

Huck Finn Gets a Makeover

Huck Finn is getting a makeover and it's not pretty.

It's not the Hollywood kind of makeover of course, but a misguided "modern" effort.

There is no doubt that Mark Twain's American literary classic, "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," which was published in the United States in 1885, includes language that today we find offensive, horrid and despicable.

I am especially characterizing the use of the word "*nigger*," which appears in the book more than 200 times. A common word at the time, today this same word is most usually referred to as the "*N word*." As demonstrated by Huck Finn, the challenge for a modern, diverse culture is how to reconcile a by-gone culture represented by words we shouldn't and won't tolerate in today's society.

The answer is not to rewrite a classic, but to use it as a "teachable moment." This is a moment in which youth and adults alike come together under the leadership and guidance of a skilled facilitator for a frank conversation, in this case, to discuss the damage and emotion caused by just one word. What does this word mean to us and why it is unacceptable in our modern society?

It is through teachable moments like this that people of different races can universally learn from each other. This conversation can encompass different cultures, religions, ethnicities, genders and even ability statuses.

The question we ask in a teachable moment is how does difference, and the language used around difference, impact those who are perceived to be different and the rest of society?

In the case of Huck Finn, what can we learn about our nation's past history and social values, and how does that past – a past that often doesn't make us proud– relate to ourselves and our lives today?

How will we learn about slavery, race relations, civil rights issues, discrimination and, yes, this ugly word and all that it implies and how it continues to impact all races today, without talking about it together in a respectful way?

How will we truly learn, understand and move past a stain on the brightness of the American story without talking about it?

We can learn a lot from Huck Finn, but we've got to talk about all of it to do so.

Sincerely,

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About the American Conference on Diversity The work of the American Conference on Diversity is among the most important activities we can participate in to create a positive, inclusive society. It is the unfinished business of living in a highly diverse state: educating and empowering our next generation of leaders; enhancing NJ workplaces; and helping to create inclusive communities. The American Conference on Diversity takes an historic mission and creates programs and activities relevant and vital to 21st Century life. It is a journey we can all take together. The American Conference on Diversity operates eight chapters to help us to educate and empower leaders and bring our messages of inclusion and respect to communities throughout New Jersey: Atlantic County Chapter, Bayonne Chapter, Central Jersey Chapter, Essex County Chapter, Greater Bergen Chapter, Hudson County Chapter, Jersey Shore Chapter and Mercer County Chapter. Visit www.AmericanConferenceonDiversity.org to learn more.

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