

Publishers line up to bid for rights to print the whole story of Huck Finn

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Now that "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" is safely tucked away in one piece, in the new Mark Twain Room of the Central Library, the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library Foundation and other parties with whom it shares the publishing rights are preparing to consummate a book deal.

Seven publishing houses have lined up to bid for the right to print what will be the first edition of the famous novel to contain the first half of Twain's manuscript — missing for more than a century before it turned up in a Los Angeles attic in 1991 — said Patrick Martin, library general counsel.

The first segment includes a conversation in a cave between Huck and Jim, the runaway slave. They talk about ghosts, and Jim describes a scary experience in a morgue in which he wrestles with a corpse.

This much is certain: The bidding war will be over in a lot less time than it took the long-lost pages to make their way to the library, to which Twain willed the complete manuscript in 1885.

"My best guess is, we'll have the broad outlines of an agreement within 48 hours," Martin said Wednesday. "I have an offer in hand that I'm going to respond to."

The identity of the winning bidder and contract terms most likely will be kept secret until the deal is closed, "probably in a couple of weeks," he said.

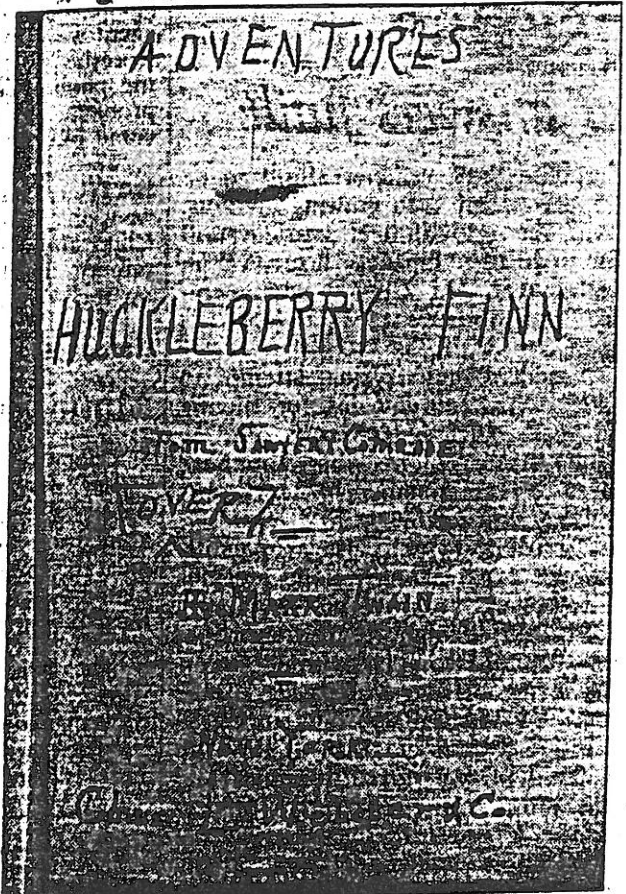
The lawyer has been talking "several times a day" with the attorney for Barbara Testa, who found the manuscript, and her sister, Pamela Lindholm, and with Richard Watson, trustee of the Mark Twain Foundation in New York City.

Under a settlement that brought the missing half of "Huck Finn" back to Buffalo, the sisters — granddaughters of John Fraser Gluck, the library trustee who received the manuscript from Twain in 1897 — share publishing rights with the Library Foundation and the Twain Foundation, whose share of the rights is derived from the will of the author's widow.

In this era of fast-expanding communications, a book deal isn't merely a book deal. CD Rom, Internet and audiotape rights will be part of the package, said Martin, the lead negotiator for the rights-holders.

The parties also are eyeing a new market for "Huck Finn" — the Far East. "We ultimately expect to have editions in China, Southeast Asia," Martin noted.

To date, the novel, minus the missing pages, has appeared in 92 foreign editions, in 34 languages.



Title page of the original "Huckleberry Finn" manuscript.

Meanwhile, parallel discussions are continuing with the New Yorker, which plans to publish the first part of the manuscript in its fiction issue, which comes out a month from tomorrow.

"The New Yorker agreement is separate. Right now, it's on hold pending resolution of the book negotiations," Martin said.

How much the various agreements — which could produce royalties for decades to come — will be worth in the long run is anybody's guess.

But Martin is confident the income eventually will cover what the Library Foundation spent to underwrite the 1992 settlement with Ms. Testa and Ms. Lindholm that returned the missing manuscript to Buffalo. Terms of that agreement are confidential.