



## ABOUT THE ADAPTATION

by Walter Wolfe

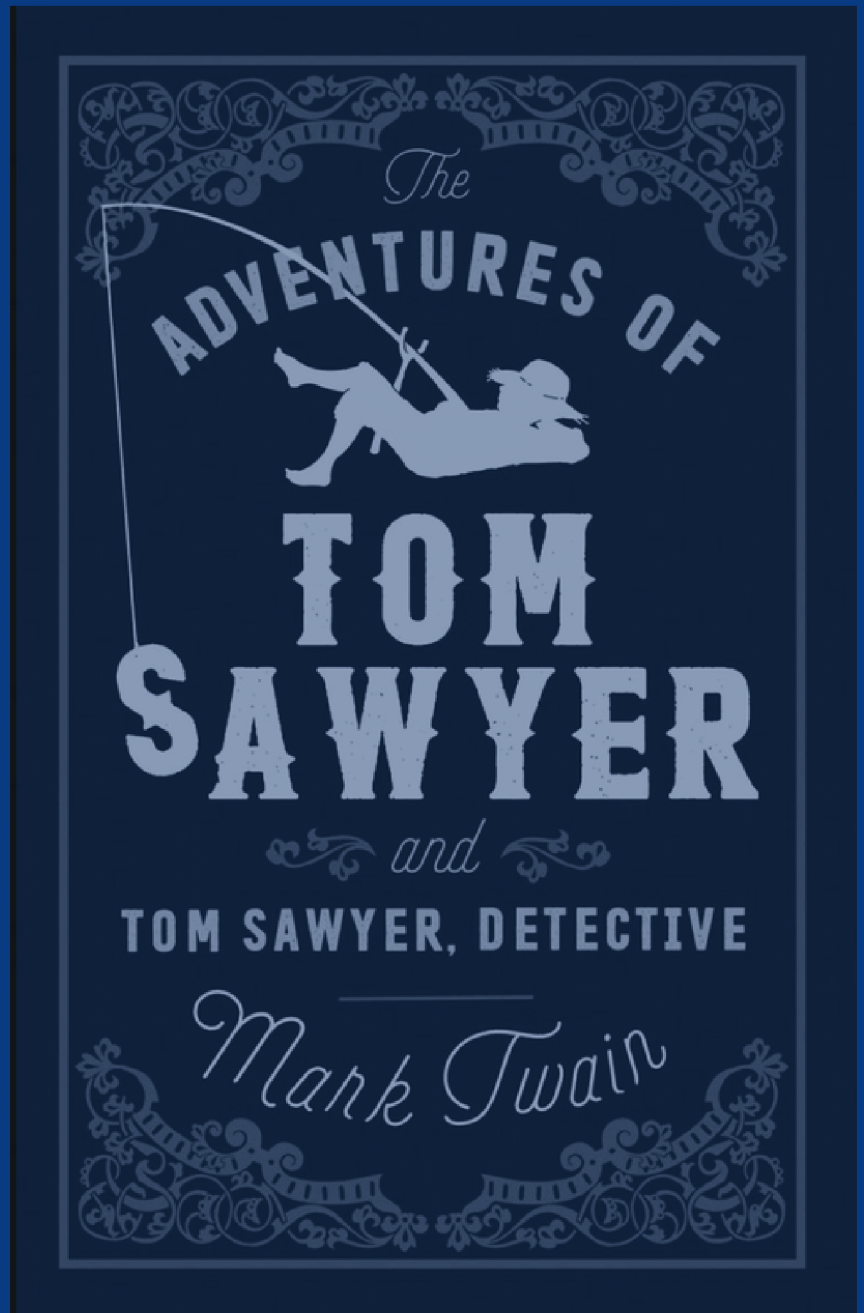
As many of you may know, I was afforded the opportunity of a lifetime during the 2022-23 school year. Because my turn came up after 29 years on campus, Loyola's administration generously awarded me with a sabbatical from teaching. They assigned me to come up with a project which would reignite my passion for being an educator. They approved my proposal for writing a play for the Hannon Theatre Company to perform which would be meaningful for not only our actors but also our audiences. I had a couple of ideas, but early on in my break they proved unappealing to pursue further. However, viewing them as needed learning experiences in the process, I committed myself to a period of serious exploration and discernment. (That's the fancy way I told my boss I ran out of ideas and needed to start from scratch!)

Luckily, my wife dragged me to another high school's fall play, telling me it might give me some ideas. To my surprise, the ingenious director had taken a Reader's Theatre script of the classic book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and decided to stage it as a full-blown production. Keeping the narration intact, the show proved a delightful ensemble piece which boasted a completely different interpretation of the well-worn story. Its message of overcoming personal obstacles through the help of friends seemed more prescient than any other version of the story I had ever seen. And it reminded me of why I love theatre. Aside from the fun of its entertainment value, the true magic of theatre is its communal power to stir critical thinking, contributing food-for-thought relevant to the necessary conversations of the day. Seeing this show made me reinvest in the process and find a vehicle for a play in which I could begin a meaningful discussion.

Taking a cue from the production I saw, I decided to look to classic literature for inspiration. So, I perused the *Gutenberg Project* Table of Contents webpage to see if anything would jump out at me. For a moment, I considered *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, a personal favorite I used to love teaching in summer school. But then I saw *Tom Sawyer, Detective* listed below it. How did I not remember there was a sequel? Why had I never read it? It was as if I had found a long-lost Sherlock Holmes or Harry Potter. And my curiosity was off and running.

When I first picked up *Tom Sawyer, Detective* I was worried I might just fall down another rabbit hole, distracted from what I should be doing. But the fun of revisiting favorite characters and the adventurous ring of the book's title piqued my interest. I fully expected to discover how Twain advanced the significant moral progress Tom and Huck had made in their respective adventures and incorporated their burgeoning awareness into a more serious storyline reflective of their coming of age. How could it be that this book is rarely read and is not often considered worthy of reading?

To my surprise, I did not find the more worldly-wise pair of young men I had expected. What I found instead was an intriguingly complex plot, seemingly manufactured by Twain in order to exploit some of the successful, familiar tropes from the first two books about Tom and Huck. It was as if Twain was trying to make a fast buck by selling out and cashing in on his two most famous characters. I soon understood why *Tom Sawyer, Detective* languishes at the bottom of the recommended reading list for excellent Mark Twain works, as there is little meaningful substance to recommend it.



I believe the true magic of theatre is its communal power to stir critical thinking.



Among the original's many problems are these: 1. The main villain's motivation seems oddly incongruous with the evil plan he subsequently sets in motion. 2. Tom and Huck, while still delightful, seem oddly unaware of the harrowing events they supposedly had experienced in the year prior. The events of 1849 did not impact the events of 1850. 3. Without anything really original in the plot, there didn't appear to be any compelling reason for adding these new adventures to the stories of Tom and Huck. 4. And perhaps most perplexing is the lack of any kind of social commentary which would have made the story relevant when Twain wrote it in 1896, and certainly little historical interest which would make it worthy of interpretation today. The book is devoid of one of the hallmarks of Twain's works—the inclusion of social commentary expertly crafted into an entertaining story line.

Even though the novel itself is clearly not one of Twain's best, I did feel it had enough good, raw material for a fun writing exercise for me to attempt. I soon found that it also had enough comedic and dramatic potential to make for a fun show for both my actors to perform and for our audience to watch. I wondered if I could dramatize it into something which could address all the insufficiencies the novella had. But, along with these musings, I proceeded without any expectation of success. I just started typing.



After working away for a few weeks, I was actually on the verge of abandoning it in the same way I had quit working on the other “good ideas” I had. But the thought that kept coming back to me was what a shame it is that Twain seemingly lacked access to the very moral compass which led to the success of his two most famous works. What was happening to the author at the time he wrote it?

I began research into why *Tom Sawyer, Detective* seemed so incongruous with what I knew about Mark Twain’s body of work. After discovering more about Clemens’ life as it approached a serious turning point in 1896, I conjectured that he abandoned this particular work before it was completed with his characteristic attention to important detail that leads to relevancy. So, perhaps presumptuously, I decided to try yet another writing challenge. I wondered what would happen if I changed some of the significant given circumstances, reimagined some of the characters, and ramped up the social commentary as if *Tom Sawyer, Detective* were the last of a Tom and Huck trilogy. I began to ask questions which I could answer through a more serious adaptation.

Considering Twain was writing about the Mississippi River Valley of 1850, why did he uncharacteristically avoid the most significant occurrence in the political landscape to affect that area for that time? On September 18, 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act which seriously altered the conversation regarding national abolition and proved a monumental setback for those brave folks recruiting conscientious white allies to help smuggle the enslaved out of the South. Likewise, why had he not seen the opportunity to weigh in on the great moral debate of his time? Written in 1895, the debate over “separate but equal” accommodations for Black Americans was the major racial issue of the day. Without the most famous voice in America giving an opinion, we will never know the impact Twain could have made on the Supreme Court’s decision regarding *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Wouldn’t he have raised his voice against another possible setback in the advancement of equality?



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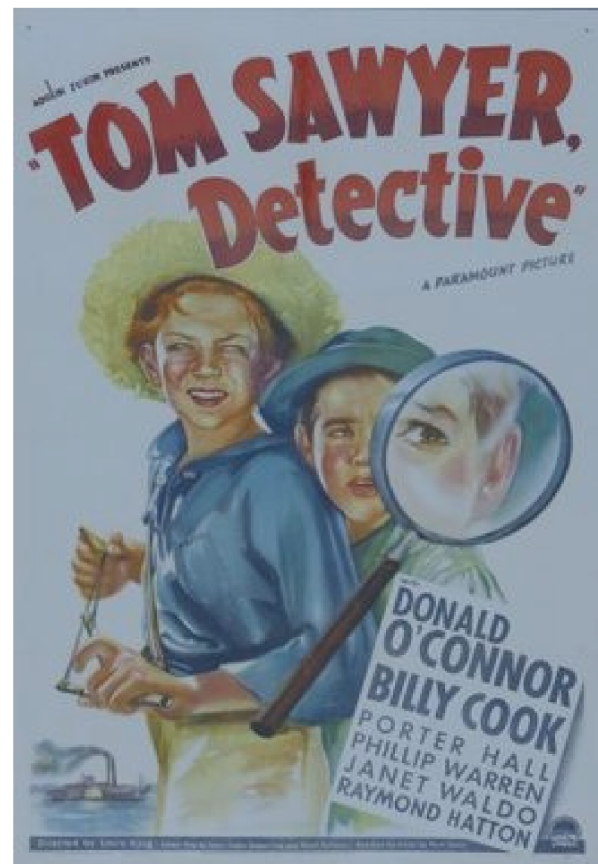
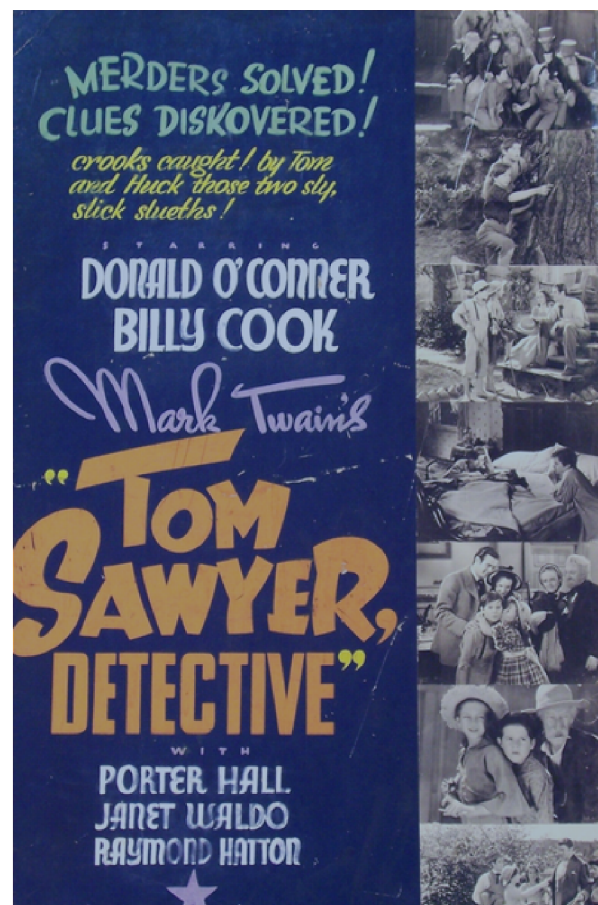


I wondered if my adaptation could give the story more of the heft it might have had if Twain had been in better mental and financial health in 1895 and wasn't seemingly cut off from what was troubling his own country at the time. Did writing from his self-imposed exile in Paris hinder his access to the consciousness and guidance of his activist friends?

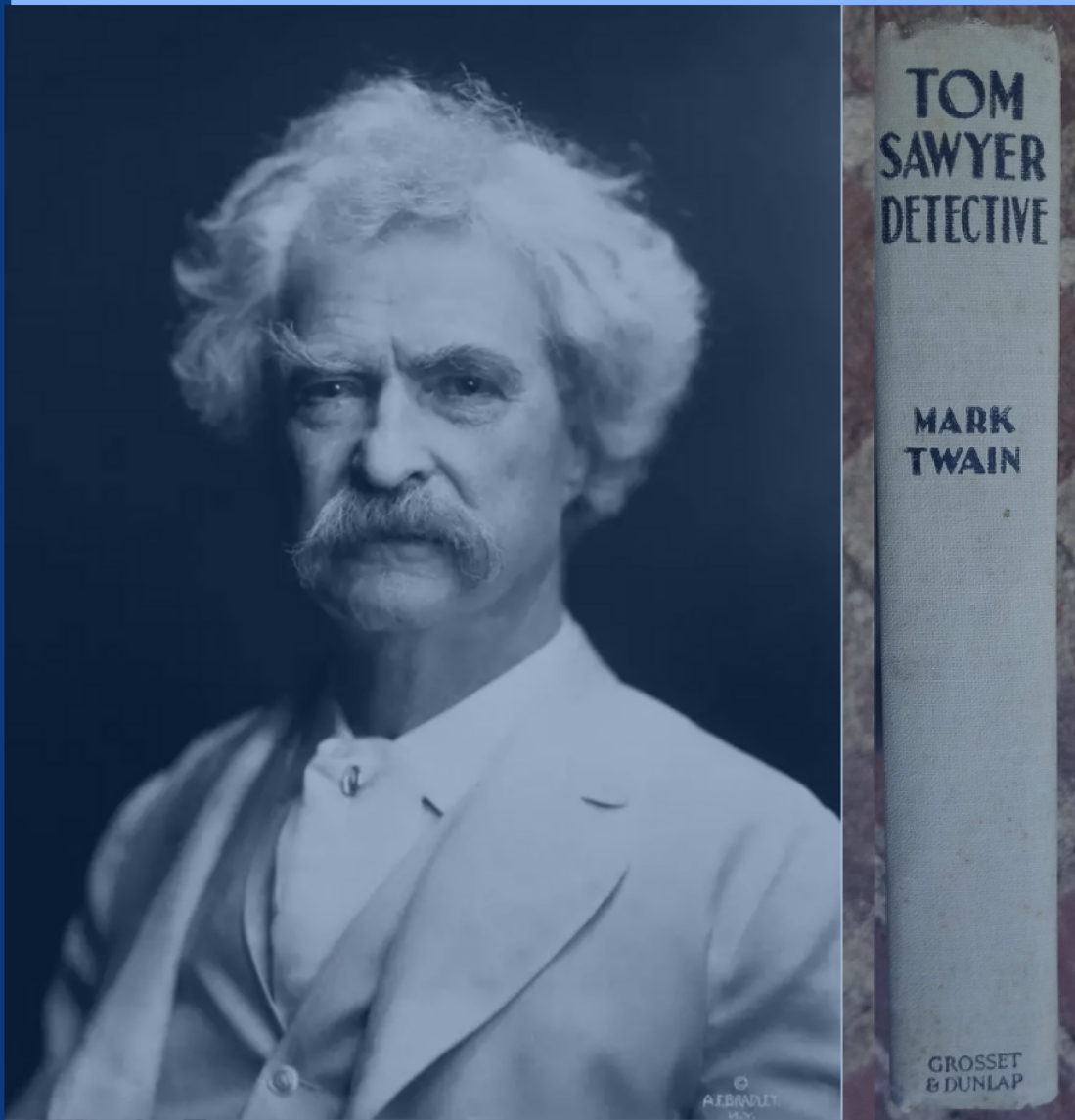
This conversation in my head led to further research into other adaptations of the work to see if there had been other writers who had wrestled with these same questions. I found none with any significant objective to right the ship. I did find that *Tom Sawyer, Detective* had been adapted for a commercial audience as a film in 1938. The production's Hollywood screenwriters leaned into the story's frivolity—the very opposite of what I had thought would be an interesting exercise. It's almost as if they furthered Twain's underlying motivation for writing the story by going for what sells.

Furthermore, the world of the movie provided no mention of the political climate of 1850. Thus, the movie ended up with a light-hearted tone from beginning to end. Without a conclusion with some kind of redeeming lesson the film was not only unlike Twain's works, it also appeared to be hopelessly dated and culturally problematic. In an effort to fix the problems in Twain's plot, the screenwriters created new and different problems for today's audience. There were portrayals of some characters that wouldn't be appropriate to incorporate for a twenty-first century audience. When looking at the film through a modern lens, it seems unwittingly offensive and racist.

The two hours I spent watching it however, did lead me to the conclusion that any adaptation I would attempt would need certain purposeful changes. Additional characters would be needed to flesh out some of Twain's problematic plot points. Furthermore, Tom and Huck would need to be cast with actors who are the right age in the "trilogy." A story about fourteen and fifteen year olds without any coming-of-age component seemed like a missed opportunity. I needed to re-prioritize writing something more prescient.



**Twain's storytelling cleverly weaved together familiar shenanigans from the original books and modified them into something new yet familiar.**



Since my idea was inspired by a “Reader’s Theatre” adaptation, a few weeks were spent simply repurposing narrative passages into dialogue and stage action. And I decided to keep the thornier exposition bits spoken by a narrator. What I discovered in that process was how Twain’s storytelling cleverly weaved together familiar shenanigans from the original books and modified them into something new yet familiar. And even though Twain’s penchant for an ending predicated on moral conviction was absent in the published novel, I did feel as though Twain left space for some social commentary at the resolution. In my editing process, I decided to follow Twain’s more successful formula. I leaned into the more fun and familiar aspects of characters and situations in the first act, followed by laying the foundation for something profound in the second act, and then finally addressing the secret underlying conflict in the third which would prove the opportunity for some character development and societal change. Hopefully these “corrections” will spark discussions relevant for our day.



I also had to grapple with finding the justification for writing a play about America in 1850, written in 1896 by a problematic writer and adapted by an aging white man in 2023. Some real soul-searching needed to be done to provide an answer to that question. With the intention of creating a fresh, modern take on a familiar, wholly American story, I sought the advice of Loyola's Office of Equity and Inclusion to make sure I was on an enlightened path toward creating a work which could serve as a metaphor for what ails our country today. We discussed how a direct parallel between the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 could be drawn to the current debate centered on state legislation taking away rights formerly guaranteed by the federal government. With the rise of a new Confederacy and the resurgence of white supremacy groups in the last ten years, there is a direct correlation to the climate which ultimately brought about the Civil War and the rise of the KKK. How is the resistance to a national abolitionist movement not unlike the legalized vilification of historically oppressed groups with state legislation which overtly discriminates Black, Indigenous, and People of Color as well as members of the LGBTQIA+ community? How can an adaptation which addresses the historically wrong-headed decisions of the 1850 and 1895 Supreme Courts not reference the politicization of today's Court and their controversial decisions which attack personal freedoms and limit equal access?

Despite its humble origins as the least successful work of a great writer, I hope our version makes our audiences think about how little has changed in America in the 128 years since *Tom Sawyer, Detective* was written. Furthermore, I hope looking back on the important issues of the book's setting in 1850 and the author's life in 1895 will shed a new perspective on the issues of today. For the underlying human frailties—fear of change and misplaced pride—are ever-present. As a contemporary of Mark Twain, George Santayana said in 1905: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”



The United States Supreme Court at the time of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896.