

Tom Sawyer at 150

Alissa Burger, Associate Professor of English

2026 marks the 150th anniversary of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, which is simultaneously a snapshot of a small Midwestern town in the 1840s and a timeless boys' adventure tale of precocious ingenuity.

Tom is in trouble right from the start of the novel, with Aunt Polly shouting for Tom, who is hiding in the closet with snuck jam smeared around his mouth. He is unrepentant and cheeky when discovered, an attitude and interaction that establishes Tom's character moving forward. When Aunt Polly gives Tom the chore of whitewashing the fence as punishment for bad behavior, he tricks the other boys into doing the work for him and paying him for the pleasure, with his collected loot including (in part) "a piece of blue bottle glass to look through, a spool cannon, a key that wouldn't unlock anything, a fragment of chalk, a glass stopper of a decanter, a tin soldier, a couple of tadpoles, six firecrackers, a kitten with only one eye, a brass doorknob, a dog collar—but no dog—the handle of a knife, four pieces of orange peel, and a dilapidated old window sash." Tom later trades some of his boyish treasures for Sunday school tickets to earn a Bible so that he can impress new girl Becky Thatcher and her esteemed judge father, intentionally reframing the way others see him, though he cannot repress his mischief for long. Later, when Tom, Huck Finn, and Joe Sawyer are having a lark on Jackson's Island and Tom learns that all three boys are feared dead, he keeps the mourning families in suspense a bit longer, just so that he, Huck, and Joe can make a miraculous reappearance at their own funerals, with little thought of the suffering he is putting his Aunt Polly and others through.

While Tom is selfish and gets into plenty of trouble, there's a rough heroism to him as well: when Becky accidentally rips a page in the schoolmaster's prized book, Tom takes the blame and Becky's punishment. Tom testifies in court against Joe, telling of the murder he and Huck witnessed in the graveyard, and "Tom was a glittering hero once more—the pet of the old, the envy of the young. His name even went into immortal print, for the village paper magnified him. There were some that believed he would be President, yet, if he escaped hanging." When Tom and Becky get lost in the cave, his determination and bravery save them both.

Some elements of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* are markers of their unique historical and cultural moment, such as the racial slurs and stereotypes that frequently result in the novel's exclusion from classrooms in 2026. However, Twain's novel reminds readers of an earlier and simpler—though certainly not perfect—time, nostalgically and humorously framed by a man looking fondly back at his childhood in Hannibal, Missouri. In the years since, many authors have celebrated Twain's story and young Tom, while also actively reframing this narrative to include other voices and perspectives that hover around the margins of Twain's novel, including

Lenore Hart's *Becky: The Life and Loves of Becky Thatcher* (2008), Jessica Lawson's children's book *The Actual & Truthful Adventures of Becky Thatcher* (2014), and Phong Nguyen's *The Adventures of Joe Harper* (2016). As these retellings remind us, it is always possible to return to old stories with new eyes, to spin fresh tales built upon the foundation of those that have come before.

As we reflect on the resonance and meaning of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* at 150, we can look both back and forward, appreciating the way Twain evocatively captures Hannibal and the Midwest in the 1840s, commemorating the ways in which Tom Sawyer still captures the American imagination even as we look ahead and tell new stories.

You access a full-text version of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* with illustrations through Project Gutenberg [here](#).

Culver-Stockton College is sponsoring this program in partnership with the Missouri Humanities and with support from the Missouri Humanities Trust Fund.