**Huckleberry Finn" and the N-word debate**

[](http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7360234n)

(CBS News)

From the moment it was published in 1885, Mark Twain's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" caused controversy. It challenged authority, poked fun at religion, and was accused of leading children astray. What's surprising is that 125 years later Huckleberry Finn is still making news.

Today there are school districts in America that ban this American classic for one reason - one word: "nigger," a word so offensive it's usually called the "N-word."

Now a publishing company in Alabama says that schools don't have to change their reading list because they changed Huckleberry Finn. Their newly released edition removes the N-word and replaces it with "slave." It's a bold move for what is considered one of the greatest works in American literature.

[**Is it ever okay to say it?**](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504803_162-20044765-10391709.html)  
Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn is a classic set before the Civil War. The story is told by Huck, a white boy escaping an abusive father, and about his adventures with a black man named Jim, escaping slavery.

Huckleberry Finn is set along the Mississippi River. In it, Twain used the N-word 219 times. To some people, the word gets in the way of the story's powerful message against slavery; to others, Twain is simply capturing the way people talked back then.

"Are you censoring Twain?" correspondent Byron Pitts asked Randall Williams, co-owner and editor of NewSouth Books, publishers of the sanitized edition of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn that replaces the N-word with the word "slave."

"We certainly are accused of censoring Twain," Williams replied.

It's aimed at schools that already ban the book, though no one knows how many have. Williams says they are not trying replace Twain's original, N-word included.

"If you can have the discussion and you're comfortable havin' the discussion, have it. Have it with it in there. But if you're not comfortable with that, then here's an alternative for you to use. And I would argue to you that it's still powerful," Williams said.

The new edition drew powerful reactions from Twain scholars, the press and ordinary readers - and it's worth noting most of the articles don't spell out the word, either.

"What's it say that people have been so passionate about it?" Pitts asked.

"I think it says that race continues to be a volatile and divisive subject," Williams said.

In this passage, Huck says the word three times in two sentences: "Jim was monstrous proud about it and he got so he couldn't hardly notice the other niggers. Niggers come miles to hear Jim tell about it and he was more looked up to than any nigger in that country."

"What do you think of Huckleberry Finn?" Pitts asked author David Bradley, who teaches at the University of Oregon

"It's a great book. It's one of the greatest books in American literature," Bradley replied.

He says the key to understanding Huckleberry Finn is through Twain's use of language, as the friendship between Huck and Jim unfolds.

"When Huck comes back to that raft, he says, 'They're after us.' He doesn't say, 'They're after you.' He says, 'They're after us.' And that's the moment when it becomes about the American dilemma, it becomes about, 'Are we gonna get along?'" Bradley said.

School districts struggling to teach Huckleberry Finn have called in Bradley. He believes strongly in teaching Twain's original text.

"One of the first things I do is I make everybody say it out loud about six or seven times," Bradley said.

"The N-word?" Pitts asked.

"Yeah, "nigger." Get over it," Bradley replied, laughing. "You know. Now let's talk about the book."

(CBS News)  Students at Woodbury High School in Minnesota are reading the original book. But there are differences in how their teachers approach it. Nora Wise says the word out loud in class; Karen Morrill does not.

"People are scared to talk about race," Morrill told Pitts.

Morrill told Pitts she is not afraid to talk about race in class.

"But you will not say out loud the N-word?" Pitts asked.

"That's just such as minor part," she replied.

"Aren't you giving the word more power than it deserves by not saying it?" Pitts asked.

"I didn't give the word its power. It came into my classroom with that power," she replied.

"I might not always reach and nourish and nurture every single student. But I can certainly do my best not to harm them," she added.

When Nora Wise says the word, she feels its impact on students is worth it. "It makes sense in this novel to teach it with the controversy. It makes sense to bring up all of the hard emotions. They come with it. It's not just a classic book. It's not just the way the words are written, it's the ideas," she said.

Eleventh graders Melvin Efesoa, Joseph Jaurdio and Ryan Farrell are confronting the controversial word and their feelings about it.

"I feel that that word is in there for a reason. Twain put the word in there to get our attention. And every time we read it, it does exactly that. It gets our attention," Farrell told Pitts.

"If you replace that with the word slave, of course people would be less bothered, but I think Twain wants people to be a little bit bothered," Jaurdio said.

"Melvin, you smiled," Pitts remarked, while interviewing the students.

"I smiled because like I just kind of think that constant use (of) the N-word, and to me, it feels unnecessary," Efesoa said.

"Why? What is it about this word?" Pitts asked.

"It reflects on African-American history back then. And like I said, it's a history that nobody wants to relive," Efesoa said.

"Do you think the discomfort starts and stops with the N-word? Or the discomfort extends to a conversation about race?" Pitts asked NewSouth Books' Randall Williams.

"In this specific instance, it is the word itself that is the problem. People are not comin' up sayin', 'Well, we can't teach this book because it's got discussion about slavery.' What they're sayin' is 'We can't teach the book because it's got all these repetitive instances of the offensive N-word in there, and therefore, we're not gonna use it,'" he replied.

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