

# FOREWORD

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In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, published in 1876, Mark Twain imaginatively recalls his boyhood in the 1840s in a small town on the banks of the Mississippi River. The real town was Hannibal, Missouri, but in the story he calls it St. Petersburg to suggest St. Peter's place, or heaven. In many ways it does seem like heaven for boys and girls. The weather is always summery. The wooded hills, the river, and the cave are ideal for games and adventures. Tom and his friends get into and out of one scrape after another, and Tom's desires for fame and fortune and for the love of Becky Thatcher are happily realized. Even Huckleberry Finn, who sleeps on doorsteps and in large barrels, shares in the treasure the boys uncover.

But not everything is "heavenly" in St. Petersburg. *Tom Sawyer* shows the violence of life in the small town as well as its day-to-day activities, the troubles of the children as well as their pleasures. The story also makes fun of the preachy juvenile fiction of the time, written to encourage young people to be clean and polite and to obey their parents. Mark Twain pictures the unreal heroes of such fiction in the person of Willie Mufferson, the "Model Boy" of St. Petersburg, whom the church ladies fuss over and the other boys despise. By contrast, Tom is a rebel. He goes swimming when it is forbidden, associates with Huckleberry Finn though warned not to, breaks the rules in both school and Sunday school, and runs away from home. He steals out at night when he is supposed to be home in bed, and, along with Huck, becomes a witness to a grave robbing and a murder. Yet everything eventually turns out well. Tom gets rewarded for his disobedience. Although Aunt Polly and other adults disapprove of what he does, they are privately grateful to him for bringing excitement into their lives. They cannot in good conscience punish him for showing off or for wanting to be rich because they, too, long for fame and wealth. Unlike most juvenile fiction of the nineteenth century, therefore, *Tom Sawyer* shows how morally complicated real life can be.

Mark Twain did not write *Tom Sawyer* simply to amuse children—although the book certainly does that. His original intention was to write for adults as well as for younger readers by carrying Tom through to

manhood and having him travel in many lands. Many readers believe that something of the original intention remains, in that the book shows how a boy matures. Others hold that the work is really a sardonic comment on growing up because Tom finally becomes more like the adults in St. Petersburg, who at best are pious and sentimental, at worst intolerant and cruel. At the end of the story, when Tom sides with the adults in insisting to Huck that he live with the Widow Douglas and become "respectable," Mark Twain may well be suggesting that in growing up we increase our regard for social custom and social approval and lose much of our love for individual freedom. *Tom Sawyer*, in short, is a work that appeals to readers of all ages. It is a book one never forgets.

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