

## Beyond Huck Finn: To find real context, remember Frederick Douglass

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By **Sean Kirst / The Post-Standard**

Twice, Michael Patrick Hearn has provided annotated notes to accompany new editions of "Huckleberry Finn," the 19th Century novel by Samuel Clemens, best known as Mark Twain. The research required a journey deep into Twain's world, and Hearn now listens with fascination to the **national debate** about a version of "Huck Finn" planned by NewSouth Books, a publisher that intends to substitute the word "slave" for Twain's use of the most notorious of racial epithets.

Alan Gribben, a professor at Auburn University, came up with the idea, according to The New York Times. The paper reported that Gribben had a simple rationale: Twain's frequent use of that singularly powerful racial insult had caused the book to fall off many school reading lists, since teachers found it difficult to teach a work of such volatile language to younger readers.

While the decision touched off a literary brawl about censorship vs. cultural sensitivity, Hearn wonders if there isn't a separate route. He lives in New York City, but he regularly passes through this region. He is writing a biography of L. Frank Baum, the Central New York native who authored "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz."

Hearn is keenly aware of another 19th century presence in Syracuse and other Upstate cities, and he thinks one way of calming the furor over Twain is by remembering the link between two monumental figures:

"Frederick Douglass once attended a reading of 'Huck Finn,' in Washington D.C.," Hearn said, "and when it was over he went back stage to see Twain."

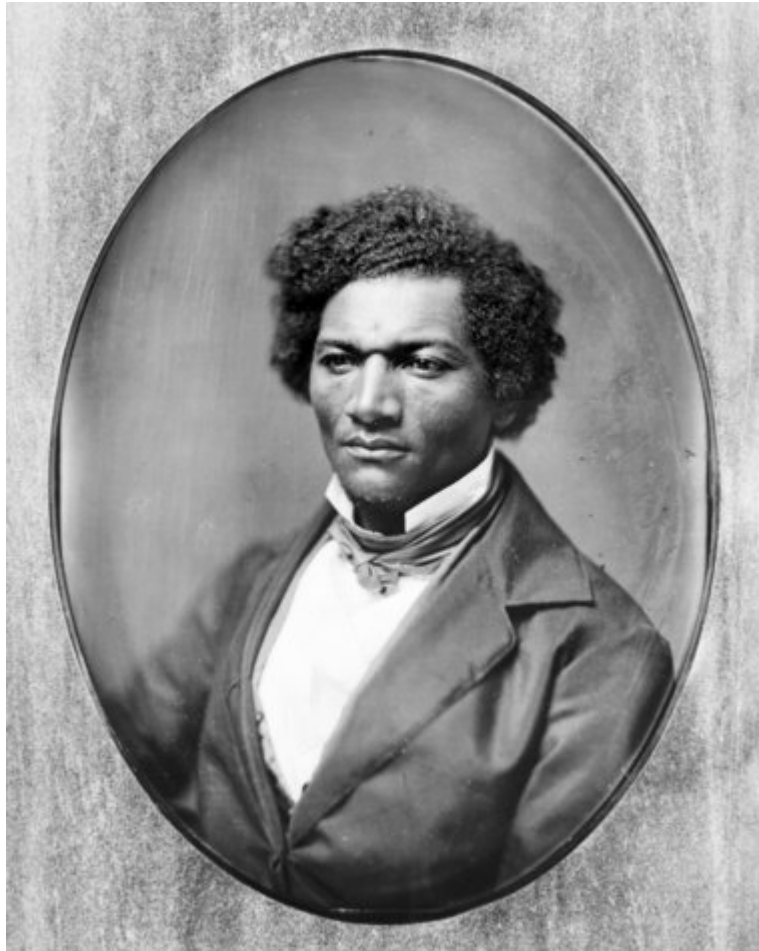
While scholars and educators pummel each other about Twain's use of language, Hearn's thoughts are drawn to



The Associated Press

Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain: His path would cross with that of Frederick Douglass.

Douglass, an escaped slave who settled in Rochester. His flight was made possible by his ability to read and write, skills outlawed by slaveholders. In the North, Douglass' eloquence as a speaker and writer fueled the movement against slavery — while helping to shatter the myth that African-Americans were lesser beings.



Onondaga Historical Association

Frederick Douglass, around 1848

His ties with Twain ran deep. Twain's eventual father-in-law, Jervis Langdon of Elmira, was a passionate abolitionist who played a major role in Douglass' escape. Twain, raised in slaveholding Missouri, grew up immersed in the virulent racism of the world around him. Yet he was a thinking man, and Hearn said his attitudes changed as he traveled the nation. By 1869, as editor of a Buffalo newspaper, he was writing editorials that attacked a lynching in Tennessee.

At about the same time, Twain had his first chance to meet Douglass, a handshake that soon evolved into a friendship.

To Hearn, the great literary mistake in scholastic America does not concern strong language in "Huckleberry Finn." The real blunder, he said, is the absence of Frederick Douglass — the fierce, unbridled and heroic Douglass — from the curriculum of too many schools in the 50 states.

Douglass wrote several landmark autobiographies, in which he stripped away the veneer of Antebellum romance in slavery. He also used

strong words in laying bare a dehumanizing system that often involved rape, abduction and torture. Many of his observations still ring uncomfortably accurate about the world today.

To fully understand America demands an understanding of those books, and Hearn offers this solution to the Twain debate:

Keep the language of "Huckleberry Finn" as it is, but bring in Douglass as required reading in the schools.

"If you're going to have (high school students) read something with that language, have them read Douglass," Hearn said. "Then, when they get to Twain, they'll have the context."

That said, he doesn't see Mark Twain as a racist. He sees him as a man who wrote a courageous, even subversive book that climaxes with a child rejecting the biases and violence of the world surrounding him. As for Jim, the escaped slave going the wrong way on the river, Hearn describes him as the only truly admirable character in the

book. Everyone else, including Huck, has been poisoned.

To contemplate it on those levels, Hearn said, demands adult eyes and thinking. "No book should be forced upon a child," said Hearn, who knows the harsh themes of "Huck Finn" are especially painful for African-American children. His hope would be to leave Twain's words as they are, for older readers. If high schools want to teach the book, he said, it ought to be done in tandem.

Instead of Mark Twain, Hearn asks, "Why don't they start with Frederick Douglass?"

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