**Dumbing and Numbing Down Jim**

David Matthews

**David Matthews** is the author of “Ace of Spades,” a memoir, and "Kicking Ass and Saving Souls: a True Story of a Life Over the Line," a forthcoming biography.

**Updated** January 6, 2011, 12:43 PM

The word is the word. In many ways, it's America. It's confounding, infuriating, degrading, and, sometimes, necessary. Even lyrical (in the right context, one need only listen to early Richard Pryor, or Biggie Smalls, or Dolemite).

Removing that single word from the text relieves the reader of doing any heavy lifting.

The word "nigger" should sting. It's part of the bloodied soil of America, yet another legacy of slavery still with us a hundred-plus years after the fact.

Huck Finn is an historical document. What a tragedy if a modern reader, deprived of the context the word provides, were to conclude that 'Slave Jim' was the equal of 'Nigger Jim.' A slave, without the proper historical guideposts, could conjure the lowly born, the unlucky member of the wrong caste, or maybe victim of some feudal system. There is no equivalency between slave and "nigger," which is an American invention. It's a word that denies humanity, and along with it justice and mercy.

Dumbing and numbing down 'Nigger Jim' to 'Slave Jim' etiolates the crushing, dehumanizing institutional forces against the character, and minimizes Huck's enlightenment. The reason Huck is such an enduring character is that he represents the best and worst of his time. He was able to skewer the inherent absurdity of slavery, while ostensibly being a member of the ruling society.

Removing that single word from the text, while sparing those too sensitive to get past it, relieves the reader of doing any heavy lifting. Great books -- or any work of art -- require that the reader meet the author half-way. Huck Finn is a serious literary work. It is not a children's adventure book, nor a Rockwellian portrait. As intended, it is a scathing indictment against slavery, hypocrisy, gender roles (sure, why not), and class.

It is the successor to the Odyssey, and the precursor to "Catcher in the Rye." I understood little of Huck Finn when I was in high school, a little more in college, and still more is revealed to me, when I pull it from the shelf every few years. I'll run out of capacity before Huck Finn runs out of lessons.

These books -- and others like them -- should not be retrofitted to make modern readers comfortable. Modern readers are already too comfortable. Lazy, even. If the word "nigger" keeps one from reading Huck Finn, then one lacks the critical skills to appreciate all the book has to offer.