The astonishing irrationality of the micro-censors

National Post - Wednesday January 12th, 2011

'All modern literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn," said Ernest Hemingway, himself no slouch at aesthetic innovation.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has always provoked public consternation. When first published in 1885, libraries wouldn't carry it because of Huck's bad grammar! (Mark Twain pioneered the now-commonplace technique of demotic narration.)

But since the 1950s the locus of discomfort has been the N-word. Publishers have in the past opted for "slave," "servant" and even the ultramilquetoast "hand" as a substitute for that dread locution. Debate is presently swirling around a new school-targeted edition of Huckleberry Finn opting for "slave."

Although not technically censorship in the larger sense, since original editions abound, expurgation of the N-word in a school text is micro-censorship for students forced to use the altered text. The substitution is not aesthetically or thematically innocent. "Slave" describes a politically contingent status; "Slave Jim" could exist anywhere. "Nigger Jim" summons Huckleberry Finn's specific moral vision, inextricably joined to the immutable, race-based divide between whites and blacks in the American South.

When, for reasons of political correctness and students' alleged sensitivities, we start tampering with literature without authorial assent, we are on dangerous ground. In her 2004 book, The Language Police: How pressure groups restrict what students learn, Diane Ravitch, assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Education under president George H. Bush, illustrates the absurdities that result when educators put the sensitivities of readers above literary merit.

Here are examples Ravitch offers of words and phrases banned from textbooks and reading lists in the U.S. by "bias review" panels:

- A story in which peanuts are described as "a healthy snack," because some students have an allergy to them;

- A passage about patchwork quilting by women in a historical narrative of the western frontier, rejected because it stereotyped women as "soft" and "submissive";

- An inspiring true story of a heroic blind man who hiked to the top of Mount McKinley, rejected because in recounting the special dangers the blind hiker was vulnerable to, it suggested that blind people are "worse off" than sighted people, and because it contained "regional bias," favouring students familiar with mountains; likewise a charming story about a friendly dolphin was rejected for "regional bias," allegedly privileging kids who live by the sea;

- Aesop's fable, The Fox and the Crow, eliminated for "gender bias"--the vain crow is female;

- A passage about owls, rejected "because a Native American member of the bias committee said that owls are taboo for the Navajos"

And for my personal favourite, this: One bias and sensitivity committee voted out a story about a rotting stump in the forest that housed insects, birds, plants and animals. On the surface it was environmentally beautiful, because it emphasized the ways in which nature provides for her wards in organic, environmentally friendly ways. Fatally, however, the story's writer referred to the rotting stump as an "apartment house" for the forest creatures it sheltered. In the view of the committee, the analogy would upset apartment-dwelling inner-city children, who might think of themselves as insects in a rotting tree stump: "Youngsters who have grown up in a housing project may be distracted by similarities to their own living conditions. An emotional response may be triggered."

It's tempting to laugh at such absurdity, but there is nothing funny about censorship, or the astonishing irrationality that
governs the censoring sensibility. We must not give in to the impulse to sanitize even the supposedly unsayable, if it is part of the historical record.

Twain was not a racist. He opposed racism. And that is why the book must remain as it is. As America's premier literary critic Lionel Trilling said about Huck's use of the N-word: "This is the only word for a Negro that a boy like Huck would know in his place and time -- that is, an ignorant boy in the South before the Civil War." The use of offensive words, Trilling said, "is a fact that forms part of our national history, and a national history is not made up of pleasant and creditable things only ... it is something to be confronted and dealt with, not evaded or forgotten."

To excise aesthetic realism is to infantilize high school students (and a bit hypocritical, since the same students shielded from the N-word in class are regularly exposed to it in rap music). We need less concern for "feelings" in our schools and more concern for historical integrity-- not to mention reality.

bkay@videotron.ca