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Don't censor Mark Twain's N word

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It is, perhaps, the seminal moment in American literature.

Young Huck Finn, trying to get right with God and save his soul from a forever of fire, sits there with the freshly written note in hand. "Miss Watson," it says, "your runaway nigger Jim is down here two mile below Pikesville and Mr. Phelps has got him and he will give him up for the reward if you send."

Huck knows it is a sin to steal and he is whipped by guilt for the role he has played in helping the slave Jim steal himself from a poor old woman who never did Huck any harm. But see, Jim has become Huck's friend, has sacrificed for him, worried about him, laughed and sung with him, depended upon him. So what, really, is the right thing to do?

"I was a-trembling," says Huck, "because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

'All right, then, I'll go to hell' — and tore it up."

When NewSouth Books releases its new version of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* next month, that revelatory moment will contain one troubling change. Publisher's Weekly reported last week that in this edition, edited by Twain scholar Alan Gribben of Auburn University, all 219 occurrences of the so-called N-word will be cut. Huck's note will now call Jim a "runaway slave." Twain's use of the word "Injun" will also be struck.

Gribben brings good intentions to this act of literary graffiti, this attempt to impose political correctness upon the most politically incorrect of American authors. He told PW that many teachers feel they can't use the book in their classrooms because children simply cannot get past that incendiary word. "My daughter," he said, "went to a magnet school and one of her best friends was an African-American girl. She loathed the book, could barely read it."

But while Gribben's intentions are good, his fix is profoundly wrong. There are several reasons why.

In the first place, any work of art represents a series of conscious choices on the part of the artist — what color to paint, what note to play, what word to use — in that artist's attempt to share what is in his or her soul. The audience is free to accept or reject those choices; it is emphatically not free to substitute its own.

In the second place, it is never a good idea to sugarcoat the past. The past is what it is, immutable and non-negotiable. Even a cursory glance at the historical record will show that