

A brilliant and offensive book

By [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#)

January 19, 2011



My generation--the tail-end of X, or early Millennials--grew up in a time of soft racism and racial inequality; we were also brought up to be tolerant and "color blind." Like most of my peers, I wouldn't be caught dead using the n-word (despite being a bit of a profanity connoisseur). I was taught that it's the most abhorrent of epithets--although I also grew up exposed to hip-hop artists and comedians who use the word with what seems like impunity.

The n-word issue has come up recently with the decision by NewSouth Books to release a new edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The 1884 Mark Twain novel has a long history of controversy and censorship, much of it involving its record 219 uses of the despised word. This new edition does away with the n-word word entirely: [hoping to reach a broader audience and stave off controversy](#), the editors replaced it each time with the word "slave."

[Everyone seems to have an opinion about this](#). Many think the new edition whitewashes the past. But editor Alan Gribben spoke compellingly [to Publishers Weekly](#) about his decision. Doing *Huck Finn* readings across Mississippi in 2009, Gribben encountered numerous teachers and other readers who lamented the barrier the n-word creates to teaching and enjoying this wonderful American novel.

Twain prefaces the book with a note about its many dialects, lest readers "suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding." The n-word appears often because it was natural for a wide variety of white characters to use it; by writing in all these different voices, Twain demonstrates how pervasive dehumanizing language about African Americans was in the pre-Civil War South. Huck's own use of the word only makes his journey--up the river, into adolescence, toward freedom and understanding--more momentous and compelling.

But Huck's voice is not Twain's--and not everybody gets this. I know teachers who echo Gribben's concerns. Whenever my sister, who's taught at several high schools with mostly nonwhite students, assigns a book focused on race issues (whether it's Twain or Sherman Alexie), she struggles with the fact that teenagers aren't used to distinguishing between narrators and authors. She's been called "racist" more than once. She cries each time.

Preachers know the difficulty of using texts with violent imagery or troubling language. I was reading the story of [Jael's assassination of Sisera](#) in church recently, and my eyes went immediately to the nine-year-old in the second pew. I edit Martin Luther King Jr.'s writings when I read them in worship--despite the feelings of foreboding and hubris this creates--because I can't bring myself to say the word "negro" from the pulpit and risk validating it for others.

The current book-club staple *The Help* tells of African-American women who work as domestics in the 1960s. In her [review](#) of the book, Sandhya Jha notes

that though it's intended to be uplifting and mildly subversive and includes little offensive language, *The Help* still rubs many people the wrong way.

Twain wrote a brilliant novel that manages to be satire and epic and coming-of-age story all at once--and that uses the n-word 219 times. Michael Chabon [highlights](#) how painful and complicated it is to navigate the book; his essay challenges all parents to engage their children in conversation.

I wish these discussions were taking place in classrooms and churches. I wish it were easier for Christians to talk about satire and truth, our troubling histories and human brokenness, our enduring need for grace to change us. I wish we could read the Bible with the critical voracity--with passion and deep inquiry, the awareness of what is hurtful and what is transcendent--that some have brought to the debate over *Huck Finn*.