
Mark Twain, Walt Disney, and the Playful Response to Pirate Stories



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Like many a modern play theorist, both Mark Twain and Walt Disney were enchanted by the way children act out stories, in particular pirate tales. For both Twain and Disney, this fascination grew out of their small-town, midwestern boyhoods, where avid reading and fantasy play helped stave off boredom and fill emotional gaps for both of them. Even while remaining true to their literary convictions, both men understood how children incorporated and changed printed stories to fit their imaginations, and both wove this insight into their adult creations—Twain into his novels and Disney into his theme parks and theatrical productions. Indeed, the pirates that haunted *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* became the focus of Tom Sawyer Island at Disneyland and Disney World.

The relationship between children's play and their responses to stories is, as Brian Sutton-Smith discusses in *The Ambiguity of Play*, a complex and dynamic relationship. Through their play, children not only act out stories, but they transform the stories in the process, often taking a collaborative approach in which the child players bargain and compromise as they assign roles and revise plot elements. "What they reproduce," writes Sutton-Smith, "is a playful theatric adaptation."¹ Katherine Nelson and Susan Seidman comment on this collaborative process in their "Playing with Scripts." As Nelson and Seidman point out, "Playing Cowboys and Indians or Cinderella . . . requires the establishment between the players of a shared fantasy world that has little or no basis in the child's experience."² Like contemporary play theorists, Mark Twain and Walt Disney also took an interest in children's playful responses to stories. Both Twain and Disney were intrigued with the phenomenon of children acting out pirate stories. Although Twain and Disney approached this type of pretend play from different angles, they both explored the ways children engage in theatric adaptations of stories involving a shared fantasy world.

For both Twain and Disney, their interest in children's responses to stories grew out of their own childhood experiences. Both spent part of their boyhood years in small towns in Missouri. In 1839 when Twain was nearly four years old, he moved with his family to Hannibal, a town in eastern Missouri located on the banks of the Mississippi River. In 1906 when Disney was four years old, he moved with his family to Marceline, a town in north-central Missouri. For both Twain and Disney, the experience of growing up in a small midwestern town helped shape their identities and provided them with a wealth of memories that they later drew upon in their creative work. Both Twain and Disney had distant fathers and affectionate mothers. Both grew up in families that were barely middle class. Both were avid readers during their childhoods, but neither excelled in school. Both spent part of their early adult years in Kansas City, and both sought their fortunes in California. Both became successful in part by tapping into the popular tastes of the American public, and both helped shape American culture.³ In addition to these biographical similarities, both Twain and Disney had a deep understanding of how children respond to stories.

Twain and Disney knew that children often treat their favorite stories as playgrounds for their imaginations. For children who are inclined to engage in pretend play, shared stories can provide a loose structure for this type of play. These children often pretend to be characters from their favorite stories, or they act out plot elements, or they imagine that their play is taking place in the settings described in the stories. As reader-response theorist Robert Protherough points out, many child readers describe this "experience as being 'there' in the books with the characters."⁴ In their pretend play, these children often deviate from the story line found in the printed version, but they tend to honor the basic literary conventions associated with the story.

When responding to literature in this way, children often gravitate toward stories that are set in self-contained worlds. As both Twain and Disney understood, island settings are especially well suited for this type of pretend play. Jackson Island, the setting for several chapters in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and Tom Sawyer Island, an attraction at Disneyland, provide intriguing examples of how island environments can function as multileveled literary playgrounds for children who enjoy projecting themselves into story-based situations.

Mark Twain's 1876 classic novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* contains several instances of children incorporating stories in their pretend play. The most notable example involves Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, and Joe Harper

taking a raft to Jackson Island, a small uninhabited island in the middle of the Mississippi River, where they pretend to be pirates. It is clear from the text that Tom is very knowledgeable about pirate lore. When Huck asks what pirates do, Tom readily responds, “Oh they have a bully time—take ships, and burn them, and get the money and bury it in awful places in their island where there’s ghosts and things to watch it, and kill everybody in the ships—make ’em walk a plank.”⁵

Under Tom’s direction, the boys assume pirate names. Huck is renamed Huck Finn the Red-Handed, Joe takes on the name of Joe Harper the Terror of the Seas, and Tom dubs himself the Black Avenger of the Spanish Main. While on the island, they play out scenes from pirate stories. Lucy Rollin, the editor of the Broadview Edition of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, explains that these pirate stories are based on a series of tales by Ned Buntline that first appeared in a weekly paper called *Flag of Our Union* in 1847 and then came out as a book titled *The Black Avenger, Story of the Spanish Main*. During his boyhood years, Twain read Buntline’s pirate stories, and he drew on this aspect of his childhood when he created the character of Tom Sawyer.⁶

As a boy growing up in Missouri, Disney gravitated toward the works of Mark Twain. Disney especially enjoyed *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, which he originally read during his childhood and remembered fondly for the rest of his life.⁷ Disney’s love of Twain’s classic surfaced when Disney set out to create Disneyland in the early 1950s.

Of all Disneyland’s attractions, the one that Disney became most involved in designing was Tom Sawyer Island. As Bob Thomas recounts in *Walt Disney: An American Original*, the task of designing Tom Sawyer Island was initially assigned to Marvin Davis, one of the main designers of Disneyland: “Marv Davis had labored over the contours of Tom Sawyer Island, but his efforts failed to please Walt. ‘Give me that thing,’ Walt said. That night he worked for hours in his red-barn workshop. The next morning, he laid tracing paper on Davis’s desk and said, ‘Now *that’s* the way it should be.’ The island was built according to his design.”⁸

In creating this attraction, Disney drew heavily on his childhood memories of reading Twain’s classic. He set out to create a special environment where children could feel as if they had magically entered the pages of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Disney especially liked the chapters in the book that take place on Jackson Island because these chapters convey the experience of being in a secondary world where the rules associated with the ordinary world do not ap-

ply. Disney wanted the visitors to Tom Sawyer Island to enjoy this same type of experience. Like the character of Tom Sawyer, they could ride a raft, explore a mysterious cave, and engage in pretend play. When talking to a reporter from *Reader's Digest* about his plans for Tom Sawyer Island, Disney said, "I put in all the things I wanted to do as a kid—and couldn't."⁹ He deliberately avoided putting rides or other mechanical devices in this attraction because he wanted it to be open to multiple interpretations and to present children with opportunities to exercise their imaginations. Disney included many specific references to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* on Tom Sawyer Island, such as Injun Joe's Cave and Harper's Mill.

Tom Sawyer Island opened to the public in June 1956, one year after the official opening of Disneyland. Walt Disney himself presided over the dedication of Tom Sawyer Island, and he used the opportunity to celebrate his Missouri roots. He arranged for a boy and a girl from Hannibal to participate in the dedication ceremony. These children brought with them bottles of water from the Mississippi River, and Disney had this water used to "christen" the island.¹⁰

As Chris Strodder states in *The Disneyland Encyclopedia*, Tom Sawyer Island came to be known as "one of the most unique and most entertaining" attractions at Disneyland.¹¹ One of the aspects of Tom Sawyer Island that soon distinguished it from most of the park's other attractions was its absence of rules and restrictions. Visitors reached the island via rafts, and as soon as they exited the rafts, they were at liberty to play and explore. In an article published in *The "E" Ticket Magazine* in 2002, Jack and Leon Janzen discuss this aspect of Tom Sawyer Island.

On the island there are no waiting lines, few rules or restrictions and kids freely explore one site or another for as long as they want. Even in this era of increased litigation, running, jumping and climbing are activities still welcomed on the island, and kids quickly outdistance their careful parents. Tom Sawyer Island is big enough to get a little bit lost, and unsupervised access to cave, bridges, escape tunnels and secret passages lets each kid script his or her own exciting story. Most other theme park rides control the route, the ride length, whether you stand or sit, the direction you turn and look, and what you see and hear. Because of this, each rider in line receives the same experience. In contrast, kids of all ages make their own discoveries on Tom Sawyer Island and adventure

is experienced from each child's point of view. It is this difference that accounts for much of the attraction's timeless popularity.¹²

The success of Tom Sawyer Island led to the creation of two similar attractions at other Disney theme parks. In 1973 a somewhat expanded version of Tom Sawyer Island was included in the Magic Kingdom within Disney World.¹³ A decade later, a third Tom Sawyer Island made its debut at Tokyo Disneyland in Japan. Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* served as the inspiration for all three of these attractions, but they are not identical.

In part because Walt Disney played such an important role in designing Tom Sawyer Island, the management of Disneyland made only minor changes to the island during its first fifty years. However, as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* gradually fell off the required reading lists for many school systems, fewer and fewer children who visited Tom Sawyer Island could fully appreciate the attraction's many connections to Twain's novel. Finally, in the fall of 2006, Disneyland decided the time had come to revamp Tom Sawyer Island. The redesigned attraction, called Pirate's Lair on Tom Sawyer Island, opened to the public on May 25, 2007, the same day that the *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* opened in theaters.

When the management of Disneyland decided to introduce a pirate theme to Tom Sawyer Island, they hoped to tap into the immense popularity of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, but they still wanted to preserve the Mark Twain connections to the attraction. To accomplish this goal, Disneyland relied on the leadership of its experienced "Imagineers," including Michael Sprout, senior concept writer, and Chris Runco, senior concept designer.

Sprout and Runco found their inspiration in the pages of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, especially the chapters set on Jackson Island. The two read this part of Twain's classic with great care, and they used it as a blueprint for their redesign of Tom Sawyer Island. As Sprout explained during an interview conducted on March 22, 2007, "The idea is that everything that Tom and Huck imagined to be on the island is actually there. We're just trying to live out a little bit more of the fantasy. We're being very careful not to disturb the bones of the original design. It's still called Tom Sawyer Island, but we want it to seem as if it has just been taken over by pirates, and it is now a pirate's lair."¹⁴

Visitors to the redesigned Tom Sawyer Island still take rafts to the island, but the rafts now fly the Jolly Roger flag and have pirate names. One is called

Blackbeard, and the other is named after Anne Bonny, the female pirate who became famous for her exploits in the Caribbean during the 1720s.

Most of the original buildings and structures on the island remain, but their names have changed. For example, the first building visitors encounter after exiting the raft had long been known as Harper's Mill, but it is now called Lafitte's Tavern, named after Jean Lafitte, a famous pirate from the early nineteenth century who frequented New Orleans.

One of the long-time features of Tom Sawyer Island is a cave dubbed Injun Joe's Cave. This cave remains a main feature but has a new name. "We've given it a pirate name," Sprout said. "It's called Dead Man's Grotto. It's the same cave, but we've hidden more treasures in it. We've also added special effects that sort of guard these treasures."¹⁵

Another feature that remains is Tom and Huck's Tree House, where children can still climb up high and spy on the other visitors down below. The tree house includes specific references to Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. Sprout explained, "We added their pirate names to the wall of the tree house. We're using the names from the book, such as Huck the Red-Handed. I hope that these touches will lead children back to the book."¹⁶

Sprout and Runco have provided other Twain references that less observant visitors might not even notice. For example, near the dock where visitors board the rafts to reach the island, there is a glass-covered bulletin board with a sign that reads "River Notices." Posted on this bulletin board is what appears to be a newspaper article from *The St. Petersburg Journal*, dated November 30, 1835. The article is titled "Lost Boys Found," but it is really a retelling of the episode from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in which Tom and his companions return from their adventures on Jackson Island in time to attend their own funeral service. The bulletin board also includes a replica of Twain's pilot's certificate that authorized him to operate riverboats on the Mississippi River.

Although the revamped version of Tom Sawyer Island has fewer references to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* than Disney's original design, the new version remains true to the original spirit of the book. Child visitors to the redesigned version of Tom Sawyer Island may not be inclined to pretend that they are Tom or Huck, but by pretending to be pirates, they are doing exactly what Tom and Huck do while visiting Jackson Island. The new version still provides children with opportunities to engage in pretend play and to draw on stories while doing so. In this regard, the new version of Tom Sawyer Island has much in common with the memorable depictions of imaginative play found in Twain's classic novel.

NOTES

1. Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997), 154.
2. Katherine Nelson and Susan Seidman, "Playing with Scripts," in *Symbolic Play: The Development of Social Understanding*, ed. Inge Bretherton (1984), 45.
3. Brian Burnes, Robert W. Butler, and Dan Viets, *Walt Disney's Missouri: The Roots of a Creative Genius* (2002), 154–55.
4. Robert Protherough, *Developing Response to Fiction* (1983), 22.
5. Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), 119.
6. Lucy Rollin, "Appendix D: A Small-Town American Childhood in the 1840s," in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain, ed. Lucy Rollin (2006), 306.
7. Bob Thomas, *Walt Disney: An American Original* (1976), 36.
8. *Ibid.*, 264–65.
9. Quoted in Ira Wolfert, "Walt Disney's Magic Kingdom," *Reader's Digest* (April 1960): 147.
10. Jack E. Janzen and Leon J. Janzen, "Tom Sawyer Island," *The "E" Ticket Magazine* (Spring 2002): 18.
11. Chris Strodder, *The Disneyland Encyclopedia: The Unofficial, Unauthorized, and Unprecedented History of Every Land, Attraction, Restaurant, Shop, and Event in the Original Magic Kingdom* (2008), 425.
12. Janzen and Janzen, "Tom Sawyer Island," 14–15.
13. Jeff Kurtti, *Since the World Began: Walt Disney World, the First 25 Years* (1996), 55.
14. Michael Sprout, interview by Mark I. West, March 22, 2007.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*