About the story
Tom Canty, a poor boy in 16th century London, lives with his family in one squalid room and has to beg for a living. He is bullied by his father and dreams of an alternative world where he is a prince in a palace.

One day, he wanders past the palace of Westminster and comes face to face with the real Prince, Edward.

The palace guards treat Tom roughly, prompting Edward to apologise and invite Tom into the palace. The boys compare their vastly different lives, and decide to swap clothes, realising as they do so that they look almost identical. Edward spots a bruise on Tom’s arm and goes to reprimand the guard, forgetting that he now looks like an urchin. He’s chased away by the crowds, and ends up lost in the streets. Tom’s father drags him home, mistaking him for his own son.

Meanwhile, Tom tries to persuade people in the palace that he’s a pauper. Everyone fears that the prince has lost his mind. Tom is trapped, and so is Edward. Only Tom Canty’s mother questions his true identity.

The king dies, making Prince Edward king – except that Tom is still in the prince’s place. Tom enjoys the build-up to the coronation, and claims not to know his own mother when she rushes up to him during the procession. At that moment he realises what a fraud he has become. Then Edward, barefoot and in rags, bursts into the coronation ceremony, claiming to be the true king. Tom backs his claim and suggests a way for Edward to prove his identity, and the confusion is finally resolved.

About the author
Mark Twain is the pen name of the American writer Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835 -1910). Born in Missouri, he was a printer’s apprentice, a steamboat pilot and a journalist before turning his hand to fiction. He is best known for his novels The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, both set by the Mississippi river where Twain grew up, and now acclaimed as American classics.

Words and phrases of interest, and unfamiliar words
Help your students to develop strategies for unfamiliar words, so that you don’t have to interrupt the flow of the story often to explain vocabulary. You might suggest they make a quick note of words as they read, or mark their place on the page with removable sticky notes or index tabs. Encourage them to deduce meanings: are they familiar with any part of the word (e.g. “thread” or “bare” in “threadbare”)? Can they guess from the context (e.g. “livid” in “livid purple bruise”)? You could look at different strategies for learning new vocabulary, such as making word clouds or thematic lists.

pauper p4 foul p5 ragged
p13 gobbled p16 swap p18 identical
p27 frown p28 terror-struck p29 noble
p37 startled p40 command p42 reign
p43 garment p44 coronation p45 banquet
p46 table manners p47 napkin p51 robes
p55 liar p56 forbid p57 urchin
p60 cabinet
p725 snatching p83 p10 stench p37
filthy p25 curtsied p23 cur
p33 trapped p32 recover p30 flushed
p45 banquet p40 command p42 reign
p43 garment p44 coronation p45 banquet
p46 table manners p47 napkin p51 robes
p52 lord p53 officer p54 minister
p57 urchin p58 goblin p59 squire
p60 cabinet p61 servant p62 pretender
Before reading
You might like to search for pictures of Henry VIII, especially towards the end of his life, and Edward VI.

Write WILLIAM, HENRY, EDWARD, GEORGE, RICHARD on the board. Ask the class what these names have in common. Apart from boys’ names, they are all names of Kings of England (or Great Britain since 1707). There have been 4 King Williams, 8 King Henrys, 8 King Edwards, 6 King Georges and 3 King Richards.

What do the students know about Henry VIII? [Maybe that he had 6 wives.] His third wife, Jane Seymour, had a son who became king when Henry died. He was just 9 years old. Write HENRY VIII on the board and the dates of his reign (1509-1547), then EDWARD VI (1547-1553). You could show your pictures here.

Does anyone know where the Queen of England lives today? [She has several palaces, but Buckingham Palace is her London home.] In Henry VIII’s day, Buckingham Palace hadn’t been built. The king lived first in Westminster Palace (where Big Ben is today), then in nearby Whitehall Palace.

Show the class the book. Tell them that it’s set in London, in 1547. Very few of the buildings still exist, and the city looks very different, although in many areas rich and poor people still live close together.

Reading or listening
You can listen to the story on CD or read it aloud to the students, take turns to read or read together silently. Each double page spread in the book is one track on the CD, so that you can pause between tracks or repeat tracks if your students need it. The first reading is in a British English accent, and it is followed by an American English reading. The words are exactly the same.

During reading: you might like to ask some of these questions.

p3 Why is a woman tipping a bucket out of the window? [There’s no plumbing in the house.] What is offal? [An animal’s organs, eaten as cheap meat.] What does Offal Court suggest?
p5 Why do we already know about Tom’s family and the way they live?
p10 Why do the guards not trust Tom? How is he different from the others at the palace gates?
p11 What’s surprising about the two boys?
p15 Why does splashing in the mud appeal to the Prince? [He would never be allowed that kind of freedom and fun.]
p16 Which outfit would you prefer to wear? Which looks more comfortable?
p26 Have you heard of Princess Elizabeth before? [She’s the future Queen Elizabeth I.]
p31 Why will nobody believe Tom?
p36 How do you think Edward is feeling?
p41 What does Tom’s first command tell us about him?
p46 Why does Tom think he’ll be found out at the banquet?
p50 Can you see why Tom might grow to like his new life? How about Edward?
p53 Why are the words “Tom heard himself say” used, instead of simply “Tom said”? Does Tom really mean to reject his mother?
p54 In what way is Tom’s mother wounded?
p57 Who are the guards more likely to listen to – Tom or Edward?
p54 What does Edward mean by “the accident of our birth”?

After reading
On page 63 we hear what Edward has learned from being poor, and what he promises to do as a result. What do you think Tom has learned? How might he live and act differently in the future?

Now read the quotation from Mark Twain at the bottom of page 2. Ask the class which parts of the story they think are history and which they think are legend. Could the story really have happened?

If you could swap lives with an historical character for a few weeks, who would you choose and why? What would be the good things and the bad things about living their life?