

Why **HUCK FINN** *belongs in classrooms*

By Jocelyn Chadwick
Harvard Graduate School of
Education.

Twain's work sparks the kind of frank discussions about race and race relations that we need—and fear—to have.

In the American Library Association's recently published list of the 100 most frequently challenged books of the 1990s, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* ranked fifth. In fact, Samuel Clemens/Mark Twain had the dubious distinction of having written two of the only three pre-twentieth-century books on the list. (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was number 83, and Helen Bannerman's blatantly racist *The Story of Little Black Sambo* was number 90.) Clearly, much controversy remains about whether Mark Twain had racist attitudes and whether he displayed those attitudes in his works, especially *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Stereotypes in his portrayal of the character Jim, excessive use of the racial slur "nigger," and a paternalistic attitude toward African Americans are among the charges made against Twain by his would-be banners. Are these charges valid, and if so, do they implicate Mark Twain

as a racist? Twain scholar Lou Budd has asserted that Twain had "conflicting, conflicted attitudes" about the racial issues of his time. And while I acknowledge the likely truth in Budd's assertion, I would also argue that, given the time in which Twain wrote, this can be seen as a minor indictment of Clemens the man and an even lesser one of Twain the writer.

As an African American, I know that I would rather be in a room with a person who is working through his position on race and inequality than with an incorrigible racist. Certainly racist attitudes of any kind, even if they stem from "conflicting, conflicted attitudes" and membership in a culture steeped in racial oppression, are unacceptable. But what are essential and substantial are the decisions we make and the concomitant actions we take as a result of our attitudes. We cannot, therefore, overlook the works of Twain that do address the issues of race and stereotype. Clearly, Twain used his writing to work through issues of race for himself and his society, and when I read Twain's satires, I feel that he "gets it." Despite the culture surrounding him, Twain understood deeply that racism is wrong. For

Twain to have depicted in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* a young hero who questioned racial inequality and an African American who was caring, compassionate, and strongly committed to his freedom was revolutionary indeed.

In no way am I asserting that this novel is the ultimate answer to discussing race relations in this country or even in the English/language arts classroom. What I am asserting is that change begins, must begin, with one individual. And while that one individual who connects with someone else will not cauterize the racial chasm, the connection does create a ripple in the great racial ocean that continues concentrically. By questioning racism in his own time and provoking discussion in ours, Twain provides just such a connection for many students.

Jocelyn Chadwick is assistant professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She is the author of *The Jim Dilemma: Reading Race in Huckleberry Finn*.
