

# Epithets: When Art Clashes with Social Mores

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When authors write manuscripts, I suspect they are thinking about their artistic endeavor and rarely about how the words they choose could become an obstacle to lucrative markets. But they should think about it. Why go through the process of revision, editing, and all of the other aspects of publishing if your work, in some small way, alienates your audience. If so, you lose out on potential sales of your finished product.

When I published *The World of Comics*, a coming-of-age novel about a comic book collector in the 1970s, I wanted to capture the age of the budding cottage comic book industry as well as the age of the decade. During a street fight scene in the book, one of the delinquent characters demeans another character through the epithet “F\_gg\_t” (a derogatory word for someone gay). Although the storyline had nothing to do with the LGBT community, I used “F\_gg\_t” because I remembered when growing up during the 1970s that word was used as a common put down. In an effort to capture the slang of the era, I used it in my book thinking I was achieving “verisimilitude” (realism).

Unfortunately, I was not thinking how offensive that may be to somebody of current sensibilities. It doesn't matter that the way the “F” word was used back in the day meant you were a punk, rather than homosexual. The real question is, does an author have to forsake the realism of a past era to avoid offending a current day audience?

Let's examine the issue from artistic, social, and business perspectives. From a literary artistic perspective, verisimilitude is essential to capture an era. For example, in the book *Roots* by Alex Haley, he uses the “N” word prolifically throughout the novel. This was in part necessary to capture the slave era and to depict the demeaning experience. I believe without the use of the “N” word, *Roots* would not be as compelling a read. If current-day

words such as “African American” were used, it would lose credibility. For example, one sentence in Haley's book reads:

Kunta had come to dislike  
intensely hearing the fiddler call  
him "N"

If the “N” word was replaced with African American, the same sentence would not instill the same feeling in the reader.

Kunta had come to dislike  
intensely hearing the fiddler call  
him "African American."

On the other hand, a book such as Mark Twain's (Samuel Clemens) book, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* also uses the “N” word to refer to a man of color. One could argue, this classic novel is also serious literature trying to capture the times of the era when such language was commonly used. However, this book is used throughout the public school system as a book to teach impressionable minds learning the sensibilities of inclusion. Should the “N” word be changed to something more acceptable such as “black man” to avoid offending the audience? In this case, the purpose of the literature to instruct students is based more on the structure of the story and growth of the character rather than the accuracy of depicting the mid-1800s. In addition, the “N” word would not only offend students, but also detract from the focus of the story. Therefore in this case given the use and purpose of the book, it should be edited to avoid any inadvertent perpetuation of prejudice.

Back to *The World of Comics*. In my case, capturing the slang of the 1970s was not essential in the story. The coming-of-age story would not be undermined if one reference to “F\_gg\_t” was replaced with a more generic

word such as “punk” or “reject.” The fact is that there isn’t just one solution to dialogue issues. The English language, including slang, is rich with diverse options. So why jeopardize alienating your audience and potential markets for sake of being adamant over an expendable detail?

Back to business. Although I promoted ***The World of Comics*** to all demographics from seniors, who could enjoy a nostalgic visit of a past time, to young readers, who felt at ease with a topic they could relate to, I unwittingly—by using the “F” word, closed any opportunity to capitalize on the public school market. What school would condone such a word? And what school system would endorse a book that contradicts the values of inclusion and respect for all? As a result of my own recognition of these issues, I have made the change of the “F” word to an audience friendly version for the second printing. And my book did not lose its charm, its depiction of the 1970s, and especially its salability.

Through this awareness, it is a lot easier to exercise sound judgment and understanding of the market place before investing in the entire publishing lifecycle. Why go through all that labor and expense bringing a book to print only to be rejected in the market place for a judgment call that could have been made at the beginning of the writing/editing process?

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