

BOOK CLUB NEWS

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***The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, by Mark Twain**



Discussion Leader: Ginger Semple-Schneider

Mark Twain, born Samuel Langhorne Clemens, was a beloved American writer, humorist, entrepreneur, publisher and lecturer. Why did Clemens choose that particular pen name? (Hint: he received his steamboat license April 9, 1856 and piloted his own boats for two years when the civil war ended steamboat traffic.) Twain's life mirrors that of Tom Sawyer in many aspects and is worth exploring, if you haven't already. As for Twain's writing, Ernest Hemingway famously opined, "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since." On what basis does Hemingway claim this? Why does Hemingway use *Huckleberry Finn* when *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was written first? Do you agree with Hemingway's statement? Why or why not? How is Mark Twain similar to Tom Sawyer? How has his mother's sense of humor and his father's lack of success influenced Mark Twain?

Ginger's first question was: "How is the book for adults?" Some replies: "picture of an era", "historical significance"; another wonders how those children turned out as adults. An examination of Twain's style includes words of wisdom, moral lessons, humor; the author interjects himself into the narrative. What are some of the adult themes? How old is Tom? How are children's lives today compared to the book's setting of 1846? What role does superstition play? (The dead cat, etc.)

Where is the humor? Examine the whitewashing scene, the church, Becky, the town's funeral for the boys. What scenes or words remain with you? Explain the interest in pirates compared to boys' games today; explain the brutality in this story. What do you think about the teacher? A sadist? Were there any role models for Tom or Polly? Is Tom his own role model? Discuss Twain's portrayal of the complexity of human character. How do *you* relate Tom's quest for wealth to Mark Twain's yearning for the same? Pirating? Explain the characters of Injun Joe and Jim. Do you feel that this book should be eliminated from school curriculum? How is this book a teaching moment? Pirating? Violence? Fear of "the Other"?

While many voice during the go-around expressed positive reactions to this classic, it was not unanimous. Having read Mark Twain for the first time, I was struck by the number of colons and semi-colons as opposed to contemporary writing. Kathy shared taking a wonderful road-trip with her grandson while listening to the audiobook. Mark Twain grasped that we are all the same inside regardless of our outside. I was also struck by the danger the children faced – I'd forgotten a lot of the plot. The book is not relevant for today because American cultural attitudes have changed. Reading *Tom Sawyer* as an adult gave me a new perspective about it. I'd never read Mark Twain because I don't enjoy written dialects. And although I don't usually like re-reading a book, this one was an exception. My sensibilities were offended, particularly because of the treatment of women.

Thank you, Ginger, for your leadership and for providing pirate décor with chocolate doubloons. "Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum." (Oops, not Twain).



Join us November 17, 2017 for our discussion of *Ladies of the Canyons*, by Lesley Poling-Kempes. Derry Levy, the founder of our book club, will be returning to us from San Diego to lead the discussion. *Happy reading!*