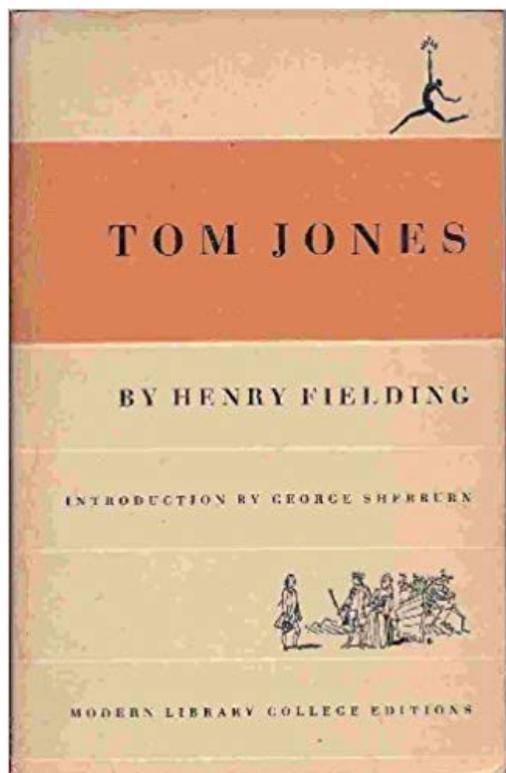


## History of Tom Jones *by* Henry Fielding



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**ISBN:** 0075535769

**ISBN13:** 978-0075535768

**Author:** Henry Fielding

**Book title:** History of Tom Jones

**Pages:** 982

**Publisher:** McGraw-Hill College (August 1, 1950)

**Language:** English

**Category:** Contemporary

**Size PDF version:** 1794 kb

**Size ePUB version:** 1706 kb

**Size FB2 version:** 1561 kb

**Other formats:** mobi lrf doc lrf

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## Reviews of the *History of Tom Jones* *by* Henry Fielding

Quinthy

Tom Jones is probably the most influential novel in English history, pioneering elements like complex characterization, social criticism and authorial interjection. But you already knew that.

What you want to know is, is this a good book for us in the 21st century. And here, it's not so clear. The dialogue is pretty brisk, and some of the exchanges (the stereotypical Whig Mrs. Western arguing with her Jacobite brother is a particular treat) are actually funny. The latter part of the novel evolves into a farce, with a dozen characters engaged in scheming against one another, while Tom and Sophia helplessly go along. Farce works better in drama, where it has a faster pace, but it's always a welcome mode of comedy. You don't see enough farces.

Some of the characters are evocative (why do I picture Blifil as looking like Ted Cruz?) but some are

not: Dowling is just a lawyer, and Mrs. Miller is a good woman, like thousands who have come since, and that's all there is to it. It's not as if every character needs to, or can, be a fully realized person, but the parts of the novel spent with these human plot devices do feel mechanical.

But Mr. Partridge, Tom's traveling companion, is in a different category altogether, and he just poisons the parts of the novel that he features in (chiefly the middle third). Eighteenth Century literature has a depressing reliance on goofy loose-lipped sidekicks: Mr. Partridge, Hugh Strap, Humphrey Clinker, Andrew Fairservice, Friday. Sometimes they're servants, but sometimes they're just stupid friends.

Part of this must be practical: It's difficult to follow a wandering hero (and why are the heroes of these novels always wandering? But that's a different question altogether) without giving him a friend to talk to. Maybe early novelists had a hard time sketching characters who didn't have a way to discuss the ongoing action.

But mostly, I think this is the bad influence of Don Quixote, which was becoming increasingly popular in England during this period. Sancho Panza is OK, and he's certainly the funniest element of that leaden tome. But Mr. Partridge \*is\* Sancho Panza, cowardice, superstition and all, and one Sancho Panza was more than enough. You know? There's a limited number of things that a silly, selfless, lazy pal can do, and it's hard to read about the same old doofus, yet again.

Kearanny

The most important factor for the Kindle version of the Modern Library Classics edition of Tom Jones is how well the critical apparatus is handled. It is, in general, handled very well. Footnotes work. The process of reading emendations on an electronic device will never be as seamless as reading with physical paper, and any 18th century work requires emendations. Additionally, the greatest works benefit from emendations where they do not require them. The good news is that the Modern Library edition is very good. The notes are explanatory, scholarly, and never abstruse. The "Introduction," maps, and other material are placed at the end for the Kindle edition, and they do not fare particularly well.

If you have already read Tom Jones, this is a great way to have it in a portable format. If you are a person who knows what Tom Jones is and wants to read it, this is an affordable way to read a "real" (scholarly) edition. If, however, you mean to study Tom Jones, you will likely need a paper copy, and probably Battestin's edition.

Crazy

This is a review of the Oxford Classic Kindle edition.

The book itself is one of the greatest novels ever written; this is maybe the third time I've read it. Fielding is a master of irony, by which I mean genuine irony, not the mean sarcasm that often passes for irony these days. Fielding is never mean-spirited. His irony is generous and his humor is benevolent. His characters are three-dimensional, never all good or all bad. Before reading this, I had been re-reading several Dickens novels, and the contrast is enormous. A Dickens villain is a villain to the core, and his heroes (and especially his heroines) are saints. Tom instead is a young man with many faults, but a great heart. Sophia, his beloved, is a genuinely good person, but she's got a certain fiery spirit, and has her moments of doubt and remorse.

I advise you to read every word of this novel. It's divided into books, and the first chapter of each book is an address to the reader, expounding Fielding's theories on literature and on human nature. An impatient reader might be tempted to skip these, but that would mean missing a lot of worthwhile and enjoyable reading.

I have some quibbles with the Kindle edition. There were some mistakes in the passage from print to pixels, but they were not excessive. The biggest problem is that the excellent notes often have a reference to another note, with the page number, e.g., a note might be only "See note on page 85." As the book proceeds, more and more of the notes are references to earlier notes. However, there is never a link to these earlier notes, and when reading a Kindle, finding the note on page 85 is not an easy matter. Other than that, the Kindle edition is a pleasure to read.

Goltikree

I took a break from it in the middle, but now I finally finished it. It's worth it for the writer's voice and sarcastic observations. Much easier to read than I expected. There is even a plot. The only real obstacle to enjoying it is the characters.

The world created by the author is a hostile place. 95% of the characters will hang you for a penny. Another 4% will do it out of pure malice. The remaining 1% will condemn you because you're not up to their grotesque moral standards. Chances of survival: 0. But there's a way out of this: simply marry the money or have a title drop into your lap. Then your enemies will turn into your friends, insurmountable obstacles will dissolve, and the hostile world will embrace you, becoming a welcoming place. I didn't enjoy that world, and I'm glad it ended with the book.

The only sensible character was the "whore" Mrs. Waters. To compare this to space, she is the only one coming from Earth, while all the others are from Neptune and dark reaches of outer space. But I dare not say more, lest I be compared to the "devil's most welcome guest".

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