea of his being part black troubles us.”

Which brings us, last and not least, to n—.

Whatever aesthetic points of view they bring to the discussion—historical, narrative, linguistic—teachers of English and History have reported that the use of the word in *Finn*, rather than establishing an obstacle, actually opens useful doors in the classroom. Because contrary to its appearance in *Huck*, where the word is more or less omnipresent, it in *Finn* occurs only in the mouths and minds of certain characters. Characters of particular educational and social backgrounds, at that. It never, ever appears in the voice of the narrator, unless he is reporting from deep within the mind of such a character. And this clear distinction establishes the use of n— as a linguistic artifact, setting the stage, particularly in classes that study both books, for an early and enlightened discussion of its historical place. As a former English teacher myself, I find that a gratifying development.

In writing *Finn*, I didn’t set out to rehabilitate Huck. Or to un-rehabilitate him, come to that. I did set out to reflect on the shifting states of race relations in America, with Twain’s work as my springboard, whether the result meant retracing a few of the Missourian’s footsteps or striking off in altogether new—and often darker—directions. Directions suggested by the source material but left unexplored by prior readers and scholars. If in the process I have expanded some folks’ understanding of Twain’s novel, then I’m honored in the extreme. And if one day I achieve the ultimate in literary impact—and find *Finn* banned by some school board or library—I know just the kind of letter I’ll send in response. ■

### About the Writer

*JON CLINCH, a native of upstate New York and a graduate of Syracuse University, has taught American Literature, been Creative Director for a Philadelphia ad agency, and run his own agency in the Philadelphia suburbs. His stories have appeared in John Gardner’s Mss. magazine. He and his wife have one daughter.*



“*Finn* is as dark, as brutal, as ambivalent, and as insane as the history and legacy of American racial slavery. It is also graceful, imaginative, and relentlessly intelligent.” —Mary Gaitskill, author of *Veronica*



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