Foreword

Alan Gribben

Before the first copies of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* were issued in 1876, an army of sales agents spread out across the country, knocking on people's doors and showing them sample pages of Twain's new novel bound in bright blue covers. Twain's books were sold only by "subscription" publishing—a direct sales method that generated considerably more money for the publisher (and the author) than by selling through retail bookstores. Made wealthy by this lucrative publishing arrangement, Twain could afford to be indifferent to the literati's dim view of such a crassly commercial relationship with the public. His writing abilities had rescued him from poverty and obscurity, and he and his family now resided in a sumptuous nineteen-room mansion built in Hartford, Connecticut on the proceeds of his profitable publishing contracts.

One matter about *Tom Sawyer* had bothered Twain initially—the novel's intended audience. That confusion would affect its reputation down to the present day. In the summer of 1875 he expressed uncertainty about the manuscript he had completed. Was this essentially a young people's book? Or should it be marketed as a work about them but intended for adults? Twain's best friend, the respected magazine editor and book reviewer William Dean Howells, read the manuscript and advised him, in Twain's words, to call it a "book for boys, pure & simple." Twain accepted this verdict, subsequently referring to his creation as "a hymn, put into prose form to give it a worldly air," and observing that this type of fiction appeals not only to boys but "to any man who has

ever been a boy." It turned out that his book also possessed an attraction for any girl or woman who has ever known a boy.

The mid-1870s heralded Twain's arrival at a phase of his writing career that many biographers consider his most significant, because he had finally recognized the literary potential inherent in the Mississippi River materials of his youth, experiences he put to use not only in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* but also in a stirring set of recollections about his boyhood ambitions and steamboat piloting days written for his friend Howells's magazine, the *Atlantic Monthly*. This series ran as "Old Times on the Mississippi" (1875). *Tom Sawyer* represented Twain's first solo venture as a novelist, inasmuch as he had been previously known primarily for his droll platform performances and his collections of comic sketches and travel narratives—though three years earlier he had co-authored a work of extended fiction titled *The Gilded Age: A Tale of To-day* (1873).

There had been a vogue of so-called "Boy Books" following the lead of an English writer named Thomas Hughes and his memorable *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857) and *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1861). After Louisa May Alcott wrote the hugely popular *Little Women* (1868) about a New England girlhood, she was promptly answered by Thomas Bailey Aldrich's tale of a rough-and-tumble American boyhood, *The Story of a Bad Boy* (1869). A growing in interest in both the joys and pangs of youth had arisen. Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* outdid Aldrich in recounting boyish mischief, but he also introduced a new element to this genre. Whereas Aldrich and most male authors restricted their narratives to factual recollections, Twain embellished his autobiographical memories with wildly romantic escapades as well as inspirations from his own reading.

The license Twain felt in taking these liberties was not entirely due to his global travels or his innovative spirit; he had

also absorbed the energetically unconstrained pictures of rural life set forth by Southern frontier humorists, so different from their more sedate Northeastern brethren, the "literary comedians." Now-forgotten Southern frontier authors had recorded, sometimes with ribald flavoring, the wilder pre-Civil War days they witnessed in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Tennessee, and other southeastern states. Joseph G. Baldwin's *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi* (1853), for instance, delivered hilarious accounts of the outrages that often passed for law before competent attorneys and judges arrived on the scene. Johnson J. Hooper drew a rapscallion in *Some Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs* (1846) as an aggregate of the roguish backwoodsmen he met in Alabama. William Tappan Thompson produced in Major Joseph Jones the epitome of a goodhearted Georgian landowner who lacked all knowledge of spelling and grammar but shared his opinions and travels nonetheless. A. B. Longstreet's often-violent *Georgia Scenes* (1835) received a laudatory review by Edgar Allan Poe. Joseph M. Field, author of a colorfully unbridled collection, *The Drama in Pokerville* (1847), had theatrical ties to Mobile, Alabama. The yarn-spinning Harden E. Taliaferro lived for a time in Talladega and Eufaula, Alabama. These and other Southern frontier humorists like Thomas Bangs Thorpe and George Washington Harris, many with Alabama connections, would certainly have recognized and sympathized with Tom Sawyer's impatient perceptions of the Reverend Sprague's tedious prayer and droning sermon in Chapter V; after all, their books had pioneered the puncturing of lofty but empty genteel rhetoric.

Mark Twain's narrator, detached by his middle age from the children he describes, in essence copied the device of the aloof Southern frontier humorists, who considered themselves inherently superior in education and attainments to the settlers whose boisterous speech they quoted admiringly and whose gusto and

vitality of behavior they recounted gleefully. Holding the uncouth and "ornery" settlers at arm's length, the humorists nevertheless exhibited these untutored backwoods denizens as peculiarly interesting if unpredictable specimens of humanity. Twain similarly presents his boy protagonists as objects of entertainment, not as heroic figures to be taken seriously. He merely claims the advantage of having himself grown up in a village among boys of this ilk. The Southern frontier humorists wrote about people whom they had observed at close quarters, usually after having relocated to a more established city; likewise Twain now related his story at a considerable remove by age as well as geography from the preoccupations of his juvenile literary characters.

The geological landmarks so prominent in Twain's story existed (and still exist) in physical reality. Cardiff Hill was merely a renaming of Holliday's Hill, McDougal's Cave (once known as McDowell's Cave) can actually be visited south of Hannibal, Missouri, and the broad and muddy Mississippi River does indeed flow past the town, but the principal episodes about the court trial, treasure hunt, and other events sprang from Mark Twain's imagination. However, when Twain transformed Hannibal into St. Petersburg, he was hardly exaggerating by bestowing the grandiose name of the then-Russian capital on a little river port. Hannibal, after all, had taken the name of a legendary Carthaginian general who nearly conquered ancient Rome, and nearby Missouri towns bore historically and exotically suggestive names such as New London, Canton, Memphis, Alexandria, and even the biblically mentioned Palmyra. Pieces of Twain's lived life likewise float into the narrative. The episode in Chapter VIII in which Tom Sawyer and Joe Harper play Robin Hood "by the book" quotes directly from a book that Sam Clemens most likely knew by heart as a child, Joseph Cundall's *Robin Hood and His Merry Foresters* (1841). The word "sawyer" held several distinct meanings

for Twain as a river pilot—it could be a hazardous snag bobbing beneath the water but also any of the amateur wood merchants who lined the river banks and tried to entice steamboats to stop and refuel. These evocative associations and many others occurred to Twain as he looked down on the Chemung River from his octagonal study perched on a steep hillside above Elmira, New York, where he composed much of *Tom Sawyer* during the summer of 1874 when his family vacationed at Quarry Farm.

Mark Twain's story of a boy who grew up in a small Missouri village continues to exert its allure even as the United States and the South move further and further away from the life it depicted. During the first half of the twentieth century *Tom Sawyer* led all of his other writings in sales, and this durable fixture in American literature has never gone out of print. Why has the book's popularity survived when nearly all of the other novels published in 1876 have long ago fallen by the wayside? Quite possibly its charm is related to the universal admiration for boyhood's uninhibitedness. Whatever the case, Twain's hooky-playing title character has assuredly entered the collective national pantheon of memorable literary figures. And by far the most famous and beloved (and most often painted, photographed, and filmed) episode in *Tom Sawyer* is the fence-whitewashing business in Chapter II. People all over the world who have never opened the pages of this novel are familiar with Twain's example of reverse psychology in which Tom inveigles his neighborhood comrades into trading him their favorite items for a chance to take over the fence-painting assigned to him by Aunt Polly. The author's voice concludes this scene to underscore the lesson that "Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do and that Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do."

One of the least-realistic aspects of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*—and the price Twain had to pay for his determination

to create a "hymn" to boyhood—was its virtually complete avoidance of the topic of human slavery, a prominent feature of daily life in Hannibal in the decade in which Twain set his story, the 1840s. Twain would guiltily take up this subject in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), the classic sequel to *Tom Sawyer* that he started writing almost immediately. That more complex novel has eclipsed *Tom Sawyer* in critical acclaim because of the abundance of suspenseful incidents encountered by a runaway boy and a fleeing black slave who protect each other as they drift down the Mississippi River on a raft. Besides Huck Finn's struggles with his conscience, which contribute crucial depth to that work, *Huckleberry Finn* utilized a revolutionary narrative technique: this boy writes his own story rather than depending upon a third-person, adult viewpoint.

By contrast, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* consciously charts a course around the disturbing subject of African American bondage, which had ended a mere ten years before Twain wrote most of his novel. Twain was of course aware that his own father had kept slaves, had viewed slavery based on race as a natural and essential social institution, and had sat on a jury that sentenced three abolitionists to prison. Whether acquired as household servants or field laborers, black slaves were a common sight in the streets of Hannibal and on the farms surrounding the town, yet these laborers all but disappear from Twain's fictional St. Petersburg. Only a few hints about the subservient status of blacks in the antebellum border state of Missouri surface in the story-line. A young slave named Jim makes cameo appearances in Chapters I and II, yet he seems no more oppressed than Tom, since Aunt Polly is their common overseer where household chores are concerned. However, Jim's dialect speech suggests the oral culture in which he has grown up with no hint of formal schooling.

In Chapter VI, discussing folk cures, Tom Sawyer and Huck

Finn utter deplorably casual references to a word synonymous with black slaves in the American South during the 1840s, "niggers." This word choice demonstrated Twain's commitment in the 1870s to the credo of the emerging American realist movement that demanded accurate reproductions of speech patterns of all social groups and historical periods, but it understandably strikes modern readers as jarring and repulsive. In this case Twain was definitely relying on his memories of early-day Hannibal, because that derogatory label for slaves had already become highly objectionable among educated whites by the 1870s, and the adult narrator had been careful to employ the (then-polite) terms "colored" and "negro" in Chapter I. Aside from these few references, St. Petersburg, described as a "peaceful village" in a "tranquil world" (Chapter IV), appears to exist remote from the practice of slavery. Obviously Twain wanted to portray a benign kind of social structure that would not remind readers of the massive destruction the recent Civil War had wreaked upon the republic.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century a number of literary commentators started to notice that *Tom Sawyer* hardly qualified as the sweetly innocent book that most people had long supposed. For instance, young Tom and his chum witness grave-robbing and a murder in a cemetery. Tom's life is threatened by a prisoner who escapes during a murder trial and he and Huck Finn are nearly captured by cutthroats in an abandoned house. Two men hatch a nefarious plot against the Widow Douglas. Tom and his girlfriend Becky Thatcher become lost in a cave, and the murderer who chases them in that dark labyrinth dies a horrific death while futilely hacking at the sealed cave opening. Even the boys' expedition to Jackson Island, at first diverting, is marred by a stupendous thunderstorm that abruptly reminds them of their vulnerability. The town is acutely aware of the mas-

sive presence, haunting force, and inherent danger of the river that serves and yet also controls and threatens the town. Tom and his comrades' disappearance arouses an all-too-familiar fear for every town that borders a body of water. The trio's return to town, viewed as a miraculous deliverance from their presumed drowning, nevertheless recalls for readers the too-frequent grief of genuinely bereaved parents and relatives. In short, there is as much danger, skullduggery, and darkness in Tom Sawyer as sunlit days and harmless playfulness.

Tom Sawyer has been taught less often in high school and college classrooms than its celebrated sequel *Huckleberry Finn*, the latter being viewed as more complex, eventful, and innovative. But the earlier novel, too, has important things to tell about its historical epoch, and its continued popularity indicates how nostalgically Americans value their less-complicated past. There is a delicious fantasy element in the book and a satisfactorily rewarding ending for the young protagonist. Tom is not yet as bossy and dogmatic as he will become in *Huckleberry Finn*, though already in *Tom Sawyer* he yields to no one except the sternest adults. His revenge on the overly severe schoolmaster Dobbins (we should recall that male school teachers of the nineteenth century were notoriously cruel) came across as welcome to contemporary readers whose hands and posteriors retained the sting of beatings in an era when the infliction of corporal punishment in schoolrooms went virtually unrestricted.

It seems quite possible that Twain was drawn to write stories with young protagonists in *Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, The Prince and the Pauper* (1881), and *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* (first published in 1969) because his own boyhood and formal schooling were cut short by his father's early death in 1847. That calamity resulted in the family's bankruptcy and young Sam Clemens's being taken out of school and put to work in a com-

bined newspaper office and printing shop. Apprentice printers worked long hours at tedious labor, and Sam watched enviously as other eleven- and twelve-year-olds enjoyed freedoms he was denied. Biographers have often noted his penchant as an adult for ostentatiously carefree ways and the pleasure he took in his wife Olivia's fond nickname for him, "Youth." Cheated out of a portion of his childhood, Sam Clemens returned imaginatively to those lost years as an author named "Mark Twain" with a full inventory of the "adventures" promised in the titles of two of his "Boy Books," including *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

Dr. Alan Gribben *co-founded the Mark Twain Circle of America, compiled* Mark Twain's Library: A Reconstruction*, and recently co-edited* Mark Twain on the Move: A Travel Reader. *Gribben has written numerous essays about Mark Twain's life and image. He teaches on the English faculty of Auburn University at Montgomery.*