



Mark Twain's Book for Bad Boys and Girls

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When Mark Twain was a boy growing up in Hannibal, Missouri, he was obliged, his autobiography informs readers, to attend Sunday school, where the teacher entreated his charges to repeat biblical verses. Successful recitations were rewarded by tickets that could be exchanged for the privilege of borrowing books. Alas, the books were always an endless series of morality tales made dreary, Twain tells us, because “there was not a bad boy in the book case.”

MARK TWAIN'S BOOK FOR BAD BOYS AND GIRLS provides a comprehensive remedy for such dreary malaise, or, for that matter, practically any other malaise. This delightful anthology, edited by noted Mark Twain scholar R. Kent Rasmussen, is composed, with children of all ages in mind, of several dozen choice texts—stories published on their own, portions of the author's notorious after dinner speeches, material unpublished in Twain's lifetime, or episodes culled from larger works.

The result is an uproarious collection of Twain's bon mots on the subject of advice to the young (“always obey your parents, when they are present”) the consequences of committing ill deeds (“be good and you'll be lonesome”), and similar homilies for those presently or previously inexperienced in life.

Despite the holiday fascination with contemporary high-tech widgets, this collection deserves attention for its ability to entice readers into sparing a thought for the past with some first-rate amusement, punctuated by knee-slapping hilarity, from the nation's most beloved writer. Twain's roots were in mid-America at mid-century, but he lived to see—and parody—a Gilded Age that parallels our own.

These stories make light of the moral humbug of Twain's times, but, as we laugh, we find Twain the moralist just beneath the surface. The result, at a deeper level, is the discovery of the complex humor of a penetrating mind. The volume is a gem.

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