**Why Read That Book?**



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My freshman year at Yale I had a white roommate whose favorite song was “Rock n Roll Nigger” by Patti Smith. He played it all the time. I liked my roommate, a liberal Jew from Brooklyn, but I hated when he played that song. I never complained. I didn’t want to seem like the overly sensitive black dude who doesn’t get the joke. Now I think I should have asked him not to play that song around me and, if he persisted, thrown the record in the garbage can.

I suffered through Huckleberry Finn in high school. The white kids kept repeating “Nigger Jim," while the teacher offered tortured explanations for its use.

That same year my mother, a public school teacher, called one day to complain that some kids had vandalized her school, which was in a poor, all-black neighborhood in Chicago. The hooligans stole stuff and poured paint on the walls. Mom said, about the perpetrators, “You just want to say ‘those dumb niggers’ but you don’t because there are white people in the room.”

Yale was wonderfully diverse, but sometimes my African-American friends and I needed a black space. We might listen to Richard Pryor’s hilarious album “That Nigger’s Crazy.” Or on weekends take the short train ride to New York City, where hip-hop was being born, and the word “nigger” gaining an artistic legitimacy it hadn’t had since ... well, since the days of Mark Twain.

It’s complicated, “nigger” is. I suffered through Huckleberry Finn in high school, with the white kids going out of their way to say “Nigger Jim” and the teacher’s tortured explanation that Twain’s “nigger” didn’t really mean nigger, or meant it ironically, or historically, or symbolically. Whatever. I could live my whole life fine if I never read that book again.

If some teachers have the audacity to believe that Mark Twain’s work is still meaningful, even absent the words “nigger” and “injun,” more power to them. If other teachers think keeping those epithets in is worth the pain they will cause students of color, I understand that too. This isn’t about censorship, it’s about choice. Either choice will have unfortunate consequences.

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