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Searching for an Aussie *Tom Sawyer* — The Classic Boy

Anthony Ross

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First of all, read (or re-read) *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain and consider its merits as an outstanding home-town adventure story, something that even now can satisfy young and adult readers. (By contrast, the "sequel" about Huckleberry Finn remains almost exclusively a great *adult* novel, very difficult for children to enjoy, without being simplified with great loss into film or comic strip versions.) Then consider the following question: What does Australian children's literature have that can compare with this Mark Twain classic of boyhood? I claim that Don Charlwood's novel *All the Green Year* (1965) is the ranking contender for an Aussie *Tom Sawyer*. But first we need to consider some possible competitors.

My edition of Norman Lindsay's *Saturdee* (1934) has a cover note from Douglas Stewart declaring that it is "more consistently amusing than *Tom Sawyer*, it is more lifelike, a more authentic picture of boyhood". This would seem to make *Tom Sawyer* a fair comparison for *Saturdee*. Like *Tom Sawyer*, it begins with an adult female bellowing the name of the central protagonist who rapidly escapes potential motherly clutches and heads off to find adventure and excitement. Yet it has sadly dated.

Saturdee can now be seen to be full of eleven and twelve year old apprentice larrikins with (now superannuated) nicknames like



Bandy, Conkey, Stinker, Bufflehead and Bulljo, whose speech is littered with "Cripes!", "What price me. . .?" "Books up your duckhouse", "doin' a line with . . .", "funk", "skite", and other once-common, now-bygone slang expressions of Lindsay's day.

Bulljo filled his mouth with saliva and made a bubbling sound with it, indicating pleasure at this prospect [running away from home to bushrange and hunt rabbits]. He then chirruped, as if encouraging a proposal to include himself in it. Small and tubby and pug-faced, he was given to the practice of suggesting motives which marks the subtle mechanist of affairs. (ch. 5, p. 56)

Slapstick, relayed in mock formal prose, which would have had immediate appeal in its own

Charlie Chaplin days, but nowadays might succeed only in a heavily adapted (i.e. modernised, as was the film of Miles Franklin's novel *My Brilliant Career*) film or TV version.

The adults in it are limited to little more than comic book stereotypes of appalling relatives, interfering good-bodies and shop-keepers and house-holders who are fit only to provide entertainment for bored heartless young lads:

Uncle Ferdinand was long and lank, with a furtive tender nose and a mournful beer-strainer moustache, and his eye was a self-activating mechanism, bent on putting abroad a fiction that Ferdinand was a spritely fellow, whereas he was the dankest uncle alive. Not a wink in him. The only evidence that he was aware of the avuncular status was that on the day of his arrival, he had given Peter a sixpence, but there all honourable negotiations as between uncle and nephew ended. (ch. 2, p. 26)

And there are servants who are, precisely, "servants", sometimes fit for boys to hob-nob with, but lesser adults, even so:

Honkey Minter, the groom, asleep on his bed with his pipe in his mouth, pleasantly frowsing Sunday afternoon away . . . was large and lumbering, and inclined to a gentle layer of beer fat, which required that he take his leisure in a state of partial coma. (ch. 2, p. 23)

Regrettably by modern standards, the racial stereotypes are typical of their time. The local Chinese market gardeners are the butt of derisive humour, the target for unprovoked stone throwing ("this excellent sport") and stand castigated by their alleged taste for dog or cat, and their mangled pidgin version of English:

Old Monkey Ah Soon was coming down the flat at the jiggity see-saw amble that old Chinamen acquire to get along at a walk with the actions of a run; and as he was a looney old Chow capable of instantaneous rages, stones were at once selected and sent hopping after him. Instantly Old Monkey whipped around like a demented marionette, yelling, "You lallikin too muchee stone catchem me topside no good fashion . . . One time catchit too bad, by Cli!" (ch. 1, p. 7)

Indeed *Saturdee* belongs so much to a vanished culture that its only likely readership in the future will be adults with some interest in the history of children's literature — unless it is turned into a glossy TV mini-series (in which case it may not be read at all) — along the lines of the film of the *Fatty Finn* comic strip (starring Bert Newton), or the film *Ginger Meggs* (starring Gary MacDonald). The last straw is that *Saturdee* culminates in a pairing up of lads and lasses that flouts its Tom Sawyer-like first two-thirds, which is predominantly a "boys" book, rightly unconcerned, except perhaps in a very minor way, with

such incomprehensible (to young boys) sentiments. A generation younger than Douglas Stewart, himself a generation younger than Norman Lindsay, I can see something of my own childhood in *Saturdee*, but I doubt if my own children can see anything of theirs in it, amusing as it might be to watch!

What am I looking for through this comparison with *Tom Sawyer*? A boys' book, about ordinary boyhood, not too far-fetched in its "adventures", with only a hint of any early interest (more appropriate for an older boy) in girls. There should be a clear and fairly realistic portrayal of home and family and of the larger community. And this should be readable and recognisable for modern boys. For many years *Tom Sawyer* was a touchstone: amusing, exciting, and full of the kind of boyish derring-do that resembled the "ten-year-old" life of Australian boys mucking about in backblocks and bush on the other side of empty paddocks at the edge of town. The rash of suburbia and false American glamour of TV may have totally changed "ten-year-old" life for modern Australian boys. But I think it is still worth looking for such a book, if only in the hope that some alternative life-model may be available that could counter the endemic sit-com mentality induced by passive entertainment pouring from the TV screen. Do children still know how to play, how to make-believe, how to muck around and find things to do when there's nothing to do? I know

some children do, and believe this is worth encouraging.

Alan Marshall's autobiographical *I Can Jump Puddles* (1955) trilogy, including *This is the Grass* ((1962), *In Mine Own Heart* (1963) and the short stories about young Alan and his mates, *Hammers over the Anvil* (1975) are Australian classics, with the rambling larrikin nature and intense child's point of view (in the early books) of Tom Sawyerdom. But Marshall, the irrepressible, courageous son of a bush horseman was crippled as a child by poliomyelitis. He aspired to live like a non-disabled person. To his enormous credit he achieved this aim to an extent that is deeply moving to readers and inspirational to others who may be similarly challenged by some disability. Yet this heroism in the face of his physical disability and his encounters with social prejudices against such a disability, as well as his outstanding personal and literary achievements, mark Alan Marshall (and his persona in his autobiographical books) as an extraordinary person. Tom Sawyer may be given to wild romantic daydreams but is at heart every ordinary boy — hence his appeal.

Colin Thiele in *Sun on the Stubble* (1961) and its sequels *Shadow on the Hills* (1977) and *The Valley Between* (1981), and its Barossa Valley relatives such as *Uncle Gustav's Ghosts* (1974), looks back to his own childhood in the Barossa Valley. Yet *Sun on the*

Stubble, for example, seems as dated as Dad and Dave in *On Our Selection* by Steele Rudd. Hi-jinks on the farm, with Katzenjammer-kids vaudeville German-mangled English thrown in for comic relief: "Donnervetter, Bruno! Don't talk stupid! To high school you must go." (Prologue). The fact that this is meant to indicate that the adults Thiele is writing about actually spoke German at home, rather than the Barossa Deutsch English used to represent their speech, does not become apparent in the book.

The episodes are as loosely linked as the "chapters" (which are really short stories) in Richmal Crompton's William books. Despite the nostalgic affection with which Thiele describes this transplanted German community, retaining their language, and home-country customs of sausage-making, and tinktling newly weds, for example, it is only the children who seem, and speak, Australian. Interestingly in those days there was something in the education system, or in the immigrant melting pot, that successfully brought about this transformation of cultural identity in the second generation. I wonder how successful we are now in achieving a satisfactory mixture of multicultural pride and continuity mixed with an extra quality of "Australian" identity?

There is also something melodramatic in the sub-plot of the sheep rustlers that goes beyond the Tom Sawyer-limits of everyday plausibility. Dad's adventures divining for water and sinking a well into

solid rock, establishing a chip-heater hot-water service in a proper bathroom instead of a "sitz-tub" in the kitchen, and changing the oil in the brand new first car, caricature him as a wilfully stubborn learn-nothing man, yet he is otherwise shown respectfully as a figure of considerable authority both within the immediate family and the wider community. *Sun on the Stubble* is an amusing, occasionally poignant picture of a vanished hybrid culture, of a very particular Australian boyhood, but is not (indeed, does not try to be) an account of mainstream Australian boyhood.

Nor do the stories of James Aldridge offer a mainstream view of Australian boyhood, despite being repeatedly set in the fictitious Murray River township of St Helen's, and centring on the Quayle family as narrators or narrative keys. Aldridge's Murray River books show parallels with Twain's vanished slow-paced rural river community, the life of vagrant Huckleberry Finn on the Mississippi, and the concern for Huck's new found wealth and for who shall be Huck's custodians. These St Helen's books are *A Sporting Proposition* (1973) — better known in its Disney film title *Ride a Wild Pony — My Brother Tom* (1966), which made a popular recent TV mini-series, *The True Story of Lilli Stubeck* (1984) which won the 1985 Australian Children's Book Council Book of the Year Award, *The True Story of Spit MacPhee* (1986) which

won the Guardian Award for 1987, and *The True Story of Lola Mackeller* (1992) which is a direct sequel to *Ride a Wild Pony*. According to Aldridge, none of these were intended as books "for children", although all five are readily accessible for children and young adult readers. Also *Ride a Wild Pony* has been a Puffin paperback for nearly twenty years and made an excellent film, and two won prestigious "children's literature" awards, despite Aldridge's encomium.

Where Tom Sawyer meanders like Tom's home river from one adventure to another, just managing to avoid being "merely" episodic, and to contribute to some sense of boyhood passing with increasing age and experience, Aldridge's St Helen's stories focus very tightly on central narrative questions: Who does the wild pony belong to? Who should Tom be allowed to marry? Who should have custody of Spit MacPhee? How should Lilli Stubeck be allowed to grow up? The father in the Quayle family is one of the town's lawyers, the young son Kit grows up to become a journalist on the local newspaper, and events are seen through their eyes, or are sifted and reported by them. Perhaps because of these legal, journalistic investigative viewpoints, the intense narrative questions frequently resolve into community conflict, only able to be resolved by legal inquests, hearing and examining personal evidence collected as objectively as possible from the

more involved townsfolk, treading subtly and wisely through the tensions between legal principle, natural justice and sentimental sympathy. Even though children and young people are directly involved, the viewpoint is an adult's hindsight, nostalgic, yet sceptical and uncertainly ambivalent, although always with a heart in the right place for both sides of an argument. Moreover, the fundamental conflicts reflect adult bigotry and intolerance.

Indeed, much of St Helen's culture has long since disappeared or altered beyond immediate recognition to modern readers. The cultural and financial chasm separating wealthy land-owner and impoverished small-scale farmer has been evened out, then swamped by generations of soldier-settlers and international changes in agriculture and hard-nosed economic marketing. The community's bitter division between Protestants and Catholics was once more more evident in little country towns with their protestant church, and, beside it, or across the road, the catholic church, where weekday workday tolerance turned into scrupulous Sunday avoidance, and frequently exploded into open conflict in the schoolyard. One of the least remarked changes in Australian culture since the 1950s is this virtually total relaxation of sectarian antagonism, a commendable result of scepticism, liberalisation and secularisation in the last half of the twentieth century. Aldridge speaks of an earlier time.

Increasingly his stories become *historically* interesting, so that a child reader may say, that is how it once was, that is how I might have been. They are gripping books, full of character, pace and finely observed detail. But none is (nor tries to be) a *Tom Sawyer* about which a child reader can say, that is how I am, now.

Nor can Ivan Southall be accepted as a writer of an Australian *Tom Sawyer*. Like Aldridge, Southall prefers tightly plotted stories which focus intensely on character and personal dilemmas. Interestingly, possibly Southall's book that comes closest to a *Tom Sawyer* is *Rachel* (1986), about a girl, affectionately based on Southall's mother, when she was growing up in turn-of-the-century worked-out goldfields of Victoria — the scene of Norman Lindsay's *Saturdee*. Only two things happen in *Rachel*, small-scale adventures firmly embedded in the life of Rachel's family and of the larger community. She falls down an abandoned mine-shaft because one night going home in the dark after a piano lesson she is frightened by some rowdy boys. And later that night she is taken with the family to hear Mrs Ernest Headstrong of Sacramento, USA, deliver her world-famous [phrenological] lecture, with magic lantern slides and practical demonstration, "Your Future in Your Bumps" (p.110). A lot of other things occur, most of them in Rachel's very active imagination or memory — typical of Southall's central protagonists.

Yet, untypically for Southall, Rachel is a fairly ordinary character and the things that happen to her are fairly ordinary. Of course, "ordinariness" is a deceptive quality and we do well to be able to "see heaven in a grain of sand". But Rachel's ordinariness becomes clearer when compared with events in *King of the Sticks* (1979), similarly set in worked-out gold mine country in horse and buggy days. Young Custard Gray (whose real name is Cuthbert) lives with his widowed mother Rebecca, heavy-drinking older brother Seth, and his crippled sister Bella. Custard, variously described as "pixilated" (p.17) and possessed of great powers (p.127), is an innocent whose head has been filled with stories he has heard, given to intense fits of imagination and sudden inspirations of doggerel songs. There has not been a character like this since Little Diamond, the simple-minded songster in George MacDonald's extraordinary early illness-fantasy *At the Back of the North Wind* (1870).

As if this eccentricity of character were not enough, Custard's family is attacked by the ne'er-do-well sons of mad Preacher Tom, themselves crazily acting on Tom's reports of Custard's ability to find gold with a divining rod. The first part of a trilogy, *King of the Sticks* ends with a second insane kidnapping — Preacher Tom is not as totally mad as he sometimes seems — scarcely an "ordinary" narrative. Yet Cuthbert/Custard is typical of

Southall's many remarkable, heart-searingly sensitive, terrifyingly vulnerable characters who march off to war, struggle with calamity or disability, battle their own worst fears and imaginings, and respond to otherwise ordinary events with intense introspection and fever-pitched emotion. In *Matt and Jo* (1973) two teenagers can't even fall in love unexpectedly one miraculous wagging schoolday without raptures more fitting for the Song of Solomon. In fact the Bible, and issues of faith, fate and God lurk closely behind all of Southall's fiction. Because Southall almost always works on an extremely heightened emotional scale — with intense, powerful stories and fascinating eccentric, hypersensitive characters — inevitably his books cannot be contenders in the Tom Sawyer stakes.

By contrast, Don Charlwood's book *All the Green Year* (1965) is episodic, adventurous and ordinary. Perhaps it is the elusive Aussie Tom Sawyer. Looking back autumnally from adulthood, Charlwood's narrator Charlie Reeve remembers being fourteen, in eighth grade, his last year at school, 1929, when the effects of the First World War were still being felt, silent films were just beginning to talk, and the Great Depression was already creating havoc. But, being part of a "triptych" of books followed by *An Afternoon of Time* (1966) set in the 1930s in Victoria's rural Western District, and the war-time classic *No Moon Tonight* (1956) about Bomber

Command in Britain during World War II, Charlwood's *All the Green Year* deserves longer discussion in a separate article.

Finally, have I missed any other possible Tom Sawyer contenders? Have I overlooked female authors or possible Tomasina Sawyers? Have I missed any urban or suburban Sawyers who might compete with their rural small town counterparts? Are there any likely Aussie Sawyers to be found in this global village era of computers, TV and rock music, our modern or post-modern Australia of children's rights and sexual liberalism, broken and blended families, multicultural pluralism and reconciliation with our Aboriginal co-inheritors? Do mothers and aunts still hang out of windows bellowing "Tom!" after their errant charges?

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Biographical Note

Anthony Ross is a retired teacher with a life-long interest in books, and children's literature in particular, which is now a sustaining hobby. With early hopes of becoming a writer, he actually worked for several years in bookshops before becoming a teacher — but his poetry and stories remain unpublished.