Title: 2009 Seattle Reads 'My Jim': Huck Finn: In or Out of School?

Speaker 1:

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Chris Higashi:

I'm Chris Higashi, program manager of the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library. Welcome to the Central Library and thank you for joining us today for Huck Finn: In or Out of School? This program is part of Seattle Reads' My Jim by Seattle author, Nancy Rawles. And before we do anything else, I want to welcome our special guest, Nancy Rawles. So today's event is a discussion about Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. You're going to meet the panelists and our moderator in just a moment. This is meant to be a real-world discussion about Huckleberry Finn, not a theoretical first amendment, all of that stuff, but a discussion amongst teachers, students and a parent about this whole business of Huckleberry Finn. We think the public library, what better place to have this kind of conversation.

So this is the 11th year of Seattle Reads, the Seattle Public Library's widely emulated one-book community reading program. It's amazing the way in which this idea that Nancy Pearl and I had all of those years ago has exploded all over the country and internationally. So we're grateful to the generous support of the Wallace Foundation since the inception of Seattle Reads. We've also have additional support this year from KUOW Public Radio and from Three Rivers Press. Also, our independent bookstore partners, Elliott Bay Book Company and University Bookstore. Please do visit the U Bookstore table. She has Nancy Rawles novel and many other works from the recommended reading list in our toolbox.

And then finally, a special thank you as always to the Seattle Public Library Foundation whose support makes possible so many of our free library programs. So Nancy Rawles is going to spend May 20th to the 23rd with us. She'll make seven public appearances to talk with readers about her book. Friday, May 22nd, 7:00 in the evening right here is the main event for Seattle Reads and Nancy's going to present a talk titled Living With Passion. Okay, prior to that, of course, we have a whole series of programs, panel discussions, films, all about to put the book in its cultural and historical context. We have 29 Seattle Public Library book groups that are reading My Jim. You can get the book from any of those libraries hosting those discussions.

Okay, so I'm going to turn things over now to our moderator, David Wright, who is a fiction department librarian. He also researched and wrote the piece in the toolbox called A Controversial Classic. And then I'm going to say at the outset, we're going to try and keep track of time, so that everybody gets a chance to speak and so that you get to also ask questions and join in the discussion afterwards. Okay, thanks. So here's David Wright. Oh, should I introduce the panelists? Sorry. I didn't get your name first.

Cole Austin:

Cole Austin.

Chris Higashi:

Cole Austin, a student at Garfield and let's see, Hannah Rusk, another student at Garfield, Jessica Garcia at Garfield. Alan ... No, sorry, Mark Lovre is a ... Oh, sorry. Mrs. Beatrice Clark, a parent who's involved in discussions with the Renton School District. Then Mark Lovre, a teacher at Garfield High School and then Alan Miller, a teacher at Berkeley High, who all have a lot of different viewpoints about this. Okay. Thanks again for joining us.

David Wright:

Okay. So I'm going to just describe briefly how this is going to proceed today and then we'll get about it. We have three sections. And what we're going to begin with actually is just an open mic, if you will. And we can go down the line. We can let people select themselves or just we can come down maybe from the far end to the near. And everybody will have a little bit of time to talk. And Chris has got a system of little cards, yellow and red cards, just to let you know when your time is running out. I think yellow means you've got a minute or so more and red means time to stop and move on to the next person.

After that, I will be asking some follow up questions. Some probably aroused by what you've been talking about and others that I have written down here, far more questions I'm sure than I'll ever have a chance to ask. And after 20 or so minutes of that, we'll open the floor to general questions, including questions from the panelists themselves, from those here gathered. And maybe if I have some that I didn't get in, I might be able to ask them as well. So that's how we're going to proceed. So without further ado, who would like to be first up? Should we start down on the far end and just go in order? Let's do that.

Alan Miller:

Okay. I'm Alan Miller. I teach at Berkeley High School. I've been teaching for 20 years. When I came to Berkeley High, Huck Finn was a required book, so everyone had to teach it if you were teaching juniors. Currently, it's one of a series of choices of books that we can do. I think it's an important book to teach. One of the reasons that I support it being taught is that I want to make sure that the issues that the book raises are discussed in a classroom context. Now, I worry, and I've talked to some people about the book and people worry that it can be taught badly and it can be harmful. Lots of things can be harmful and badly botched, and certainly, this is one of them.

I'd say that the really important thing is not to teach it in isolation and not to let it isolate people because I think that the book can do that. When I teach, I use the Dover Thrift Editions and I talk to Mark, he

uses those editions too, because I like students to be able to write in the books. The Dover Thrift Editions, if you're a teacher, are these wonderful cheap editions of books, $1 and $2 classics. Because I want the students to engage the text and I want them to write what they're feeling and to be able to pinpoint why they're feeling as they do. I use also illustrations from the various versions of Huck Finn. And we have a local free paper in the Bay Area that printed several of those illustrations from early editions to more current editions of Huck Finn.

Also for good critical source that deals with the whole issue of caricature and images of Black people, there's a wonderful video called Ethnic Notions by Marlon Riggs, which is still available. It shows racist artifacts going all the way back to the late 1700s and to the present. We're really lucky today with Nancy's book, that we have Nancy's book to teach, but there's been a proliferation of books about slavery because the issue isn't dead. I'm a historical freak in that my grandfather was a slave. Just take a minute to think about that. My grandfather was a slave.

Ironically, many white folks have much greater access to this history than do I, because as you know, with Black folks, a lot of our history's been erased. It's been obliterated. We don't have connections. We don't know connections, but I can reach back in my family tree and touch a slave. My grandfather was born at the end of slavery. My dad was born at the turn of ... Was born in 1902, so you can see how that could happen. I was born in 1959. So if you're going to teach it, surround it. Slave narratives, great source. There's a lot of information today about contemporary forms of slavery. Lethal Weapon 4 dealt with that if you're interested. Music, poetry, folklore, folk tales, newspapers from that time, both pro-slavery and anti-slavery. Language and dialect, you've heard ...

There's a lot of stuff about child psychology and child development, especially the Stockholm syndrome. In addition to My Jim, Uncle Tom's Cabin, equally problematic book, also in many cases still being taught. And there's a lot of wonderful visual documents you can use. I use a film called To Sleep With Anger by Charles Burnett. Great film to try to help people understand the importance of folklore magic ritual in African American life. Excuse me. But you teach this book the way that you teach all literature, but the great thing about it is that you ... And the dangerous thing about it is that you got to teach it in context.

You don't teach it in context, it can blow up and it can cause some harm. If you teach it in context, remember this book is being read by people all over the country, it has the capacity to generate discussions for generations. It's something that I've read many times in my life and I'm sure it's something that I'm going to read again, but I'm going to stop.

Mark Lovre:

Why? It's great. Hi, I'm Mark Lovre. I'm at Garfield High School, just a mile that way. And mostly, I just say what he said. Probably not as well though. Context, of course, and I think the idea of corollary text to say that, in a vacuum, this is not something that kids of any ability level can be left alone with. I teach at a school that has a lot of incredibly able students who are doing college-level work and above and I find, in classes with a preponderance of those students, my challenge is to slow them down and focus their attention because they come in so good at school that they're used to solving the problem in front of them, moving on. So we get partway into the book, it's like, "Well, Twain's being ironic. He's making fun of slavery. He's making fun of racism. We're done. There we go, right?"

And so my job in that case is say, "No, let's all turn to page 212 where there's no arguing that this isn't completely racist here. Twain answered his own goodness with his own badness." And so making sure we focus on how frustrating a piece of art it can be because you want it to be one thing and it refuses and to deal with the complexity. And that can only work when you've got a room full of students who are motivated and read really well and they've already done it. And so that changes completely when I'm in a classroom with students who can't read it quickly or don't want to or aren't that interested in school. They're more regular high school students.

And so my job is to try to do what I can to steer and control the context. And I think us having other texts is key to that as well. If not during, then before and after to say like in my more advanced classes, we read Beloved, Toni Morrison, which is a ridiculously difficult book, and mostly, most high school students couldn't read it, but it answers Huck Finn so beautifully in so many ways. It's like, "Remember how we said Mark Twain had a lot to say about racism and slavery? Yeah, Toni Morrison points out he didn't say much and certainly not as strongly as he could have or should." And so that shift in historical context and what a piece of art can do.

Another big piece too, because I work at an extremely diverse high school, is the N-word conversation and cultural competency, cultural awareness. So if I'm in front of a room full of white kids, my job changes significantly than if I'm in front of a room full of every color kid. And that's a huge piece again because we just want to come up with this abstract answer. And when you're thinking about things that are just ideas and you don't actually have experience with yourself, with your family, with your people, then you can oversimplify it like, "Well, get over it. It's the 21st century. Here we are. It's there in the book and we're just going to say it because we're all adults here, aren't we?" It's like, "No, we're not and even with adults."

And so walking through those ideas and making sure that they're being treated respectfully as ideas and to make sure that we're not mistreating one another inadvertently in our study of it.

Jessica Garcia:

I'm Jessica Garcia and I go to Garfield and I'm a student of his. And as a student, well, at first I thought that Huckleberry Finn wasn't an important book to read and it was just racist and it shouldn't be taught, but after reading it, I think it's an important book because it captures a moment in history and this writer was living during the time that slavery and racism were happening. And to try and take this book out or challenge its validity in school is wrong because you can't just take something out that makes people uncomfortable. We can't pretend that racism and slavery didn't happen. And just because it focuses on something that was really bad in American history doesn't mean we shouldn't learn it because it's still there and it still exists.

Racism still exists, but slavery did exist and it was a really important part of our history, even if it was bad because it defined, for a while, who we are as a country and what we strive for now, for equality and things like that. And if we had never experienced everything that we had, we wouldn't be what we are now.

Beatrice Clark:

I'm Beatrice Clark and I'm speaking as a parent and community worker. And before I start, I would just like to say, when I was a child growing up, my mom used to give us castor oil, and because it was so bitter and nasty, they put sugar in it so that we could swallow it, but in the end it was still castor oil. The classic book of Huck Finn, a glorified fairytale written in the 18th century by a racist Caucasian man, Mark Twain, who probably owned slaves, belongs in a museum with all other classic antiques. The fact that it was ever allowed in school says a lot about how society felt about Black people then and how they continue to view Black people.

The fact that it contains the word nigger over 200 times is reason enough to put the book through a shredder, but to smear it in the face of the race of people it was designed to identify and reduce to the level of being less than human is an outrage. The word was real to the enslaved Africans who were captured and brought to this country by white slave traders and probably was the last word they heard when that noose tightened around their neck as their body swung from the big oak trees. That word is drenched in blood in real history, but schools such as the Renton School District would prefer to miseducate its students by hiding behind this fake book as history.

The book is fiction, the figment of one man's racist distorted imagination. Students should be taught the truth and there are plenty of books to fulfill that need. The Huck book should be classified as hate material with a double-edged sword. Inside the classroom, it has caused pain, embarrassment, loss of respect and dignity to thousands of Black students who sat in classes with their white peers, who snickered and jeered at them every time the word was read over 200 times. I hear these stories often because I'm leading the fight in the Renton School District to cease the use of this outdated book, which has no relevancy or place in today's diverse society.

Outside the classroom, the mention of ousting Huck Finn from the classroom brings out the rage in those who were nursed on its demeaning depiction of a Black male being called Nigger Jim and bossed around by a little white boy. All the nastiness held in check, as long as Huck Finn was safe, no one challenging its removal, is violently unleashed. That tells a lot about the effect the book has on the Huck Finn idolizers. We got hate mail in three days of talk radio as mostly Caucasians called in berating us. A white male teacher in Richville, whose recent editorial stated it was time to expel Huck from the classroom was flooded with hate mail.

All over the country, millions of books are removed from the curriculum daily, but only the Huck Finn book gets national attention. Newsweek, Time Magazine got on board. Therefore, I know it has to serve a purpose that benefits some segment of society other than to educate, which it certainly does not. It likewise has no benefits for African Americans, and under the sun and stars, it can't possibly be irreplaceable. After reading Willie Lynch's report on how to make a slave, I see a connection to Huck Finn. Since the school system was never tailored to successfully educate Black students, such a book that depicts Black people as subhuman, illiterate, ignorant and subservient tends to keep the slave mentality alive, thereby enhancing and perpetuating the white privilege superiority complex among white students and even other groups who are newcomers to our country.

It locks in the institutional racism in this country, that this country feeds on. Putting that nasty demeaning in a word in a book is supposed to make it palatable. No other race of people is demoralized and degraded as they sit in the safety of their classrooms, but when Black children are hurt, no one seems to care. This book violates the No Child Left Behind mandate for culturally

competent curriculum. Japanese students are learning too English by reading and memorizing President Obama's speeches. And for our students, it is unthinkable that a goal of electing a Black president before its demise is horrendous. Huck Finn should die of painful death.

Hannah Rusk:

Hi, I'm Hannah Rusk and I go to Garfield. I'm one of Mr. Lovre's students. And over the past few months, there have been a few articles debating whether or not Huck Finn should be taught in schools. And one of them was written by a Vancouver teacher whose name I think was Foley and he was arguing that Huck Finn should be taken out of school. He says in his article that it makes African American students uncomfortable. As a half African American student and a half white African American student, I didn't really know what to think when we started reading Huck Finn in school, but as someone who if my parents were born probably 20 years earlier wouldn't exist because they wouldn't have been able to meet really, I think it's important to learn how different that society is now from when Huck Finn was written.

Huck Finn may or may not be a well-written book, but it's important to look at the mindset of America back then. Regardless of Twain's point, it was written and we need to see how the minds of America worked back then as opposed to now. And just because we've come a long way from then doesn't mean that it should be ignored. That's like saying that we shouldn't teach about slavery in a history class either just because that part of our history is over now. So I think that it's a good idea to teach the book just for the context, so we can understand the mindset of America back then without saying it satire or saying it's not.

Cole Austin:

Hi, my name's Cole Austin and I'm a senior at Garfield, a former Mr. Lovre student. So first off, as a high school student, the topic of slavery in itself is somewhat taboo when spoke about in the classroom. And being in a classroom where I'm one of the four people of color in my AP class, you can see how that can bring up some problems. When reading Huck Finn in the book, when reading Huck Finn in the classroom, however, it was looked through the lands more as an American classic more than a topic and a discussion about slavery. And when that occurs, I think that having Huck Finn in the classroom allow for the topic of discussion to not necessarily focus on slavery, but because of the literary aspects of the book. And along with that, we were able to have that discussion of slavery.

Reading it by itself, I can definitely see where you're coming from making your argument, but I think once again, the mindset of that time was an accurate depiction that Mark Twain was talking about and that reading it by itself can definitely lead to distorted views of Black people of those times. But reading it supplemented by Beloved, actually another book that we read in that book, contrasted those two views. So although by itself, I think that it's not necessarily a good depiction of Blacks, but in contrast, with the supplement of reading Beloved and the book and those different contrasting views, I think leads for more educational value.

David Wright:

Thank you all very, very much for sharing your feelings and thoughts with us about this and we're going to have a lot more of that. Thank you all. That was just excellent. Before I move to some follow-up questions, I think what I'd like to do actually is a question that ... Most of my questions actually are for the entire panel, but a question that actually opens out to the audience. This is just a quick little thing, but I'd like to do a straw poll, as it were, for anybody who wants to participate and all you have to do is a show of hands just to see what kind of territory we're in.

So I'm going to ask a series of quick questions and I'd like for people to raise their hand, if they feel it would be acceptable to have Huck Finn as a required text for college students majoring in American literature, if it's acceptable for college students to have that as a requirement, as majors in American literature, does that make sense? There'll be more questions, I promise. How about if it would be acceptable, and yeah, please show your hands if you feel that way and this is also people in the panel may as well, if it would be acceptable to require this book of college students, say as part of a general survey class for four-year college students, would that be acceptable? Acceptable. Yeah, that's the standard I'm setting. It's a pretty low standard.

High school, which is what we're talking about today, would it be acceptable to require Huck Finn of high school students, 12th grade? Yeah. Yeah, as a part of the ... Yeah. Okay. Junior high school, let's say ninth grade, would it be acceptable to require this text for junior high school students? Any hands? Then I probably don't need to ask about elementary school because all the hands are down. My point, I think, is that ... I don't think that any of us are talking about the eradication of a book, but we're talking about its suitability and we all have different standards there and maybe are in less radical disagreement than we think. Maybe not.

So I'm just going to wade right in with something that I'm going to refer to throughout as the N-word. I hope that's okay with everybody else and this is to anybody and everybody who wants to pick it up on the panel. Would it be so wrong to change ... Given the offensiveness of the word and how much a part of many challenges of this book it has been, would it be so wrong to change that word into something less offensive to African Americans such as negro, which was also in the vernacular at the time? Anybody want to-

Mark Lovre:

This is the starting point in my class once we start actually reading the book, which is having a class discussion about how the 30 people in the room will deal with the word in the book and what it means to different groups of people and what it means in our world today versus then and how responsible we feel to what the piece of art in front of us and the world. And I don't think any group of students has ever landed on the idea of using the N-word in discussion. And to confess, I wouldn't let them. We just keep talking about it until they saw the light and groups have agreed to use it in the book if we're reading a quote and it's a long conversation and other groups have decided, "No, not at all. We're not going to say it out loud. We're not going to pretend it's not there, but that's just ..."

And so again, that oversimplification theme that I want to make sure that students understand that this is a word with weight and heft in the world. It's not something that you could just say, "Well, people should get over it," because we can't. That's not reality.

Beatrice Clark:

I would like to come in and say if the word nigger wasn't in the book, I don't think it would be appreciated so much. I think that's part of the appeal it has to people because they say, "This is how it was then." Well, the truth of the matter, that's how it is now. So we don't need a book in the schoolroom class that emphasizes the word, and rather than change it to negro, what if that word was changed to chinks or kikes or faggots, how would you feel about it then if it degraded something that's close to you? I'm African American, so it's close to me because it represents me and people that look like me.

It doesn't represent a lot of the people that feel it should be in the classes because they don't feel the pain, they don't feel the degradation. So that to me is irrelevant that you want it in the classroom. The book doesn't need to be there because it does offend African Americans. Even now, we're talking about the N-word. Why is it the N-word? The word is nigger.

Alan Miller:

I don't know what kind of community Renton is and we talked earlier and I know that, in Renton in classrooms, the word was used in ways that were harmful to your daughter. In Berkeley, we have a very different discussion about the use of the word and I also do what you talk about doing, talking about how we're going to use it, what we will do when the word's on the page and we're reading aloud, what students' emotional responses to the word are. But I have lots of students who are very casual with the use of the word. And it's really important for me to talk about why I can't be casual with the word. I can't be casual with the word.

When I grew up, if somebody called you a nigger or a Black nigger was worse, you would fight. You would roll around on the ground and beat each other until you were bloody. And young people today, many young people today, many young people in Berkeley and in the Bay Area and in many urban settings are really too comfortable with the word. I've had students tell me that all of their friends are their niggers and that's very upsetting to me. The hair on the back of my neck just starts to stand up when they do that. That's really disturbing. I'll try to do this really briefly. I had a student tell me that the word was not an objectionable word. It didn't affect him in any way, whatsoever. He used it all the time. All his friends were.

And a few minutes later, he gets hit with a piece of paper and he says, "Nigger, blah, blah, blah," and he was trying to tell me that it was [inaudible 00:32:11] of all the poison and I said, "Look how you just used it. Was it divested of all the poison? Is it a word that expresses love and bonding and friendship and togetherness and collective, some sort of collective identity?" I said, "It's not there." So it's an opportunity to talk about the use of the word, which much as we would not like it to be so is ... I mean, you mentioned the 200 times, in Berkeley High, walking down the halls, I cannot walk any hall at any time of the day without hearing the word. 30% of our students are African American.

David Wright:

Anybody else have any thoughts on that one?

Beatrice Clark:

I think what's done on the streets has no bearing in what's done in the classroom, yet a lot of young people and older people use the word on the street and they call it this term of endearment. But we're talking about an educational setting where we go to educate our children and they shouldn't have to come into a classroom and feel uncomfortable because Mark Twain happened to write a book that says, "This is what they did back then." They still do it now, it's no difference and we can't compare street talk with classroom talk. Maybe if they were taught in the schools or at home about the meaning of the word, a lot of people don't know the significance of the word and it just transferred from slavery into mainstream society and they used the word casually in that manner, but it's a degrading word.

And based on that alone, it doesn't matter what Mark Twain said about it and how he fitted in and all that, that's just a bunch of rhetoric. The fact is the word is degrading and it should not be used in a classroom.

David Wright:

So I promise we'll move beyond the word, but I want to stay there just a little while longer actually and I appreciate, actually, Mrs. Clark, you've spoken really eloquently actually about the pain and alienation and feelings that that word provokes, I think as passionately as I've heard anybody speak. Earlier, you had talked about how that word in the history of America has always been a degrading word toward African Americans. When they were brought back to America, they were never thought of as human beings in the first place. And this word was something to call a thing that wasn't human.

What probably many of the teachers and some other people here maybe take issue with, and is an interesting thing I'd like to hear discussed is, many would say that is precisely the reason why the book should be taught, that the very things that would suggest to you that it shouldn't are exactly the reasons why other people feel it's relevant. I'm wondering what people's thoughts and feelings are about that.

Jessica Garcia:

I have a 12-year-old brother and he's half Black, and in his middle school, he started picking up the word, the N-word. I don't feel comfortable saying it though, the N-word. And he's also in a thing called Rainier Scholars and I think he read Huck Finn in that when he's in there. And after reading it, he stopped using the N-word casually, because while reading the book, he saw that it's a degrading word and it's not like something casually that you can just say to a person. And before he read the book, he thought it was stupid and he didn't want to read it and he was like, "It's just a racist book that's going to make me feel bad."

But because of how they taught it in his classroom, he got the idea that Mark Twain was making fun of racism in parts of the book with pop and stuff like that. Although I think they oversimplified it with him because although he does make fun of racism, there are parts where he's just blatantly racist.

Hannah Rusk:

I think that a huge part of the responsibility of whether or not it should be taught for that reason falls with the teachers and their judgment of the climate of their classroom, because from listening to you talk, it's clear that your school district has a hugely different climate than the district that I'm accustomed to. And when we started reading Huck Finn in the classroom, beyond the first discussion over whether

or not we should use the N-word, there wasn't any issue with that and we all were able to learn it. So I think that it really, really does depend on if the teacher is able to handle the book appropriately or not.

David Wright:

There have been a lot of alternatives, books suggested as things to read instead of Huck Finn, and you'll pardon the librarian in me, but I went through and saw that many of them also have a lot of that word, maybe less than Huck Finn. Pudd'nhead Wilson, which is frequently used, which is a much shorter book than Huck Finn, has it at least 80 times. Many other works too, including the narrative of Frederick Douglass, The Color Purple, I know Why The Caged Bird Sings, Invisible Man, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Native Son. Jubilee by Margaret Walker contains several to many, many instances. Barack Obama's Dreams From My Father has it about a dozen times. What I'm leading up to is, in what sense is this an issue of the word pure and simple and to what degree does context, the speaker, what other issues come into it? If we think it's acceptable to do a different book that also features that word, is it a matter of degree? Anybody?

Beatrice Clark:

Could you repeat the last part of your question?

David Wright:

I'm sorry. I'm just wondering if other works that have the word in them are deemed as acceptable as replacements, what is it then, what's actually at issue? Is it in addition to just the word itself? Is it a matter of degree, who's speaking, the context?

Beatrice Clark:

Part of it to me is because it's always Black people that they sit around and have these discussions about what affects them. I haven't seen, and referencing to what this young lady said about the climate, the climate, I'm sure where it's taught in our district is no different than the climate to where it's taught any place else. It's the effect it has on the people that are affected by it. And I haven't seen any books or read any books where they had to put other stuff with it, pad it up. And in the written school district, they withheld the book. They put it on hold until they could write up some guidelines on how to teach the book sensitively, which I thought was ridiculous. If it's insensitive material, you got to do all of this to make it right.

And I have a problem with the fact that it's always Black people, a word that offends them. What offends the other population in the school district? What are they having a problem with? What do they sit around discussing that harms their child, the Latinos, the Asians, the Caucasians? Where is your center of focus that you need to sit around and say, "Well, we need to set some guidelines together to use this material"? I don't see that happening. So it's not so much the degree. It's just a population of people that is targeted by all this negativity and we have the major problem. They don't have any problem putting up on the headlines Black children at the bottom when it comes to test scores, when it comes to jobs, when it comes to everything, when it comes to the prison system.

Why is that negativity always on us? And we're supposed to bear it cheerfully while everybody else says, "Yeah, it's no big deal." I have a problem with that.

David Wright:

Does anybody else want to speak to just the context of the word used by different authors in different kinds of works?

Mark Lovre:

Yes, I do. Just trying to get it in my head so that it doesn't ... I think, every year, I have students who say, "Yeah, oh, Huck Finn, okay, whatever," and I'm like, "Oh yeah, what's that?" "Oh, I read it when I was in fifth grade." I was like, "Well, who was dumb enough to let you do that?" "My mom." "Tell her I said hi." I think Huck Finn is unique because it has been at the center for so long and I'm really conflicted about being part of the machinery that's keeping it there. Other books aren't oversimplified in most Americans' minds, right? So many white people I know, "Oh, I love Huck Finn." "Yeah, why?" "Oh, the kid and the river and the freedom."

And in my classroom, I even have a cartoon version for children, for third graders and everybody looks pretty and everybody looks happy and there's nothing about Jim besides he's a heck of a guy hanging out with our hero, right? And that should be in the video of racist artifacts. And that makes it different from every other book because the Huck character has become separated from the book. And when you actually go back and read it, all of those people who say that, if they actually went back and read it as grownups and actually read every word, they would have a much different response and they might still end up valuing it, but it would be a much more informed like, "Wow, are you sure this is the one I read because ..."

And then in response to what Ms. Clark said, I think it's a fabulous point, right? Guidelines, what it is, but it also points out, I think the fact that the African American experience in America is unique. You can make connections and commonalities to other minority groups, groups who ... Well, just minority groups in various different ways, but it is a core story of Western civilization in the United States in particular. Slavery, rape, violence, horror is what our great country was built on and that idea of getting to that idea throughout someone's education is important. And whether or not Huck Finn is a way to do that or can be done by everyone or every student or how much time can it take is different, but it really is and that goes back to who uses the N-word and that's an illustration of why it's powerful.

In my school, there are people who can say the N-word in the halls and people who can't and that's regulated by all those 17 year olds. And we talk about that, right? "Who owns language?" And you said faggot and that's another one that's happening now, right? Not in high school necessarily, but you hear people in the gay community calling each other that. And other people in the gay community, again, usually older, saying, "Are you kidding me? Are you kidding me? You can't use that as a term of affection." And so seeing that echoing can be worth exploring.

Beatrice Clark:

I had a footnote, when I said that word faggot, I only meant in reference to, it's not in a book, it's not in the schools as far as it's used. I don't have a discussion about that, but I'm just talking about they

haven't put it in a school yet and they won't put it in a school because it hurts their feelings. So that was my point.

Alan Miller:

I think you talked about, Ms. Clark, you talked about the context and the question was about context. I'd want to say that Huck's a special book, but some of the other works that I'd really worry about being taught if we're not going to teach them in context that have many very offensive things, unfortunately, hussy and slut in The Scarlet Letter don't have that same kind of, and they're there. Okie in The Grapes of Wrath, offensive term, it doesn't have the same resonance because Okies have a different history in this culture. Immigrant, migrant workers, there's all kinds of literature that has offensive terms in it. White folks, I wanted to make the point, white folks don't get off easy in Huck Finn and that's something that I talk about when I teach the book.

White folks are not the superior people in Huck Finn. There, many of them are idiots and readers enjoy laughing at them and making fun of them. And some of what people laugh at and make fun of is their racism, is their lack of schooling, is their speech. So again, that's another thing to think about when teaching the book, is that they don't look like great folks. We're not saying, "I want to be like the duke and the dauphin," "I want to be like Huck." Even Huck at the end of the book when he plays the whole game with Jim's freedom, a lot of readers, a lot of high school readers are sensitive enough to say, "That's really messed up that he would play this trick on him in this way. That's really cruel. That's really horrific."

Hannah Rusk:

Well, I wanted to address the idea of replacing Huck Finn with a different book. And one of the books that he listed was Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston, which we also had to read for Mr. Lovre's class. And I think it's interesting that that book would be listed as a replacement because it's written by a Black woman depicting Black society in Florida in, I believe, like the 1930s or so. And when she published that book, the author received a lot of criticism from Black critics saying that she didn't portray the oppression of the Black characters enough, like there wasn't enough of that in the book. Whereas when we talk about Huck Finn, we're talking about how there's too much of a negative attitude in there towards the Black characters.

And the second thing that I wanted to say is, last year in our language arts class, we had to read The Autobiography of Malcolm X, which is written by Malcolm X obviously. And while he doesn't have a hugely negative attitude towards white people in it, it's not exactly celebrating them in any way. And I think that if we're ... And I think that no one got upset about that and no one had a debate over whether or not it was inappropriate to teach that.

David Wright:

Excellent. Thank you. I know we're going to open it up, but I've got more questions. Perhaps I can just ask a couple more and then we'll see if anybody else has some they'd like to share. In this case, as in many, when this book in particular is challenged, and it has been challenged as much as almost any other book, it is often, should we see a vocal minority, a small group of people, who are challenging it.

And what I'm wondering, particularly for the teachers is, how would that change if say half the parents and students in a school objected to a book or if all of the parents and students in a school objected to a book? I don't know if that's ever happened, but how would that be different? Under what circumstances is it right to remove a book from the curriculum?

Alan Miller:

I actually had an experience where parents objected to a book and the process is you go to meet the associate superintendent or this is what happened in my case. She said, "Why do you teach this? What would people object to? How do you answer those objections?" And it was an interesting thing. The reason then, this was a book by African American author, April Sinclair Coffee Will Make You Black, which we were doing with our ninth graders, the parent came to ... An African American parent complained about the book because there was some sexual content where we do a social living unit where we have to deal with sexual content and social issues of ninth graders, students growing up, drugs, sex, violence, peer pressure and so forth.

The parent ... And I think it's fine for people to express their opinions, but she was really isolated. Students overwhelmingly enjoyed reading the book, but the process is that you're generally called in and asked to defend it. I like hearing what I just heard from Hannah, which is that Huck was not the only book by and about African Americans. And if it is, that's an enormous problem. But when you can say, "Starting in first grade, we've been dealing with diverse literatures, and since middle school, we've been dealing with diverse literatures that open several windows on people's experience in the country," I think that's a powerful thing and I think that that's what we're supposed to be doing.

Unfortunately, there are many instances where in schools we're not doing that, where we're not doing a good job, frankly. There shouldn't be one book or any one thing that does that. Students really need that experience of weighing and creating images and creating image ... Well, anyway, that's basically what I wanted to say and that's the process.

Cole Austin:

I just want to talk about the book in general. When it comes to talking about Huck Finn and the reason why people approach it in the classroom so cautiously is not necessarily because of the large use of the word nigger, but more because of the harsh racism that exists within the book. And with that being said, I think it's more not of discussion of the book itself, but of the discussion of racism in schools. And I think that the reason why it's so hard to teach in schools is because racism still strongly exists in society today. And with that being said, I don't want to blank.

Beatrice Clark:

Keep talking.

Cole Austin:

Oh my goodness. I'm blanking. I'm sorry. So yeah, what I was going to say is that I think that it's necessary to have this conversation in schools because this is the only opportunity that we're going to have to have objective views about things that were going on at these times. I think the reason why

racism is so largely perpetuated is because of the influence that happens within our homes, because if people have grown up with racist beginnings, that's only going to be perpetuated within their offspring. But in schools, we have objective learning that can occur, and with having these contrasting views with Huck Finn and with your Beloveds and books like that, this is where this discussion can really grow and leading to, I guess, I'm not going to say a perfect world, but a more aware view about racism and race in American society.

Beatrice Clark:

I have a comment still on the paper here.

David Wright:

That's okay. Yeah.

Beatrice Clark:

Okay. I was going to make a comment, but instead I'm just going to read the cover of one of the flyers that I've been passing out recently and it says, "Time for change in the Renton School District," and I have the good, the bad and the ugly. The good, first African American president elected November 8th, 2008, President Barack Hussein Obama. The bad, a major newspaper folds for good, March 17th, 2009, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer changed. The ugly, book that degrades Black people by calling them nigger over 200 times remains in the Renton School District curriculum for over 30 years, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. How stale is that?

David Wright:

Well, we may not reach agreement, but I think it's time to turn to questions and comments from the audience. And let's actually start since I see your hand with Nancy.

Nancy:

Thank you. I was telling Alan today about a friend of mine, a dear friend, who was teaching in Everett School District or above Everett. I can't quite remember where. And she was teaching The Crucible, which had been required reading in that school for many years. And she had taught it for many years and the students had really enjoyed reading The Crucible and using it to discuss the Salem witch trials, but also using it to discuss the communist witch trials and everything that you can discuss from that book. And what happened is her school became very, very strongly Christian and the majority of families and it happened in a really short time. It happened around housing patterns and the housing in the area being built up.

So all of a sudden, the school grew quite a bit and the families who were joining the school were very, very strong fundamentalist Christian families. Well, they immediately objected to The Crucible because The Crucible deals heavily with witchcraft. It became the center of a big controversy at the school. The book was taken out, at least for that time period, and the principal and superintendent and everybody on down became very upset and frightened of the parent outrage. So it's directly addressing your

question about what happens if it's not just a small group of parents, one group of parent, but it's half of the parents or all the parents in the school.

It was literally half, if not more, of the parents in the school that were objecting to this book. And the teacher ended up really getting the bad end of it. She was put in the position of defending the book alone. Nobody stood with her and she ended ... The librarians actually finally came to her aid, but she ended a long career just with this really humiliating incident that had happened. And my whole point and what I felt about that situation was this school and this school district had not dealt with the changes in the world around them and in the world of their school.

So here, they had had all of these students come and families come who are fundamentalists Christian and they had just not talked about that at all. Nobody had discussed anything. So when kids said, "We want to read the Bible. We want to have a prayer in the morning," or whatever, everybody said, "Well, let's not talk about that." Really, everybody just turned away from what had become kind of a main issue in that community. So it had been building and building and building, these clashes and these different ways of seeing things. And then Karen, like she had done for 20 years, pulls out The Crucible to teach it and then everything becomes about The Crucible because nobody's been dealing with the issues.

And it just seems to me like this happens oftentimes with books where people can focus on the book and the issue, but the issue, like with Huckleberry Finn, like the young people were talking about, the issue is racism and the issue is race as it existed in Mark Twain's day and before and as it exists now. And it's like, if we're not going to talk about that and deal with that and if a school district like the Renton School District is going to just turn this blind eye to its African American students and not even just pretend that we're still living in whatever era and we can teach Huck Finn in a context that it used to be taught like nothing has happened, like Barack Obama and Martin Luther King and nothing else ever happened and we're just going to do Huck Finn, it's like we got bigger problems in the book.

The book becomes a ... Yeah, but we got some really big problems if this is the only way we can discuss what is begging to be discussed. The elephant in the room is through the book. We have a big, big problem. So that's all I wanted to say.

Beatrice Clark:

Exactly true.

Barbara:

My name is Barbara and I'd like to address a question to the young man on the end. What's your name?

Cole Austin:

Cole.

Barbara:

Hi, Cole.

Cole Austin:

How you doing?

Barbara:

Fine, thank you. What I wanted to ask you is, you stated that the teaching of this book really more or less depends on how it's being presented, whether it's a American classic or versus history. Okay, whether it's American classic of versus history and you said that it's really not good if it's presented alone because it's distorted. And in the book, it's harsh racism in addition to be addressing, mention the word nigger, nigger, several times. Can I just ask you, in your classroom setting, Cole, how do you personally feel as this book is being presented and taught and the word nigger is used so many times and how does it feel to you personally?

Cole Austin:

I remember the first time we read this book, I was addressed personally and was asked by the class if they thought it was okay if we read the word nigger out loud and I said, no, I wasn't okay with that. And I just want to talk about more along the lines of why I think Black youth use the word so heavily now as a form of affection or just regularly and casually. And I think the reason why is because we don't feel that sting of racism as much as our ancestors did. And when we're having discussions of racism, I really don't think that things should be sugarcoated because then we get comfortable. And I think that's what's happening today. We're getting too comfortable to the racism that exists.

Back then, when you heard the word nigger, that was, like you said, something that you would fight over. Now, if we hear that word, that's something that's okay. And I think that's because we don't feel that sting of racism. That doesn't exist today in our society. And I think that reading a book like this somewhat makes it real for us, makes it uncomfortable, an uncomfortable setting in the classroom. And I think that's what needs to happen because the word nigger should not be a comfortable thing. It should be uncomfortable. And I think that's what the book is supposed ... That's the feeling that the book is supposed to arouse, uncomfortability in the classroom when that word is used.

Calista Phair:

Hi, my name's Calista Phair and I'm Ms. Clark's daughter. I was the student that protested and started the initial protest of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn in the Renton School District in 2002 when I was a junior. It hit the fan, the media fan, Seattle Post-Intelligence, AP. [inaudible 01:01:43]. We're on national radio talk show hosts. So it has been out there and I feel like I should be sitting there instead of sitting here, but I basically just wanted to share my experience at how it felt being an African American in a classroom. And it seems to me that the panel has five, four and one against and I have to basically be a right arm to give a different perspective.

Being in a school that's 40% African American and not one time have I ever in the Renton School District from elementary school, junior high school to high school, we've never read one book by an African American author. We never read Malcolm X. We never read I Know Why Caged Bird Sings. We don't learn Black history. We only have about five teachers in the whole entire Renton School District from high school, elementary school to middle school. So coming from that type of background, being

in a classroom where a teacher tells all the African American students that community college is the only place that you can go, and if you think you're going to go to a university, you can only get accepted to a Black university because that's the only people that would accept you.

And then getting thrown Huckleberry Finn and saying, "This is your history. This is your Black history, learn it," and a white teacher tells you in class, "Today, we're going to learn about the word nigger," understand where that come from and how that hurt and pain can be. And sitting in a classroom where a teacher tells me, "This is your Black history," but then the next teacher tells me, "You can't do anything but go to community college," it hits you in the face and learning exactly what type of racism is being perpetuated, institutionalized in the system.

And I feel great that you guys had the opportunity to learn about Malcolm X and learn about Black authors, that was not something that I got a chance to experience, but being in a classroom where a teacher demonstrates, "This is how slaves looked when they were being called nigger and nigger was the last word that they were told by while they were being burned at the stake, but here you go, this is your Black history. Learn it," it changes the whole dynamics of how it is and where me and my mother are coming from. And this is why I push it so much in terms of not learning the book and not being taught the book because I had to endure racism.

I had to endure racism from all ends. As far as every newspaper article that was against me, they posted it up on a school bulletin board. Having the school newspaper editorial department say that I'm wrong and this is a school that I go to. Having my vice principal tell my mother, "Hey, homeschool her for the rest of the year because she's doing too much," and being able to be in that school system and being able to deal with it day in and day out every day, getting suspended three times in a month, retaliation for doing the book, but I graduated and I prevailed and I went to school and I went to college and that's what I'm doing now, but you have to understand exactly where we're coming from in terms of a different side.

We didn't come from that type of background, but being able to endure it and deal with it and having a teacher say, "Well, this is your Black history. You're supposed to read it. You're supposed to learn it," but that's the only book that they demonstrate as African American literature. And that is why I personally am a strong advocate to getting the book out of the Renton School District because of what it has taught. And you guys are saying that African American students, they use the word outside of the classroom and they decide not to use it because they read the book. Well, it was different in where we came from because our students said, "Well, since the teacher can say the word nigger, so can I. Since the teacher can say it in the classroom, so can I."

And that's what they did and they validated outside of the classrooms. And when somebody told them, "Hey, you can't say that word," they said, "My teacher says it to me when we read the book, so why can't I?" So it's a different aspect. And I just wanted to piggyback off what Ms. Clark said, just to give a different perspective.

David Wright:

Thank you very much.

Nancy:

Listening to you talk, and thank you for saying that, I kept having in my mind that phrase, "The pen is mightier than the sword," because I've always heard that used in a way of, well, beating the plow shares or beating the swords into plow shares and a book as like an alternative to a weapon, but listening to you speak, I realized a book can be a weapon just like anything can be a weapon. It can be used and it can be pointed and it can be brought out to show, "Here, this is proof that you are what's here in this book." And I just feel like, on the one hand, you're focusing on the Renton School District's use of this book, it's very interesting because I suppose, if the Renton School District, and I'm just taking from what I'm hearing here today, were more enlightened, they either would not teach the book or they would teach it in context.

So in a way, the book is symbolic of what's going on in the Renton School District, but if you took that book out of the Renton School District tomorrow, it sounds like things would still be really bad in the Renton School District for African American students. So in order for that, there's so many things that would need to change about what happens in the Renton School District and this is almost the symbol of it, but it sounds like the problems ... I mean, Huck Finn could be gone tomorrow from the Renton School District and you still wouldn't have people them teaching Black history or students have an opportunity to read African American authors or all of these other things or more teachers of color. So there's a whole, whole lot of problems that this has become one illustration of ...

Because when I hear you talk about the way it was taught and your teacher bowing and shuffling and showing, "This is what a slave was and this is how ..." it's, "Wow." It makes me think, "Oh, the pen is mightier than the sword. You might as well take it, start jabbing people if you're going to do that insensitive, really humiliating something with the book." So I felt like I got your point of just the way in which this was used and the enormous pain of it that nobody was acknowledging, that nobody was acknowledging this pain exists here that is because of these issues that we have either not dealt with or perpetuated things that are really horrifying in this day and age.

Maybe horrifying is too big a word, but the idea that kids are subjected to this in school, it's sad. It's tragic really. So I feel like I got it on a different level and that the book, it could have been ... It was really used almost in this way of, "You don't belong here and here are your people and you can't learn and this is who you are," and what a horrible thing to do to you and to the book too, in a way, to give it that kind of awful power. Anyway-

Chris Higashi:

I know we have a teacher from Nathan High School here. Do you have any comment? Do you teach the book? Do you want to say anything?

Audience:

I'd just like to say something on a lighter note, I went to college in Los Angeles, Los Angeles State College, a long, long time ago and I got fascinated with all these books by Malcolm X and Black Like Me and all that stuff and I was reading all those things. And right next to me sat a Black woman who was going to college too. And she turned to me once and says, "Why don't you just talk to me?"

Chris Higashi:

All right. I wonder if now, should we end the formal part of the program and just invite people to come down and perhaps talk with the panelists not on ... Or I'm sorry, do you have something else you want to say?

Audience:

I did have something to say, but I really felt that you brought closure to this conversation, which could have been left a little bit, as you said, maybe four against one, and I didn't want to come here to feel like we were in ... I wanted to come here feeling like we were in something that would open our minds and not be against each other, but the human side of it, as you brought out, really makes us understand better the whole discussion. And so I encourage in the future that you and your mom both are going to have to be on the panel in the future, because it really rounds it out. And thank you for putting into the context that really rounded things out for me. Thank you.

Audience:

Beautiful.

Beatrice Clark:

I understand that this is the last comment. I'm a civil rights baby, and as I grew up in high school, you wanted to get your butt beat, you called people one of two things, Black or nigger, and you were going to get beat down, okay? So that lets you know, from my era, nigger was a nothing nice, okay? And to continue on, I think we're trying to sanitize a very serious issue by making it acceptable to use this book in the classroom. And it appears that the only people are truly embarrassed are the American Negro students, but because they don't want to stand against the group, they take it and somebody mentioned the Stockholm Syndrome or I think those that don't say anything have begun to identify with their captors, so to speak.

And they want to feel that not to be on the outside, we'll say it's okay, but it really isn't okay, because when they use that term nigger in that book, which I think is on the second page immediately, that refers to me, my mama, my daddy, my sister, my brother and all of my other relatives. And I heard it mentioned that, "If it's only a few complaining, then maybe we don't have a problem," but I know that there is a formula that's used with regard to complaints on television and about advertising. There's a formula. One complaint is almost equal to a thousand complaints of people that don't take the time to let you know.

So because it's few, it doesn't mean that there aren't many that are offended. I feel like ... What's that guy's name, George Carlin, when he said the seven words that you weren't supposed to say on TV? So honky, faggot poor white trash, cracker. Now, if nigger is okay, then let's bring some books into the classroom that say poor white trash, honky, faggot and let's see what happens when we use those terms to educate our youth. And I don't think it's going to be a quiet situation if we were to do that. Thank you.

Chris Higashi:

Thank you. One more?

Beatrice Clark:

I think it's very defamatory and it's something very, very seriously wrong in America. If we're going to fight so hard to keep this word and this work in the classroom, I think it is an attempt to keep all Black children reminded that, "No matter what, you are still a nigger." And if that weren't the case, we would do away with it because we find that many of our students are humiliated and they don't appreciate it. I just talked to a lady in a nail shop in Tacoma and she told me that her grandchild was driven to tears when that book was used and this was just within the last few weeks.

Chris Higashi:

One thing I forgot to do at the very beginning was ask, how many people have read My Jim? Okay. So for those who haven't, I should have told you a little bit about it and why we're having this program. So Nancy Rawles takes the character of Jim from Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and she tells the story of the family left behind when Jim escapes down the river with Huck. There's a really brief passage in Huckleberry Finn where Huck finds Jim crying and missing his wife and his children. So Nancy decided to create a wife for Jim, Sadie, and to write what she calls her literary response to Huckleberry Finn.

So what we get is the story ... Unlike most slave narratives, which are the stories of people who escaped, we have instead a more common story, which is of a woman who survived slavery and reconstruction. So I hope you all will read My Jim and come to more of the programs and come here, Nancy, between May 20th and 23rd. Thank you all very much to the panelists also.

Speaker 1:

This program was presented by the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library. Thank you for listening to this library podcast.