

Pennsylvania school bans teaching of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*

By Hiram Lee
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The decision of a Pennsylvania school to remove Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) from its curriculum is reactionary and should be opposed. Friends' Central School in Montgomery County, a private institution founded in 1845 and based on "Quaker philosophy," has dropped the Twain classic from its 11th grade English classes, citing the work's supposed racism.

School Principal Art Hall sent a letter to parents explaining the decision: "We have all come to the conclusion that the community costs of reading this book in 11th grade outweigh the literary benefits." Hall claimed the decision was made following student complaints that the book's use of "the N-word" was "challenging" and that the school "was not being inclusive" in choosing to teach it.

Hall, who previously served as the Director of Equity and Inclusion at the Greenhill School in Dallas, Texas, presented the decision as a progressive step for the community. "I do not believe that we're censoring," he wrote. "I really do believe that this is an opportunity for the school to step forward and listen to the students."

The effort to ban *Huckleberry Finn* on the grounds that it is racist has a long history. The American Library Association lists Twain's novel as the fifth most challenged or banned book in the United States between 1990 and 1999. It was the 14th most challenged between 2000 and 2009.

Twain wrote the book in the vernacular of the American south during slavery. The "N-word" is used throughout the book, as it was in life. For this reason, it is the frequent target of censorship from largely better-off middle class layers committed to identity politics. That the book is, in fact, *anti-racist*, and powerfully so, is of no interest to them.

Huckleberry Finn, they now argue, makes students "uncomfortable." They should be spared this. As it happens, there is a great deal that is "uncomfortable" about history and society. Twain took an unflinching look at it. He brought it to life in his work in a way that was sometimes deeply funny and sometimes profoundly unsettling. In doing so, he deepened our understanding of American history and social life and encouraged opposition to ignorance, irrationalism and prejudice. The students of Friends' Central *need* to be challenged by such works.

It is not an accident that the latest attempt in Pennsylvania comes amid a wave of middle class protests on college campuses targeting allegedly widespread racism among administrators and faculty members. The protests recently culminated in the forced resignation of Yale University professor Erika Christakis from teaching duties. The attack on Twain's classic belongs to the same trend. Self-absorption and a preoccupation with subjective impressions and personal comfort have characterized much of it.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a deeply humane work. No less a figure than Ernest Hemingway famously said that "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*." The critic H.L. Mencken called it "one of the great masterpieces of the world."

Twain's classic tells the story of a young boy who escapes his abusive father and embarks on an odyssey through the American south, rafting down the Mississippi River with his new friend Jim, an escaped slave. While the two become close during their adventures, Huck cannot suppress the nagging worry that helping Jim escape is wrong. He has been told that slavery is a just system, even ordained by God. He believes he will go to hell if he does not return Jim to

his owner. In the end, however, he decides he would rather go to hell than do that.

Mark Twain (1835-1910) was among the most admirable figures in American literature. He was not a racist. Attempts to portray him as such are nothing more than historical falsification. One has only to read him to learn the truth.

Here is one passage from Twain's autobiography, in which he discusses his childhood in the pre-Civil War south and one of the men who served as an inspiration for the character of Jim:

“All the negroes were friends of ours, and with those of our own age we were in effect comrades. I say in effect, using the phrase as a modification. We were comrades and yet not comrades; color and condition interposed a subtle line which both parties were conscious of and which rendered complete fusion impossible. We had a faithful and affectionate good friend, ally and adviser in ‘Uncle Dan’l,’ a middle-aged slave whose head was the best one in the negro quarter, whose sympathies were wide and warm and whose heart was honest and simple and knew no guile. He has served me well these many, many years. I have not seen him for more than half a century and yet spiritually I have had his welcome company a good part of that time and have staged him in books under his own name and as ‘Jim,’ and carted him all around—to Hannibal, down the Mississippi on a raft and even across the Desert of Sahara in a balloon—and he has endured it all with the patience and friendliness and loyalty which were his birthright. It was on the farm that I got my strong liking for his race and my appreciation of certain of its fine qualities. This feeling and this estimate have stood the test of sixty years and more and have suffered no impairment. The black face is as welcome to me now as it was then.”

Throughout his career, Twain proved to be an enemy of social backwardness and the cruelty and hypocrisy of official life. In his final years, he became vice-president of the Anti-Imperialist League, which opposed US intervention in the Philippines. “We have gone there to conquer, not to redeem,” Twain wrote in the *New York Herald* in 1900, attacking the argument, still trotted out by the pseudo-left to defend similar crimes today, that the intervention was somehow “humanitarian.”

Notably, Twain was a fervent defender of the great

French Revolution of 1789, an event, he wrote in *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), “which swept a thousand years of ... villainy away in one swift tidal-wave of blood.” Speaking of that “tidal-wave,” Twain wrote forcefully, “There were two ‘Reigns of Terror,’ if we would but remember it and consider it; the one wrought murder in hot passion, the other in heartless cold blood; the one lasted mere months, the other had lasted a thousand years; the one inflicted death upon ten thousand persons, the other upon a hundred millions; but our shudders are all for the ‘horrors’ of the minor Terror, the momentary Terror, so to speak; whereas, what is the horror of swift death by the axe, compared with lifelong death from hunger, cold, insult, cruelty, and heart-break? What is swift death by lightning compared with death by slow fire at the stake? A city cemetery could contain the coffins filled by that brief Terror which we have all been so diligently taught to shiver at and mourn over; but all France could hardly contain the coffins filled by that older and real Terror—that unspeakably bitter and awful Terror which none of us has been taught to see in its vastness or pity as it deserves.”

What does it say, objectively, about any group that would oppose such an artist and his work? In preventing their students from studying *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the administration of Friends' Central has done them a terrible disservice.

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