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Reader Resources

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

by Mark Twain



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Preface

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer is not merely a literary classic. It is part of the American imagination. More than any other work in our culture, it established America's vision of childhood. Mark Twain created two fictional boys, Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, who still seem more real than most of the people we know. In a still puritanical nation, Twain reminded adults that children were not angels, but fellow human beings, and perhaps all the more lovable for their imperfections and bad grooming. Neither American literature nor America has ever been the same.

“The difference between the almost right word & the right word is really a large matter—it’s the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.”

What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you’re a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to the Book

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) is a book for readers of all ages. Most readers pick it up young and enjoy it, but too few come back to it later on, when its dark shadings and affectionate satire of small-town life might hit closer to home.

The book sold slowly at first but has since become the archetypal comic novel of American childhood. It begins with several chapters of scene-setting episodic skylarking by Tom and his gang. All the grown-ups in the book fret about Tom, fussing at him about his clothes and his manners, but also about his future, and whether this orphaned boy can ever grow up right.

Meanwhile, Tom just wants to cut school, flirt with the new girl, get rich, and read what he pleases. Only after he and his wayward friend Huckleberry Finn accidentally witness a murder will he at last get the chance to live out an adventure as heroic as any in his storybooks. When Tom and his beloved Becky Thatcher become trapped in a dark cave, he must call on all his imagination and ingenuity if he wants even a chance at growing up.

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer has likely suffered over the years from unfair comparisons to its famous sequel. Huck gets fuller development in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), where he escapes down the river with the runaway slave Jim and, in spite of himself, begins to discover his conscience. But just because *Huckleberry Finn* is the deeper book doesn't make *Tom Sawyer* mere kids' stuff. Twain never could make up his mind whether *Tom Sawyer* was for kids or grown-ups, and his book is the better for it.

If Tom stepped out of his nineteenth-century Missouri small town and into a contemporary American classroom, a guidance counselor would probably tag him as an at-risk latchkey kid. Reading *Tom Sawyer* today is an invitation to talk about how American childhood has and hasn't changed—and also to laugh at Twain's enduring invention of a great American comic voice.

"Now the raft was passing before the distant town. Two or three glimmering lights showed where it lay, peacefully sleeping, beyond the vague vast sweep of star-gemmed water."

—from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*



Major Characters in the Book

The Kids

Tom Sawyer is a smart, imaginative, conniving, bossy boy growing up in fictional St. Petersburg, Missouri. He's usually in trouble by the time he gets out of bed, but he's too well-meaning and funny for anybody to stay mad at him for long.

Huckleberry Finn is the son of the local drunk. Huck does most everything that Tom puts him up to, while Tom covets Huck's freedom and independence.

Becky Thatcher is the new girl in town, and Tom falls hard for her. She's flirty and headstrong, sometimes manipulative, but brave enough with Tom by her side.

Sid Sawyer, Tom's half-brother, is the most disgusting goody two-shoes on two legs. Aunt Polly is always measuring Tom against him even though he's a shameless tattletale, a worrywart, and a crybaby.

The Adults

Aunt Polly has taken care of Tom since his mother died. She truly loves him, but he's a handful, and she wishes he could be more like that nice Sid.

The Widow Douglas takes Huck into her home and tries to reform him. Her rigidly scheduled life rubs him the wrong way, and only Tom has any luck talking him into staying.

Muff Potter is a drunkard. He's not an evil man exactly but weak, cowardly, and ripe for anyone to come along and take advantage of him.

Injun Joe embodies all the fear of the unknown that a small town might feel on the edge of a great unsettled wilderness. Violent and cruel, he earns a little of the reader's sympathy only at the very end.

Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn

Mark Twain's two most enduring books, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and its often underrated junior partner *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, represent two sides of the same raft. *Tom Sawyer* is sunny and upright, skirting whirlpools but ultimately hugging the shore of convention. *Huck Finn* is its deep, dark, wet, rushing underside. Nowhere do these flipsides of Twain's productively riven personality bob up more conspicuously than at two moments common to each novel: when both title characters attend their own funerals, and when each novel ends with a shaky vow of reform.

In both books the hero gets to live out perhaps every morbid, underappreciated kid's greatest fantasy: to spy on his own mourners and hear how sorry everybody is, and then to come back from the dead to a hero's welcome. "She would be sorry some day," Tom says of Becky, "maybe when it was too late. Ah, if he could only die temporarily!" Typically, Tom lucks into his version of this fantasy. Huck, on the other hand, deliberately fakes his own death to escape his father.

The books' endings, too, are strikingly similar. In *Tom Sawyer*, Huck reluctantly allows the Widow Douglas to take him in, but on the last page he doesn't sound terribly optimistic about sticking it out with her. Meanwhile, in the famous ending to *Huck Finn*, the title character vows to "light out for the territory" if the widow tries too zealously to "sivilize" him, because he's "been there before." Huck has indeed been there before, because *Tom Sawyer* ended on this same skeptical note.

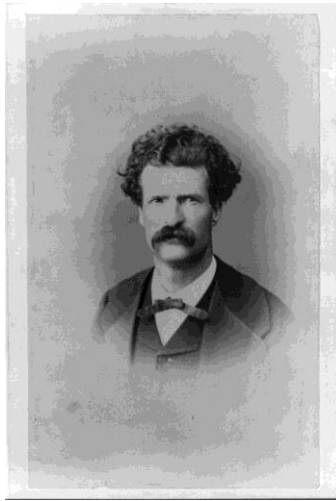
In fact, Tom and Huck fit their namesake books perfectly. Like Tom, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is outrageous, but also smooth, artful, and anxious to please. A model of literary construction, it stands up straight. Like Huck, on the other hand, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* slouches. It's ungainly, in need of finishing, and its language often lands it in trouble. It's also touched by genius. There's no denying that something's fundamentally haywire with the end of *Huck Finn*—yet look closer and see if it isn't a flaw common to every imperfect life. Huck and Jim have gone wrong after the fork, they've overshot something crucial, they've lost their way and don't know how to get back. Who among us hasn't felt the same? Twain certainly should have. He published his best book at 50 but lived to nearly 75.

Seen this way, Tom and Huck's Mississippi River becomes an endlessly renewable metaphor. Twain saw as clearly as anybody that as Americans we're all on this raft together, afloat between oceans, crewed by oarsmen of more than one color, tippy but not aground, not yet.

About the Author

Mark Twain (1835-1910)

Mark Twain was a man ahead of his time from the day he was born Samuel Langhorne Clemens, fully two months early, in tiny Florida, Missouri. Not surprising for a preemie, a profound sense of mortality shadowed him all his life. In addition, Twain survived a youth marked by deaths both sudden and grisly.



Mark Twain, 1867 (Library of Congress)

Not only did his forbidding father, Judge John Marshall Clemens, die of pneumonia when Twain was eleven, but

Twain is said to have witnessed the autopsy through a keyhole. He also sat at his beloved brother Henry's bedside as he lay dying after a steamboat explosion, and Twain forever blamed himself for getting Henry his fateful job on board.

Three other formative experiences made Twain the writer he became. First were the gifted storytellers he grew up listening to, many of them slaves. Next came his early job as a printer's apprentice. There he literally put words together, by handsetting type, and observed up close what made sentences sing or clang. Finally came Twain's years in California and Nevada, where he became a newspaperman and found his voice as a writer. There he chose the pen name "Mark Twain," a riverboat expression meaning two fathoms deep, the divider between safe and dangerously shallow water. A tall tale called "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" (1865), widely reprinted almost immediately, cemented his national reputation.

Twain returned from the West and set out for the East—specifically the Middle East, where he traveled on the first-ever luxury cruise and filed dispatches back to stateside newspapers. The eventual result was a national bestseller, *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), and highbrow acceptance from the tastemakers at *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine.

Meanwhile, Twain's personal life settled down. After years of bachelorhood he married Olivia "Livy" Langdon, whom he had first glimpsed in a cameo carried by her brother, Charley, on shipboard. Charley introduced the couple on their return, and after two years Twain overcame the Langdons' misgivings and they married. She was demure and he was outrageous, but somehow it worked. After the

death of their firstborn son, they raised three daughters and lived as happily as Twain's dark moods permitted.

Twain's imperishable memories of his boyhood led to the writing of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and, eventually, its more challenging sequel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). Twain wrote well and prolifically almost all his long life, but these two companion pieces stand apart as his masterpieces of childhood and childhood's end.

Financial uncertainty and death haunted Twain's last years even more than they had his first. He went broke keeping up the beautiful house he had built in Connecticut and investing in a series of harebrained schemes. A daughter died, then his adored but frail Livy, and then yet another daughter. Through it all he kept writing—fiction when he could, essays when he couldn't, plus magnificent letters and journals by the trunkful. Revered across America and around the world, Twain died on April 21, 1910.

Twain on Writing

"God only exhibits his thunder and lightning at intervals, and so they always command attention. These are God's adjectives. You thunder and lightning too much; the reader ceases to get under the bed, by and by."

—from an 1878 letter to his brother Orion

"There is no such thing as 'the Queen's English.' The property has gone into the hands of a joint stock company and we own the bulk of the shares!"

—from *Following the Equator*, 1897

"No sir, not a day's work in all my life. What I have done I have done because it has been play. If it had been work I shouldn't have done it."

—from a 1905 interview

"I never write 'metropolis' for seven cents, because I can get the same money for 'city.' I never write 'policeman,' because I can get the same price for 'cop.'"

—from a 1906 speech, "Spelling and Pictures"

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Mark Twain

1830s

- 1835: Halley's Comet streaks across the night sky.
- 1835: Samuel Langhorne Clemens, who later adopts the pen name Mark Twain, is born in Florida, Missouri, on November 30.
- 1839: The Clemens family moves to nearby Hannibal.

1840s

- 1847: Clemens's father dies of pneumonia.
- 1848: Gold discovered in California, mere weeks after U.S. annexation of the territory in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.
- 1848: Clemens apprenticed to his older brother Orion as a printer.

1850s

- 1858: Clemens's brother Henry dies from injuries sustained in a riverboat explosion.
- 1858: Comstock silver lode discovered in Nevada.
- 1859: Clemens gets his license to pilot steamboats on the Mississippi River.

1860s

- 1861: The Civil War begins and lasts four blood-drenched years. Clemens joins the Confederate side and lasts all of two weeks.
- 1861: Clemens heads west to find his fortune and discovers a career in journalism instead.
- 1867: As a journalist, Twain tours Europe and the Middle East and brings back the makings of his first book, *The Innocents Abroad*, 1869.

1870s

- 1870: Twain marries Olivia "Livy" Langdon.
- 1873: Greed and corruption run rampant in postwar America, yielding the subject for Twain's first (co-written) novel, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*.
- 1876: *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* published.

1880s

- 1882: After the Civil War ends, Twain embarks on a research trip for *Life on the Mississippi*.
- 1885: Inspired partly by his return visit south, Twain finishes *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.
- 1886: Twain buys half-interest in a typesetting machine, which will yield him no end of grief and no rate of return.

1890s

- 1894: Twain declares bankruptcy and embarks on an exhausting world lecture tour to dig himself out of debt.
- 1896: Twain's beloved daughter Susy dies.
- Mahatma Gandhi agitates for Indian independence; Sigmund Freud pioneers psychoanalysis; Twain meets both, and many other luminaries, during his travels.

1900s

- Twain writes brilliant, increasingly bitter essays against lynching, war, and imperialism.
- 1904: Livy dies in Italy.
- 1905: President Theodore Roosevelt busts trade monopolies at home, pursues imperialist aims abroad, and entertains Twain at the White House.
- 1908: Henry Ford introduces the Model T.

1910

- 1910: Halley's Comet returns.
- 1910: Mark Twain dies on April 21.

Other Works/Adaptations

Twain and His Other Works

Mark Twain started out writing just for himself—and wound up that way too. In between he attempted nearly every genre, found success at most of them, and all but reinvented American fiction and travel literature.

Twain honed his style while writing for the scrappy, bumptious broadsheets of the Western gold and silver booms. Somewhere, in a Saratoga trunk up in the Sierra Nevada, probably lie as many lost Twain newspaper columns as have already been found. Until they surface, more than enough early newspaper sketches survive that a reader can still watch a precocious riverfront kid turn a little more into Mark Twain with each byline.

He always remained more comfortable with sprints than with marathons. His first attempts at fiction took the form of short stories. What came to be called "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" (1865) made his name, and, even to the end of his life, Twain probably found short fiction more congenial than the novel.

Twain revolutionized travel writing with *The Innocents Abroad* (1869). The book started out as journalistic letters, but he reworked, padded, and finessed them extensively upon his return from the Middle East. The result anticipates the so-called New Journalism in its insistence on the writer's experience as no less important than his itinerary.

After the huge success of *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain applied the same style to a sojourn he'd already taken. *Roughing It* (1872) hysterically encapsulates Twain's years in the West, and some of its episodes rival any travel literature for description, characterization, and downright hilarity.

Some critics dismiss *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881) and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) as toss-offs, written more for his daughters than for the ages. But the former numbers among his few durable, well-carpentered plots, and the latter ends with surely the most age-inappropriate bloodbath in the annals of children's literature.

Pudd'nhead Wilson (1894) remains a fascinating curiosity and Twain's most direct consideration of slavery. The plot machinery has a tendency to clank, but the very lack of a settled consensus about its meaning and worth makes it irresistible reading. In it Twain rewrites the switched-doubles plot of *The Prince and the Pauper*, only this time he emphasizes the racial tension of the era.

Several of Twain's last essays never saw print in his lifetime. They were blistering, so misanthropic that few would have recognized them as the work of America's beloved white-suited grandpa. Yet these broadsides too are Mark Twain and, for those who can take them, stand among his strongest work.

Selected Works by Mark Twain

- *The Innocents Abroad*, 1869 (travel)
- *Roughing It*, 1872 (travel)
- *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, 1876 (novel)
- *The Prince and the Pauper*, 1881 (novel)
- *Life on the Mississippi*, 1883 (memoir)
- *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1885 (novel)
- *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, 1889 (novel)
- *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, 1894 (novel)
- *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, 1924 (memoir)
- *The Oxford Mark Twain*, 1997 (29-volume collection of works published in Twain's lifetime)
- *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, Vol. 1 2010, Vol. 2 2013 (stipulated by Mark Twain not to be published for at least 100 years after his death)

Twain on Film, and Elsewhere

The perennial popularity of Mark Twain and his characters ensures a steady stream of successors to the already more than a hundred adaptations of his work, not excluding versions of Tom Sawyer filmed in Russia, Japan, and Romania. None of these can be called a masterpiece, nor can the multiple movies of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, or *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. But even the most wrongheaded of them can kickstart a conversation about how not to betray a beloved book on screen, and a few have some delightful performances. There are also some howlingly awful ones—most attributable to child actors, cast mainly for their cuteness, trying and failing to nail Twain's anachronistic Pike County dialect and slang.

The early 1980s brought a spate of Twain adaptations on PBS from screenwriter Philip H. Reisman, Jr., and director Peter H. Hunt. They collaborated on a creditable *Life on the Mississippi* (1980) followed by a Peabody Award-winning short film of "The Private History of a Campaign That Failed" (1981) for the National Endowment for the Humanities-underwritten American Short Story series. Separately, Reisman wrote a well-received version of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1984), with Ken Howard of *The White Shadow* in the title role. Meanwhile Hunt directed a version of "The Mysterious Stranger" (1982), something called *Sawyer and Finn* (1983), and, best of all, a long, stunning 1985 version of *Huck Finn* (take your pick between 108- and 213-minute cuts) starring Samm-Art Williams and *Harry Potter* audiobook reader Jim Dale.

Twain's life has served as fodder for at least three biographical films: Ken Burns's impeccable PBS documentary *Mark Twain* (2001); *The Adventures of Mark Twain* (1944), with Fredric March donning the white suit and fright wig; and the gold standard, Hal Holbrook's 1967 film of his one-man show *Mark Twain Tonight!*

For the original stage version, Holbrook lovingly cobbled together choice stories and observations from Twain's own writings and lectures. After performing varying versions of the show for decades, he ultimately wound up with untold hours of memorized Twain from which to choose—all the while puffing on Twain's ever-present cigar for punctuation. In any medium, *Mark Twain Tonight!* remains perhaps the best tribute to Twain, a man who always flirted with fame as a playwright (and won it again in 2007 for *Is He Dead?*, as

reconceived by David Ives) but settled for popularizing the American novel.

"All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn."

—Ernest Hemingway, from *The Green Hills of Africa* (1935)

Discussion Questions

1. How do you think American childhood has and hasn't changed since the 1840s?
2. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was already a historical novel when it was written, fully 30 years after it is set. Does it feel realistic or nostalgic?
3. Between Tom and Huck, who's more of an outlaw and who's a conformist?
4. Who emerges with more dimension in the book, African Americans or Native Americans? Can you detect any hints of Twain's late-career humanism?
5. How might the fence in Aunt Polly's yard serve as a symbol? What might be implied by Tom getting others to "whitewash" the fence for him?
6. How old are Tom and his classmates? Do they behave convincingly for their age?
7. Why do you think Twain made Tom an orphan?
8. Which do you enjoy more, Twain's dialogue or his descriptions? How does one complement the other?
9. If you could eavesdrop on your own funeral, what do you think you would hear?
10. Find a sentence that makes you laugh out loud. Change one word. Is it as funny? If not, why not? If so, change one word at a time until the joke weakens or dies. What made it work before?
11. What important roles did Huck and Becky play in Tom's success, even though Tom is celebrated as the town's hero?
12. Tom makes a difficult decision when he tells the truth about the murder. Compare the way he comes to his decision with Huck's choice to help Jim in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. How does Tom's motivation differ from Huck's?
13. Some readers believe that Tom develops a conscience by the end of the novel. Do you agree? Is there evidence to suggest that Tom has changed?

Additional Resources

Works about Mark Twain

- Kaplan, Justin. *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain: A Biography*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966.
- Powers, Ron. *Mark Twain: A Life*. New York: Free Press, 2005.
- Ward, Geoffrey C., Dayton Duncan, and Ken Burns. *Mark Twain: An Illustrated Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.

If you liked *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, you might enjoy:

- John Knowles's *A Separate Peace*, 1959
- Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1960
- Olive Anne Burns's *Cold Sassy Tree*, 1981
- Tony Earley's *Jim the Boy*, 2000

Websites

- [Mark Twain: A Film Directed by Ken Burns](#)
The website that accompanies the PBS film "Mark Twain," a documentary directed by Ken Burns, includes classroom activities, selected writings, a chronology of Twain's life, and links to related websites.
<http://www.pbs.org/marktwain/>
- [The Mark Twain House & Museum](#)
The mission of The Mark Twain House & Museum in Hartford, Conn., is to foster an appreciation of the legacy of Mark Twain as one of our nation's defining cultural figures and to demonstrate the continuing relevance of his work, life, and times.
<http://www.marktwainhouse.org/>
- [The Mark Twain Project](#)
A collaboration between the Mark Twain Papers and Project of The Bancroft Library, the California Digital Library, and the University of California Press, this website contains reliable texts, accurate and exhaustive notes, and the most recently discovered letters and documents. Its ultimate purpose is to produce fully annotated, digital editions of everything Mark Twain wrote.
<http://www.marktwainproject.org/>

Credits

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Cover image: "straw hat isolated" by SmileStudio. Shutterstock.



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