

Henry Fielding was born in 1707 to Lieutenant George Fielding and his wife Sarah, who was herself the daughter of nobility. Socially, the family hovered at the edges of high society, but they had decidedly middle-class means. Fielding lost his mother in 1718, and his father remarried just a year later and began immediately to raise a new family. That same year Fielding began his education at Eton.

Fielding seems to have been an avid reader and an overly lively student, often flogged for his amorous escapades. Fielding's pursuit of women did not, however, prevent him from absorbing vast quantities of Greek and Latin, or from pursuing the beginnings of a career in drama. His first play, *Love in Several Masques*, was produced in February of 1728 at the Drury Lane Theater, with encouraging results. Fielding would go on to write over twenty plays and farces, the most successful of which was *The Tragedy of Tragedies, or, The Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great*. In the meantime, however, Fielding spent some time between 1728 and 1729 in Holland at the University of Leyden as a law student. His father may have been unable to support him through the completion of his degree, and so Fielding was forced to fall back on his talents as a writer and theater manager to support himself.

Fielding's life took a major turn in 1734 with his marriage to Charlotte Cradock. Fielding loved Cradock passionately, and their short life together was marked by intense affection and, at times, intense misery. Despite the responsibilities Fielding faced as a father and husband, his extravagant and reckless nature kept him and his family wavering on the edge of destitution. In order to provide for them, Fielding hurriedly finished his study of the law, and in 1740 was called to the bar. He began to eke out a living as a barrister, supplementing this work with extensive writings for political journals such as *The Champion* and later, *the Jacobite's Journal*.

Fielding's first major novel, *The Adventures of Joseph Andrews and his Friend, Mr. Abraham Adams*, was published in 1742. The novel was conceived as a satire poking fun of the insanely popular novel *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* by Fielding's rival Samuel Richardson, but its characters and plot developed independently of that text. Two years later, Fielding's wife Charlotte succumbed to a fever and died. Although Fielding remained heart-broken, he eventually married Mary Daniel, the faithful housekeeper who had looked after him and his first wife even in their moments of extreme poverty. This marriage was a happy one, but Fielding never stopped loving Charlotte, and he would model his two major female characters, Sophia and Amelia, on her.

The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling was published in 1749. Almost every aspect of Fielding's own life is apparent in the novel, from the love and reverence he had for his first wife to his extensive knowledge of the Southwestern part of England. Even Tom Jones himself clearly shows the markings of Fielding, exhibiting the same careless good nature as well as a deeply entrenched awareness of poverty and the reversals of fortune.

In this same year, Fielding was appointed magistrate for Middlesex. Although he had satirized the law and lawmakers throughout his career as a dramatist and novelist, Fielding appears to have been an exemplary magistrate. He was honest, and wrote several influential tracts that reveal his deep interest in alleviating the widespread problems of poverty and crime in England. As evidenced by *Tom Jones*, Fielding was also extremely interested in English politics, particularly in the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745, when the displaced Stuart family attempted to restore themselves to the throne by ousting George II.

Despite the demands of a family, a profession, and his rapidly deteriorating health, Fielding managed to publish his last novel, *Amelia*, in 1751. Although it is considered inferior to Fielding's two earlier novels, *Amelia* was an immediate commercial success, and Fielding's own favorite among his writings.

Fielding's work as a magistrate began to take up more of his time and energy—he engaged in an apparently successful campaign against robber gangs in London in 1753 and published an extensive *Proposal for making effective provision for the Poor*. His health was rapidly deteriorating due to a devastating combination of gout, asthma, jaundice, and dropsy. Fielding's doctor advised him to avoid England's harsh winters, and Fielding decided to go to Portugal. Leaving behind the children from his second marriage, accompanied only by his wife, his first daughter Harriet, and two servants, Fielding left England in the summer of 1754. Ever industrious, he documented his final travels in what would be published posthumously as *The Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon*, and the account took him almost to the moment of his death. Henry Fielding died on October eight of the same year, in Junqueira, near Lisbon.

First published in 1749, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* is considered one of the best and most influential early novels in English literature.

Tom Jones is told in 18 books, each with a narrator who lends cheeky commentary throughout. The narration is so cleverly done it almost seems like a conversation with an old friend. As in the epics of old, the hero finds conflict at home, hits the road and undertakes a journey fraught with pitfalls and adventure. The conflict becomes resolved, and the hero returns home.

It's a picaresque novel following Tom, a charming but reckless foundling raised by the kind Squire Allworthy. Banished due to misunderstandings and scheming, Tom travels across England, encountering varied social classes and romance, ultimately maturing and revealing his true noble origins to marry his beloved, Sophia Western.

Key Plot Points:

The Foundling: Tom is found in Mr. Allworthy's bed, raised alongside the malicious, legitimate nephew, Blifil.

Banishment: Due to Blifil's schemes and his own foolishness, a good-natured but impetuous Tom is banished from Allworthy's home.

The Journey: Tom travels to London, encountering adventures, romantic entanglements (such as with Lady Bellaston), and hardships that force him to grow.

Resolution: Tom's true identity as Allworthy's nephew is revealed, Blifil's villainy is exposed, and Tom marries Sophia Western, inheriting the estate.

Detailed Analysis

1. Structure and Style

The novel is divided into 18 books, each preceded by a narrative essay in which Fielding comments on various themes, literary conventions, or social issues. These essays provide a meta-narrative framework, allowing Fielding to engage directly with his readers. His tone is humorous, conversational, and often satirical.

Fielding employs an omniscient narrator, giving him the freedom to explore the inner thoughts and motivations of characters. His use of irony and comedic elements underscores the hypocrisy and absurdities of 18th-century society.

2. Themes

Human Nature: Fielding explores the complexity of human nature, presenting Tom as a flawed yet fundamentally good character. The novel contrasts innate goodness with the hypocrisy and malice of characters like Blifil.

Virtue and Morality: Fielding rejects rigid moral absolutism, instead promoting a more compassionate and forgiving view of human behavior. Tom's mistakes are offset by his generosity and loyalty, while the outwardly respectable Blifil is exposed as morally corrupt.

Social Class and Injustice: The novel critiques the rigid social hierarchy of 18th-century England. Tom's initial low status as a foundling makes him vulnerable to prejudice, while his eventual recognition as Allworthy's heir highlights the arbitrary nature of social privilege.

Love and Fidelity: The romantic subplot between Tom and Sophia examines the tension between passion and virtue. Their love ultimately triumphs because it is based on mutual respect and sincerity, contrasting with the superficial or manipulative relationships depicted elsewhere in the novel.

Chance and Fate: The novel emphasizes the role of chance in human life. Many of the plot's twists and turns are driven by coincidences, reflecting the unpredictability of life and the limits of human control.

3. Characters

Tom Jones: Tom is the quintessential "good-hearted rogue," embodying the tension between instinct and morality. His journey represents both a literal adventure and a moral coming-of-age.

Sophia Western: Sophia is the moral compass of the novel, representing virtue, grace, and true love. Her struggles highlight the constraints placed on women in a patriarchal society.

Blifil: Blifil serves as the antagonist, embodying hypocrisy, selfishness, and malice. His downfall underscores the novel's moral lesson that true virtue lies in actions, not appearances.

Squire Allworthy: Allworthy is a paragon of generosity and fairness, though his naivety makes him susceptible to manipulation. He represents the ideal of benevolent leadership.

Partridge: As Tom's humorous and loyal companion, Partridge provides comic relief while also serving as a foil to Tom's character.

Lady Bellaston: A symbol of moral corruption, Lady Bellaston represents the dangers of wealth, power, and sexual manipulation.

4. Social Critique

Fielding uses the novel to critique the hypocrisy, greed, and superficiality of 18th-century English society. His portrayal of the justice system, social class, and gender roles highlights the inequities of the time, while his satirical tone exposes the absurdities of human behavior.

Conclusion and Legacy

The History of Tom Jones is a masterful blend of comedy, drama, and social commentary. Its intricate plot, vibrant characters, and engaging prose make it a cornerstone of English literature. Fielding's exploration of morality, human nature, and social justice remains relevant, offering timeless insights into the complexities of life and society.

By combining entertainment with philosophical depth, Fielding elevates the novel form, paving the way for subsequent works of literary realism. Tom Jones continues to be celebrated for its humor, humanity, and profound understanding of the human condition.