

## That's Not Twain

Next month, you will be able to buy the single-volume NewSouth Edition of Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" and "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," edited by Professor Alan Gribben of Auburn University at Montgomery. It differs from other editions of those books because Mr. Gribben has turned the word "nigger" — as used by Tom and Huck — into "slave." Mr. Gribben has also changed "Injun" to Indian.

Mr. Gribben says he wants to make these American classics readable again — for young readers and for anyone who is hurt by the use of an epithet that would have been ubiquitous in Missouri in the 1830s and 1840s, which is when both books are set. He says he discovered how much Twain's language offended readers when he began giving talks about "Tom Sawyer" all across Alabama in 2009. He has also acknowledged that what he calls "textual purists" will be horrified by his sanitized versions of the two classics.

We are horrified, and we think most readers, textual purists or not, will be horrified too. The trouble isn't merely adulterating Twain's text. It's also adulterating social, economic and linguistic history. Substituting the word "slave" makes it sound as though all the offense lies in the "n-word" and has nothing to do with the institution of slavery. Worse, it suggests that understanding the truth of the past corrupts modern readers, when, in fact, this new edition is busy corrupting the past.

When "Huckleberry Finn" was published, Mark Twain appended a note on his effort to reproduce "pains-takingly" the dialects in the book, including several backwoods dialects and "the Missouri negro dialect." What makes "Huckleberry Finn" so important in American literature isn't just the story, it's the richness, the detail, the unprecedented accuracy of its spoken language. There is no way to "clean up" Twain without doing irreparable harm to the truth of his work.