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A micro-ebook from *Master Narratives*

How pleasant to meet Mr
Fielding: the Narrator as
hero in *Tom Jones*

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Chapter 2

How pleasant to meet Mr Fielding: The Narrator as Hero in *Tom Jones*

W. B. Hutchings

Well, pleasant for some, less pleasant for others. *Tom Jones* used to be the first topic on the Open University's very successful A204 course, which Bill Ruddick taught in Newcastle upon Tyne for all too brief a time after his early retirement from the Manchester English department. Not renowned for being afraid to express a point of view, Open University students would be both vigorous and varied in their attitudes to the chatty and familiar voice of the narrator of *Tom Jones*. Some found him amusing and engaging, whereas others expressed irritation and even resentment. Some loved the idea of being cheerily accompanied on the stagecoach ride that is Fielding's metaphor for the temporal journey of his story. Others found that the experience had all the pleasure and entertainment of being trapped in a corner by the saloon-bar bore.

Readers who respond so negatively to Mr Fielding can be reassured by the knowledge that one of the great novelists of the twentieth century is on their side. Ford Madox Ford, in his quirky and opinionated essay on *The English Novel*, published in 1930, inveighed heartily against this most intrusive of narrative methods. Writers from Fielding to Thackeray, he said, marred their novels by 'continually brought-in passages of moralizations' and to these Fielding added 'an immense amount of rather nauseous special-pleading'.¹ Ford writes from a technician's point of view. For him, what he termed literary 'impressionism' has the desired effect of conveying the dramatic actuality of a scene or a character. All authorial intrusion should ideally be avoided, the

1. Ford Madox Ford, *The English Novel* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1997), 77–8.