



# Classics in Short No.82: The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

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Classics in Short

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**Brian Alderson** on Mark Twain's **The Adventures of Tom Sawyer**.

**Brian Alderson**

Mostly the truth ? with some stretchers ? in?

**The Adventures of Tom Sawyer**

*I'm inclined to think*

that the midnight killing of Dr Robinson in the St Petersburg graveyard, on the banks of the Mississippi River, is a revolutionary moment in the making of children's literature.

*For one thing*

it is told with an unusually graphic directness: *'All at once the doctor flung himself free, seized the heavy headboard of [the] grave and felled Potter to the earth with it; and in the same instant the half-breed saw his chance, and drove the knife to the hilt in the young man's breast. He reeled and fell partly upon Potter, flooding him with his blood...'* and for another thing it is so entirely unexpected. There, near to the grave, are Tom Sawyer and his comrade, Huckleberry Finn, with a dead cat (a vital element in their recipe for getting rid of warts) and the reader, who is expecting another comic episode, gets horror instead.

*Furthermore*

the event, erupting about a third of the way into the story, converts what was becoming a sort of fictionalized memoir into a more focused drama. *'Most of the adventures in this book really occurred'* says the author at the start of things (*'but with some stretchers'* adds Huck Finn on a later memorable occasion) and what many people remember about it are some of the famous pranks: whitewashing the fence, or the three boys camping out on an island, but believed drowned, and turning up to their own funeral service. But the malign figure of Injun Joe, the half-breed, once introduced, stays present as a threat which you know will sooner or later assume a dominant role.

*The tension*

that is carried by this *fil rouge* in the story reaches a climax as it is twinned with the picnic outing to McDougal's Caves (a St Petersburg *actualité*). Injun Joe may here offer only a momentary danger compared to the labyrinthine caverns, where Tom and his sweetheart Becky nearly die, but the incident ends with his own ghastly death after the local Health and Safety team wall up the cave's entrance with boiler iron. (When I read the book as a child I was utterly moved ? on Joe's behalf ? by the description of his pitiful attempts to cut an exit for himself.)

## *To say that the murder*

and the (accidental) walling up of Joe are revolutionary events in children's literature may be seen as an overstatement in so far as violence and disaster have long been present in the folktales, chapbooks and dime novels that are often children's favourite reading, even though rarely exploited in this manner before 1876. And Twain may also be exonerated from accusations of terrorizing youth because ? unlike contemporary practitioners of the provocative, like Melvin Burgess ? he does not seem to have thought, at the time of writing, that **Tom Sawyer** was a children's book anyway.

## *Its publishing history*

tends to confirm this. It has been said that the final draft of the story was among the first texts to be composed on a typewriter and, whatever the truth of that, there is no doubt that two copies of the original were completed. One of these was read by Twain's friend, William Dean Howells, and it was he who saw it as ?a book for boys and girls? and edited it as such. With the collaboration of another friend, that version was brought to London where an unillustrated edition was published by Chatto & Windus in July 1876. The first American edition, based on the other, unedited typescript and illustrated by the little-known True W Williams, only got into print at the end of the year and electros were shipped to Britain for a second edition there now with pictures.

## *Whether initially intended for children or not,*

**Tom Sawyer** remains a landmark book if only for its authentic portrayal of *ante bellum* village life in a riverside settlement in Missouri (St Petersburg = Hannibal where Twain himself was brought up). As such it records with the exactitude of lived experience something of the folkways and the vernacular speech of its community ? altogether too vulgar for some of its early reviewers who weren't used to that sort of thing. It is also the first significant contribution to that genre of children's literature that deals in stories about naughty or over-adventurous boys from **Penrod** and **Bevis** to the glories of William and the feeble idiocies of Henry. Its success would eventuate in a mighty sequel which will be the subject of our next (painful) online disquisition.

The illustrations by Robert Ingpen are taken from the 2010 Templar Publishing edition (978 1 84877 464 3, £14.99 hbk).

**Brian Alderson** is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**.

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