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## The Story of a Bad Boy

Ann Beattie

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

## The Story of a Bad Boy

*Ann Beattie (bio)*

*The Story of a Bad Boy* is to a great extent autobiographical. Thomas Bailey Aldrich certainly did not need to look far to find a name for his hero, Tom Bailey. Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where Aldrich grew up, appears

in the novel as Rivermouth. When Aldrich's father died in 1852, his plans for college were put aside and, like Tom, he went to work.

Aldrich's bad boy is like others that Leslie Fiedler has described in *Love and Death in the American Novel*: "The Good Bad Boy is, of course, America's vision of itself, crude and unruly in his beginnings, but endowed by his creator with an instinctive sense of what is right." Americans have always accepted, if not actually encouraged and worshipped, "badness" in young men. Somehow, this is healthy, charming. When Tom describes himself early in the novel as "really . . . not a cherub," the reader can sit back and smile contentedly; who wants to hear about a good boy?

But this boy is surprisingly good, especially considering the kind of world he moves in. Tom, who is devoted to his horse, Gypsy, must lose her to a traveling circus; he has been separated from his parents and is never again to see his father, who dies during a cholera epidemic; his best friend, Binny Wallace, floats away to his death as Tom and some other boys stand helplessly on shore. Surely these are not events conducive to good spirits, yet Tom Bailey does not dwell **[End Page 63]** on any of them, and the general mood of the novel—and of its main character—ranges from cheerful to ebullient. In part, this may be explained in terms of perspective: Tom Bailey writes the book as an adult, and adults, in America, learn to overlook the bad (how else can we explore new frontiers?) just as little boys learn not to cry. Children are often told that their childhood is the happiest part of their lives, and this seems to be what Tom Bailey believes, even in spite of some strong evidence to the contrary, as he recounts the story from an adult's perspective.

The issue of perspective might also, in part, explain why Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*, written only seven years later, has so far out-distanced its predecessor, becoming an American classic while Aldrich's novel is, at best, a minor one. When Aldrich's Tom tells us "I am, or rather I was," a bad boy we feel obliged to share the mature perspective of the author. In *Tom Sawyer*, we can wallow without embarrassment in the "badness" we love. But even if the narrator's mature perspective tempers a little our having fun, Aldrich's book captivates us all the same with its vivid details

and fast pace. This effect takes hold because, unlike Captain Nutter's sister, Miss Abigail, a true victim of classical conditioning who can smell tobacco burning in an unlit pipe, Tom's responses are immediate and honest. And, like his creator, Tom has an artist's sensitivity: pictures, images, and brief, significant moments capture his attention. He loves the wallpaper patterned with birds in his bedroom because it is beautiful; "that no such bird existed didn't detract," he tells us. On his way to Rivermouth for the first time, he is fascinated by a "shaggy yellow dog" and "two boys fighting behind a red barn." Like William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheel Barrow," which suggests so much, the colors and arrangements of this scene remain fixed in memory. He is fascinated by Sailor Ben's tattoo of a mermaid because the man is the embodiment of art, and Tom has the perceptions of an artist; he even appreciates the aesthetics of a sign reading "Root Beer/Sold Here." In his imagination, snow falling on the garden gate transforms the posts into "stately Turks." Sailor Ben may believe that "we don't larn nothin' by experience," but certainly Tom would not agree: his own proper moral code pays off and his heightened awareness transforms the commonplace into the unusual. What we should learn from experience is...

2. George W. Bethune, "The Claim of our Country on Its Literary Men" (Cambridge, Mass., 1849), quoted in Elson, p. 7.
3. Hamlin Garland, *Son of the Middle Border* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), p. 112.
4. Herbert Quick, *One Man's Life* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs Merrill, 1925), p. 136.
5. Mark Sullivan, *Our Times* (New York: Scribners, 1927), II, 12.
6. Hugh Fullerton, "The Gay McGuffey," *Saturday Evening Post*, Nov. 26, 1927, pp. 14-16.

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2715 North Charles Street  
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218  
+1 (410) 516-6989  
muse@press.jhu.edu



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