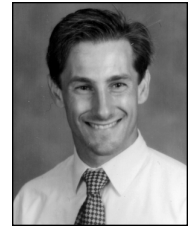


# Shoot the Author, Not the Reader

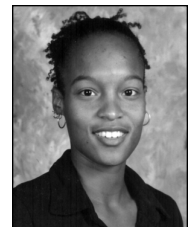
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I (Mark) have taught *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to high school juniors going on a decade now. I have attended several seminars on the proper way to deal with the controversial issues raised in the novel, and I've incorporated many of these ideas into my teaching. Nyaka served as the diversity coordinator and counselor at the same school. She is now a doctoral candidate in counseling psychology at a local university. As an interracial couple,<sup>1</sup> we care deeply about issues of race and ethnicity, especially how pedagogical practices affect the racial identity development of black and white students. We think that *Huck Finn* is an important work of art that should be available in every library in the world, but we don't think that it should be *required* reading in any predominantly white high school where African American students are in a small minority. Here's why.

Imagine that you are a black teenager at a predominantly white school.<sup>2</sup> Imagine that your English teacher is also good at his or her job. Your teacher will tell you right off the bat that Mark Twain was not a racist; that his masterpiece is a story of reconciliation between the races; that the story of one white boy and his friend—a runaway slave—journeying down the Mississippi on a raft is filled with irony, a riveting narrative, and the revolutionary use of dialect. The teacher may even tell you that Ernest Hemingway, in *Matrix*-speak, spoke of it as the One book out of which all American literature poured, while Faulkner, not to be outdone, called all of us Twain's heirs. You take these glowing accolades with a grain of salt. What do dead white male authors know about your particular situation in this particular class?

Your teacher will also prepare you for the N-word, which will appear over two hundred times in the novel. The teacher will say that its repetition is understandable within the historical context of the novel. He or she will then set down some guidelines about *how*—or *if*—this word will be used in class discussions, read-alouds, or in papers or journals (quoting the text). The novel, you are also told, will be supplemented by material on slavery, since, in your teacher's words, "*Huckleberry Finn* deals with the true horrors of slavery about as much as it deals with the juice of huckleberries." You can tell that your teacher is trying to lighten the atmosphere and be sensitive to the needs of all students. Your teacher may even say a few words about the problematic portrait of Jim—since Twain, you are informed, doesn't deal honestly with black characters in this particular novel.

Then you will read the novel with your classmates, and you will quickly discover that your teacher was right.

From the moment Jim is introduced in the beginning of Chapter 2, Twain stereotypes blacks and feeds the fantasy-vision that most whites have of themselves as superior. Your teacher tries to deal

with these stereotypes head-on, but lines were drawn in the sand way before this class began back in September. When Huck ducks below Miss Watson's kitchen window and Jim speaks his first line, "Who dah?" the white kids in the class immediately side with Huck, the thirteen-year-old protagonist-narrator, because he's clever, cocky, and he looks like them. But you have a dilemma. You don't side so easily with Huck. Jim, on the other hand—Twain's other "hero"—shares your skin color but he's so stupid, naive, and subservient that you can't believe that your school actually wants you to keep reading.

Worse, your edition contains all of the original illustrations, which are patently racist by today's standards. Jim has big lips, big eyes, and bearlike features. In every illustration he is groveling, tending to sick whites, ridiculously faithful, with no sense of self. Your teacher guides the class through a lesson on stereotypes and stereotyping, but all you feel is irritation: *When was the last time your white peers read a "classic" that stereotyped their kind—even if part of a broader benevolent mission—and then, in a predominantly black class, had to talk about it for forty minutes?*

Perhaps it's a good thing that your teacher doesn't know the little-known historical fact that Twain paid \$2,000 to E. W. Kemble, a twenty-three-year-old white illustrator from New York, to produce the drawings. Kemble explains: "I used [a white schoolboy to] model for every character in the story—man, woman and child. Jim the Negro seemed to please him the most. He would jam his little black wool cap over his head, shoot out his lips and mumble coon talk while he was posing. Grown to manhood, 'Huck' is now a sturdy citizen of Philadelphia, connected with an established business house" (Kemble, n. pag.). You bet he is. (He probably *still* is.)

And then there is all that supplemental reading about slavery. You pray that your teacher does not ask you to speak for your entire race—or, when someone does speak up about Jim's naiveté or ignorance, that the eyes don't all turn to you.

Even if you make it to Cairo, Illinois (Chapter 15), with Huck, Jim, and the syllabus intact, you find it incredible that Jim continues to sail *south* down the Mississippi after missing the *only* chance he knew for freedom: a few paddle-strokes east to Illinois, or northeast up the Ohio River to Iowa (toward free states). If your teacher is honest, he or she

will tell the class that there is no explanation for this insidious plot twist, which treats slavery like a walk in the park. When a white girl in the front row suggests that Jim continues sailing south (deeper into slave territory) to protect and aid poor Huck, you wince but keep your mouth shut. When the teacher tries to elicit some responses from the class, you try to keep below the radar.

The N-word keeps piling up. You've stopped reading, however, relying instead on the relative anonymity of class discussions and instincts you've honed from countless experiences as a black kid navigating through a predominantly white environment. Your school has tricked you: Either you read this novel word for word, suffering a profoundly distasteful complicity in the process, or you fail.

In the final chapters of the book, things go from bad to worse. Jim reappears in the narrative and you learn that he has become a rag doll for Huck and Tom's ludicrous escape plan, which involves Jim's enduring a *whole summer* on the Phelps's plantation in an *unlocked* shack that bulges with rats, spiders, snakes, and eventually a "prisoner's" pie stuffed with candlesticks and a rope ladder. You can't believe Twain actually wants any reader to think that any man would indulge two white boys even one item in this long list of indignities (which, your teacher explains, is part of the irony). What takes the cake is when Jim comes out of hiding to rescue Huck and Tom (who has been shot in the leg)—thus giving away *another* chance at his freedom—but making white readers feel good about themselves by breathing new life into the old stereotype of blacks as totally passive and childlike.

Had Twain even employed a hairball's worth of historical accuracy in this story, the nearest tree and the nearest noose would have been Jim's "reward" in lieu of the freedom that Miss Watson, incredulously, grants Jim before she dies. Has everyone forgotten that Jim, a runaway slave, is *still wanted for the murder of Huck*, a white boy (the "staged" truth of which is known only to Huck and Tom)? From your perspective, things just don't make any sense in this novel.

Jim should have put an end to Twain's antics hundreds of pages ago by putting a bullet in Huck's head—or the author's—and jumping ship. (At least you read the Author's Notice.) But, of course, this isn't a Stephen King novel. You wonder if your white

peers have learned anything from Huck's adventure. It is a journey you've been on many times before, though you've never read the text.

There's a child in another class who has read the *entire* text. As an adult, she recalls: "Fear and alarm are what I remember about my first encounter with {*Huck Finn*}. . . . My second reading of it, under the supervision of an English teacher in junior high school, was no less uncomfortable—rather more. It provoked a feeling I can only describe now as muffled rage, as though appreciation of the work required my complicity in and sanction of something shaming" (Hilton 64).

The speaker here is Toni Morrison.

### Notes

1. Nyaka NiiLampti is an African American of West African descent, and Mark Franek is a white American of European descent.

2. We have created a composite voice partly inspired by interviews with black students who trudge their way through *Huck Finn*, and now that they are nearing graduation, they are more reflective about their experience.

### Works Cited

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