HUCK FINN: 100 YEARS OF DURN FOOL PROBLEMS

by Lou Willett Stanek

HUCK FINN is a hundred years old this month. Troubles? For poor old Huck, it has just been one durn fool thing after another. Celebrating his birthday in the pages of School Library Journal would not make him very comfortable. He has had his problems with librarians from the start when, in 1885, those "moral icebergs," the Library Committee of Concord—symbolic seat of freedom—pronounced the book rough, coarse, inelegant, and expelled it from the library shelves. "Trash and suitable only for the slums," they said.

Now Huck probably wouldn't have given a hoot, but he was a sensitive boy who thought his author told the truth, "mostly." And although Mark Twain managed to present a public image of confidence and good humor, saying he was not disturbed by their "moral gymnastics," he was disturbed.

Louisa May Alcott, a member of the Library Committee, expressed the view of its members, saying that if Mr. Clemens could not think of something better to tell pure-minded lads and lasses, he had better stop writing for them. Emerson's son was also on that committee, and their labeling Clemens as "crude" summoned the ghost of the infamous Whittier dinner. Like Huck, Twain's manners had been criticized, too.

As Twain was not to forget until the day he died, he had been asked to give a speech at a dinner given by the Atlantic Monthly to celebrate John Greenleaf Whittier's seventieth birthday. The guest list was a roster of honored American men of letters—Whittier, Longfellow, Emerson—a group of extraordinary dignity from whom the poor boy from Hannibal, Missouri, who felt he had married above his class and only pretended to be a Connecticut Yankee, longed to gain acceptance.

The keynote of the evening was reverence. Twain the humorist (whom even Mrs. Clemens could not always persuade to behave) chose to tell an irreverent story he invented about Mr. Emerson, Mr. Longfellow, and Mr. Holmes. Twain was always to remember how the expressions on the faces of the guests turned to a "sort of black frost." William Dean Howells, who

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along with Livy often expurgated his friend’s bawdy humor, described the fiasco:

There fell a silence, weighing many tons to the square inch, which deepened from moment to moment and was broken only by the hysterical and blood-curdling laughter of a single guest . . . Nobody knew whether to look at the speaker or down at his plate . . . I chose my plate.¹

Newspaper accounts of the story called it in bad taste, entirely out of place, and said the instincts of a gentleman would have prevented its presentation. Speaking from the town of Thoreau and Emerson, the brightest intellectual center in America, the Concord Library Committee’s decision to expel Huckleberry Finn rubbed salt in that old wound.

Publicly, however, Twain, the first of many writers to realize that being banned in Boston had its material rewards, said Huck’s success was made. The Concord Committee had given them a “rattling tip-top puff” that would sell 25,000 more books. But in his notebook he would protest too much, saying “those idiots in Concord are not a court of last resort.” Later he would regain his humor and make the often-quoted response to Asa Don Dickinson, a Brooklyn librarian, concerning the removal of both Huck and Tom from the shelves of the children’s rooms of the Brooklyn Public Library:

I wrote Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn for adults exclusively, and it always distresses me when I find that boys and girls have been allowed access to them. The mind that becomes soiled in youth can never again be washed clean. I know this by my own experience, and to this day I cherish an unappeasable bitterness against the unfaithful guardians of my young life, who not only permitted but compelled me to read an unexpurgated Bible through before I was 15 years old. . . . More honestly do I wish that I could say a softening word or two in defense of Huck’s character since you wish it, but really in my opinion, it is no better than . . . those of Solomon, David, Satan and the rest of the sacred brotherhood.²

If librarians ever doubt their power and influence, tracing the Huck Finn story should remove their concerns and increase their sense of responsibility. For the past hundred years, scholars have been speculating on the rather surprising neglect of reviewers to comment on the book at the time of publication. Currently, approximately twenty contemporary reviews have been located, while The Innocents Abroad and The Gilded Age, certainly lesser novels, both received over fifty. Bad publicity from the Library Committee is one of the reasons most often cited. Although additional reviews have been uncovered since Arthur Vogelback’s study in 1939, no one quibbles with his finding that the famous Concord banning had the effect of drawing out newspaper and magazine comments from editors who were otherwise silent, but who wished to express their agreement with the book ban.

For the most part . . . the critical reaction to the book followed the course set by the Concord Library. . . . That the critical denunciation was widespread and powerful, is shown by the reluctance of anyone to venture a defense . . . it seems clear that most critics received the book unfavorably, and for reasons unconnected with its artistic aspects. Few seemed aware of the great character painting in the book, its magnificent passages of description, its vigor of style, and the appropriateness of the picaresque structure to the material.³

Huck & Censors

Although a conservative estimate says Huck Finn has sold 20 million copies in 100 editions in 30 languages, for the last century someone has always managed to find something wrong with Huck’s character. He has been banned from more libraries and schools than any other book in history. Nat Hentoff has even written a young adult novel about his problems, called The Day They Came to Arrest the Book (Delacorte, 1982). Either Huck represents something the world does not want to know or there have been many cooperative censors in the schools and libraries who find it easier to go along or who have not read the story and therefore cannot defend it. It was Twain himself who, perhaps prophetically, said a classic is something everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read.

To the Victorian Americans, Huck was crude. Some
blacks say he is a racist. Feminists find him sexist. Critic Leslie Fiedler thinks he might be gay.

In 1967, librarian E.L. Pearson, in “The Children’s Librarians versus Huckleberry Finn,” caricatured the attitudes of a censorious children’s librarian (no surprise to find her female) as follows:

‘No, no,’ she says, “Tom Sawyer, and you, you horrid Huckleberry Finn, you mustn’t come here. All the boys and girls in here are good and pious; they have clean faces, they go to Sunday school, and they love it, too... But you—you naughty, bad boys, your faces aren’t washed, and your clothes are all covered with dirt. I do not believe either of you brushed your hair this morning... As for you, Huckleberry, you haven’t any shoes or stockings at all, and everyone knows what your father is.”

**Huck Banned**

Although in 1881, before the book was even finished, William Livingston Alden, editorial writer, New York Times columnist, and founder of The Lotus Club, said it was the best book ever written, in 1957, New York City’s Board of Education excised Huck from its approved reading lists. When this happened Eva Taylor, assistant director of the Steele Library in Elmira, N.Y., commented:

There is much kindness and friendship between races in Huckleberry Finn and the real villains of the piece are white men. Miss Watson thought so highly of Jim, her slave, that she freed him in her will.

Mark Twain gave a realistic portrayal of frontier character and experience in the days of slavery. Words that are no longer in good standing are used, but is is a book true to its time.

As Negro boys and girls grow up they must, it seems to me, learn the history of their own race in America. That history should shame the white man rather than the Negro. I cannot see anything wrong in learning something of that history from a man as basically humane as Mark Twain.

One of the more widely publicized censorship cases occurred in 1982 when a black Virginia school administrator tried to have Huck removed from America’s school curriculums. ‘Poison,’” he said, “anti-American, works against the melting-pot theory.” Twain the humorist would have had to appreciate the irony—this administrator worked at the Mark Twain Intermediate School and spoke as a member of its Human Relations Committee. In a letter of protest, a group of students describing themselves as white, black, Catholics, Jews, and agnostics, called the censorship attempt a pointless withdrawal from reality.

Michael Patrick Hearn, author of The Annotated Huckleberry Finn, also wondered if anybody out there was reading the book. His response to the school administrator (in The Nation) was

**Wow! is it possible that the Huckleberry Finn taught in Fairfax County is the same Huckleberry Finn that describes how a poor white boy befriends a runaway slave in his flight down the Mississippi?... Anyone who labels Huckleberry Finn ‘racist trash’ does not recognize that the principal purpose of the novel was to describe an ignorant 14-year-old boy’s awakening to the injustices of slavery... In his flight with Jim, Huck denes everything—his people, his country, his God... this boy believes that there are laws greater than men’s laws. Like Martin Luther King, Jr., Huck concludes that if a law be unjust, one has the right to break it. If Huck Finn is a racist, then God help the country.”

The Russians used to ban Mark Twain as a petit-bourgeois writer. Then one of them read Huck Finn carefully and discovered he was a critic of American capitalism, imperialism, and racism, and Huck was put back on the shelves.

The case in Virginia was settled when Fairfax County ruled that Huckleberry Finn may be taught, but only with “appropriate planning.” A sure bet is that there will be more such incidents. As Hure said, “Human beings can be awful cruel to one another.”

According to Stavelon and Gerson, one month after Ronald Reagan’s first election to the presidency in 1980, Judith Krug, director of the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, reported that the number of demands for removal of materials from public libraries received by her office had increased on average from three to five a week to three to five per day. More recently, Arthur Sulzberger, publisher of The New York Times, said, “If Mr. Reagan has his way, I fear for how a new and truly conservative Supreme Court will interpret the First Amendment.” And Judy Blume is still being banned in Hanover, Pennsylvania.
Huck's Centennial

In 1985, however, people all over the country will celebrate Huck's centennial—on Broadway, on public television, and on the banks of the Mississippi. The presses are also rolling. Teachers or librarians who think only they have read Huckleberry Finn now have a multitude of editions to draw from. As a reporter with the Philadelphia Ledger said in 1896, "We are suspicious of the middle-aged person who has not read Huckleberry Finn; we envy the young person who has it still in store."

In 1885, William Glick, an enterprising librarian who was building the book collection for the Buffalo and Erie County Library, was able to talk Mark Twain out of the partial Huckleberry Finn manuscript. All the other Twain papers and his working papers for Huckleberry Finn are housed in the Mark Twain Library at the University of California, Berkeley (with the exception of Joan of Arc which is at Yale). The University of California Press is in the process of publishing new editions of all of Twain's work. They contain the original illustrations and have been carefully edited by leading Twain scholars to provide schools and libraries with copies that have not been tampered with as was the original edition of his manuscript for The Mysterious Stranger. It was no mystery and no stranger, but Twain's official biographer and publisher who patched together four manuscripts, deleted a character, added another, and posthumously published a book they claimed had been written by Mark Twain. The University of California Press, under the auspice of The Mark Twain Library, published the only authentic version of No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger in 1982.

The year 1985 has been reserved for Huck. To celebrate his birthday, the University of California Press will publish three editions for schools and colleges—an edition with apparatus for scholars, a trade hardback, and an inexpensive, durable softcover for the schools, with an introduction by Walter Blair and Victor Fisher. A fine edition, using the U. of C. Press text and illustrated by Barry Moser (who is known to educators for his Alice in Wonderland illustrations), will be published by Pennroyal Press. Sensing that Huck has often been abandoned to the censors by teachers and librarians, The Twain Library is also publishing a teacher's guide to address the issues which have caused periodic uproar.

T. S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner—three American winners of the Nobel Prize—as well as scores of other writers, have paid homage to Twain as the father of American Literature. After discovering Huck, James Joyce played not only with the name Finn, but also with the theme of a river journey in Finnegan's Wake. Hemingway said in Green Hills of Africa, "All modern literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn." Critics have suggested that Holden Caulfield's journey in Catcher in the Rye is a continuation of Huck's odyssey, which is our national myth.

Like the millions of students who were to follow him, Huck would skip school when he could get away with it. It's up to teachers and librarians to see that we keep that boy on the premises.

Notes

1. For this and other details about the banquet, see Henry Nash Smith, "That Hallowed Mistake of Poor Clemens's." Harvard Library Bull., 1X (Spring 1955).