

Mark Twain

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OVER THE MAN WHO
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MARK TWAIN

BY JESSICA TEISCH

In 1913, three years after Mark Twain's death at the age of 75, literary critic H. L. Mencken described Twain as "the true father of our national literature, the first genuinely American artist of the blood royal" (*The Smart Set*, Feb. 1913). Through the touchstone of humor, Twain tested the innocence of boyhood, challenged institutions like slavery, denounced political and religious creeds, and distilled American adventures into universal experiences. During his lifetime he published more than two dozen novels and hundreds of short stories, articles, and essays. Each piece of work satirized different parts of human society, behavior, and ideology, from Yankee politics and Gold Rush greed to King Leopold's reign. Indeed, Twain's repertoire extended far beyond America's coming of age story as told in his most acclaimed novel, *Huckleberry Finn*. He endlessly parodied human behavior in different times and places, revisiting Camelot in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, lampooning South Sea cannibals in his autobiography, and even rewriting Judeo-Christian history in *Eve's Diary*. The sweeping view of human nature he exhibited in his children's tales, moralistic adult stories, travelogues, and sharp critiques of Gilded Age society gives him a range of thought perhaps unsurpassed in American letters.

Twain was born in 1835 as Samuel Langhorne Clemens, the fifth child of

Jane Lampton and John Marshall. He spent the first 25 years of his life near the Mississippi River, the carefree setting for Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. His father died when Twain was twelve, forcing him to apprentice as a typesetter. He soon joined his brother's newspaper. After a brief stint as a river pilot on the Mississippi River, Twain joined the Confederate Army when Civil War broke out. He deserted after only two weeks to "light out" for the Nevada Territory with his brother.

Twain prospected in Nevada's silver mines and wrote for the Virginia City *Territorial Enterprise* (where he took his pen name) during the remainder of the Civil War. In 1864 he took a job with the San Francisco *Call*. While prospecting for gold in the Sierra Nevada, he wrote "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" (1867), which brought him international fame. Soon after, he set off on a tour of Europe and the Holy Lands, a tale recounted in his first book, *Innocents Abroad*. He married Olivia Langdon in 1870 and settled in

Hartford, Connecticut, where he served as editor of the *Buffalo Express* and wrote some of his best work: *The Gilded Age*, *Tom Sawyer*, and *Huck Finn*. Yet after the death of his wife and two daughters, Twain abandoned the optimism that marked his earlier work. "Often it does seem such a pity," he wrote in *Christian Science*, "that Noah and his party did not miss the boat."

WHERE TO START

If you've only read **THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN** because it was assigned to you in school, it's time to revisit the book. Your first stop beyond that should be **A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT**, then a modern collection of Twain's essays or stories.

Twain and His Critics

Perhaps no American novelist was as revered—and as controversial—in his time as Mark Twain. He hated imperialism, racism, and slavery. Though he believed in neither God nor man, he held unwavering faith in democracy.

Certainly no American novel has been attacked by the public for as long and as vigorously as *Huck Finn*, which has nearly 700 foreign editions and is considered one of the great American classics. The book was first banned in 1885 from the Concord Public Library, which denounced Twain for threatening childhood innocence and the purity of the English language. Twain responded kindly; controversy meant publicity, and publicity generated sales. When, in 1905, the Brooklyn Public Library removed *Huck Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* from the children's room because of their "deceitfulness and mischievous practices," Twain sarcastically compared his books' influence to reading the Bible at an early age.

Twain's description of African Americans as "niggers" raised new issues in the early 1900s. Nonetheless, Booker T. Washington wrote in 1910 that Twain, through

Huck, "exhibited his sympathy and interest in the masses of the Negro people" (*North American Review*, June 1910). *Huck Finn* weathered the storm through the 1930s, when it joined the ranks of classic literature. But controversy resurfaced during the Civil Rights era.



Mark Twain's boyhood home in Hannibal, MO. The sign reads "Tom Sawyers Fence: Here stood the board fence which Tom Sawyer persuaded his gang to pay him for the privilege of whitewashing. Tom sat by and saw that it was well done."

In 1957 the NAACP accused *Huck Finn* of propagating racial stereotypes of African Americans, and the book was removed from the New York City school system. Over the following decades, schools throughout the country debated whether to keep *Huck* in their curricula. During the 1990s *Huck* went to court: *Monteiro vs. Temple Union High School District* (1998) used civil arguments to try to ban the book. Although the case was dismissed, the federal appeals court ruled that schools could be financially liable for fostering racially hostile environments.

Huck Finn's continuing debate reveals as much about American society today as it does about the book itself. "By and by," Twain wrote, "let us hope, people that really have the best interests of the rising generation at heart will become wise and not stir *Huck* up" (*Mark Twain's Autobiography*).

MARK TWAIN: SELECTED WORKS

For a complete description of Twain's works, please visit our website: www.bookmarksmagazine.com.

The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, and Other Sketches (1867)

Most of these "sketches," Twain's first internationally published writings, originally appeared in the *Territorial Enterprise* and the *California*. The title story focuses on a bet over a frog race.

Mark Twain's (Burlesque) Autobiography and First Romance (1871)

This small book describes Twain's fictional ancestors—criminals, ne'er-do-wells, and a late 17th-century missionary who is eaten by his South Sea islander companions.

A Tramp Abroad (1880)

A travel narrative based on Twain

and his family's 1878 trip to Europe, in which encounters with annoying Americans becomes a joke.

The Prince and the Pauper: A Tale for Young People of All Ages (1881)

Twain's first historical novel, in which England's young Prince Edward and a look-alike peasant boy, Tom Canty, exchange places.

The Stolen White Elephant, Etc. (1882)

The elephant Jumbo, aka Hassan Ben Ali Ben Selim Abdallah Mohammed Moisé Alhammal Jamsetjeebhoy Dhuleep Sultan Ebu Bhudpooris, disappears. After a continent-wide search, Jumbo is found in the chief detective's basement.

Life on the Mississippi (1883)

A reminiscence of Twain's stint as a riverboat pilot on the Mississippi, and his later observations about the vanishing age of the steamboat.

The American Claimant and Other Stories and Sketches (1892)

Considered Twain's most unsuccessful novel. This volume contains short stories including "The Private History of a Campaign that Failed," an account of Twain's two weeks in the Confederate Army.

The £1,000,000 Bank-Note and Other New Stories (1893)

The title story recounts a man's plight as a pawn in a bet between two rich Londoners.

Tom Sawyer Abroad (1894)

A fantastic travel narrative related by Tom, Huck, Jim, and a Professor. The action occurs in fantastical settings, including a balloon over the the Egyptian Pyramids.

Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc (1896)

Twain's final novel, published under the pseudonym Sieur Louis de Conte. Regarded by the author as one of his best works.

MAJOR WORKS

The Innocents Abroad; or, The New Pilgrims' Progress (1869)

A few American tourists mistake some European antiques for souvenirs. What's the big deal? Originally published as excerpts in the *Overland Monthly*, the first of Twain's major travel books—and the first to poke fun at the notion that European culture is somehow superior to American culture.



THE STORY: In the late 1860s, the steamship Quaker City traveled to Europe and the Holy Land, with Twain and a group of Americans on board. In a 650-page journey, Twain takes us to major sites, simultaneously criticizing his

companions' foibles and scheming with them to torment the locals.

"As a conscientious, painstaking traveler, 'Mark Twain,' we fear, is not to be commended. But that his book would have been as amusing, if he had been, is a matter of doubt." Bret Harte, *Overland Monthly*, Jan. 1870.

"Perhaps we have persuaded our readers by this time that Mr. Twain is a very offensive specimen of the vulgarst kind of Yankee. And yet, to say the truth, we have a

kind of liking for him." *Saturday Review* (British), Oct. 8, 1870.

"[I]f some of the book is needless, none of it is really poor, and much of it very good." *The Nation*, Sept. 2, 1869.

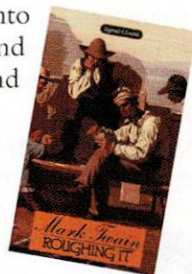
THE BOTTOM LINE: A satirical view of life in the late 19th century. Twain's first masterpiece.

Roughing It (1872)

An Easterner's perspective on the "Wild West," based on Twain's jaunt to Nevada and California in the 1860s.

THE STORY: Twain's semi-fictional account of five and a half years spent prospecting for silver. The narrator provides humorous glimpses into everything from stagecoach travel and Mormons to mining-camp slang and the etiquette of prospecting.

"No writer ever made so much out of so little, and that much of such excellent quality." B. B. Toby, *San Francisco Call*, April 28, 1872.



"As Irving stands, without dispute, at the head of American classic humorists, so the precedence in the unclassical school must be conceded to Mark Twain. About him there is nothing classic, bookish, or conventional, any more than there is about a buffalo or a grizzly."

Overland Monthly, June 1872.

How to Tell a Story and Other Essays (1897)

The title essay describes the difference between the European "witty story" and the American "humorous story."

Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World (1897)

Published as *More Tramps Abroad*. A travel narrative based on Twain's lectures given around the world between 1895 and 1896, focusing on India, Australia, and South Africa.

The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg and Other Stories and Essays (1900)

A novella that describes the downfall of the town of Hadleyburg, when a hoax involving an unclaimed bag of gold makes its townspeople gullible. Other stories include Twain's famous essay, "Concerning the Jews."

A Double Barrelled Detective Story (1902)

Parodies of Sherlock Holmes stories.

My Début as a Literary Person with Other Essays and Stories (1903)

"My Début" recounts the wreck of a clipper ship, the *Hornet*, off of Hawaii. This story was Twain's first big magazine scoop.

Extracts from Adam's Diary (1904)

This sketch, written as an actual diary, recounts the story of Adam's initial confusion about Eve, who eats too much fruit.

King Leopold's Soliloquy: A Defense of His Congo Rule (1905)

A satirical account of Leopold's brutal rule in the Congo, written for the Congo Reform Association.

What Is Man? (1906)

Published anonymously, this Socratic dialogue between an "Old Man" and "Young Man" explains Twain's belief that free will and morality are mere delusions.

Eve's Diary (1906)

Eve grows to love her partner "experiment," Adam. Like Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, this book was

banned from a Massachusetts library for its licentious images.

The \$30,000 Bequest and Other Stories (1906)

A couple, expecting (but never receiving) an inheritance, ruin their lives by speculating about how they will spend it.

Christian Science (1907)

This book explores the religion founded by Mary Baker Eddy. Twain, however, did not reveal the personal history behind his distaste for the religion.

The Mysterious Stranger, A Romance (1916)

Initially serialized in *Harper's Magazine* and published in full posthumously. The title story is set in late 1500s Austria. Twain, who became anti-religious in his later years, offers opinions about the meaning of life, death, and religious hypocrisy.

Mark Twain's Autobiography (1924)

Edited by Albert Bigelow Paine, Twain's controversial biographer. ■

"A thousand anecdotes, relevant and irrelevant, embroider the work; . . . it is singularly entertaining, and its humor is always amiable, manly, and generous." William Dean Howells, *The Atlantic*, June 1872.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Humorous, innocent, and a valuable window into the vanished "Wild West."

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876)

Boy tricks neighborhood kids into painting fence for him. Sound familiar? By far Twain's most popular book and, like *Huckleberry Finn*, controversial in its racial stereotyping.

THE STORY: Tom lives with his elderly Aunt Polly in an idyllic version of Twain's boyhood town of Hannibal, Missouri. He fears God, hates Sunday School, and has good intentions. Yet he, along with friends Joe Harper and Huck Finn, have no shortage of adventures . . . from digging for buried treasure to witnessing a murder and even attending their own funeral.



"Mr. Clemens has a remarkable memory for those peculiarities of American boy-talk which the grown man may have forgotten, but which return to him not unpleasantly when once the proper key is sounded." *The*

New York Times, Jan. 13, 1877.

"The story is a wonderful study of the boy-mind. . . and in this lies its great charm and its universality, for boy-nature, however human nature varies, is the same everywhere." William Dean Howells, *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1876.

THE BOTTOM LINE: The best picture of life in that region—if you take the story, and its racial stereotypes, in the context of the time.



THE MOST FREQUENTLY BANNED BOOKS

1990-2000

Compiled by the American Library Association, 2000:

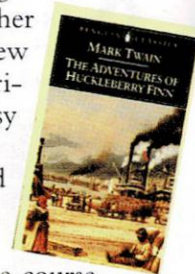
1. *Scary Stories*, by Alvin Schwartz
2. *Daddy's Roommate*, by Michael Willhoite
3. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, by Maya Angelou
4. *The Chocolate War*, by Robert Cormier
5. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885)

The book comes with this warning: "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot." So, neither motive, moral, nor plot—instead, a few hundred pages of satirical and biting critique of slavery, prejudice, and hypocrisy in antebellum America.

THE STORY: Huck Finn, who debuted in *Tom Sawyer*, rafts down the Mississippi River to escape his drunken father and falls in with Jim, a runaway slave. In the course of their journey, they meet adventure, danger, and a cast of hilarious characters. In the end, Huck awakens to the injustices of slavery.

CRITICAL INSIGHT: *Huckleberry Finn* was "introduced to the world as it were with the blare of trumpets" (*San Francisco Evening Bulletin*, March 14, 1885). Some critics resented Twain's ownership of the book's publishing company and his "subscription" marketing to readers. Others thought it a brilliant novel. Yet even negative publicity generated sales: By May 1885, *Huck Finn* had sold 57,000 copies. Here's what the critics said:



THE GOOD

"[T]he book is a most valuable record of an important part of our motley American civilization. . . . If Mark Twain would follow his hero through manhood, he would condense a side of American life that, in a few years, will have to be delved out of newspapers, government reports, county histories, and misleading traditions by unsympathetic sociologists." T. S. Perry, *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, May 1885.

"Already *Huckleberry Finn* is an historical novel, and more valuable, perhaps, to the historian than *Uncle Tom's Cabin* . . . Nothing can be more true and more humorous than the narrative of this outcast boy, with a heart naturally good, with a conscience torn between the teaching of his world about slavery and the promptings of his nature." Andrew Lang, *The Illustrated London News*, Feb. 14, 1891.

"[I]t teaches, without seeming to do it, the virtue of honest simplicity, directness, truth. . . . It will hugely please the boys, and also interest people of more mature years." *Hartford Daily Times*, March 9, 1885.

THE BAD

"[O]ne cannot have the book long in his hands without being tempted to regret that the author should so often have laid himself open to the charge of coarseness and bad taste." *Boston Daily Advertiser*, March 12, 1885.

"Before the work is disposed of, Mr. Mark Twain will probably have to resort to law to compel some to sell it by any sort of bribery or corruption. It is doubtful if the edition could be disposed of to people of average intellect at anything short of the point of the bayonet." Boston Evening

Traveller, March 5, 1885.

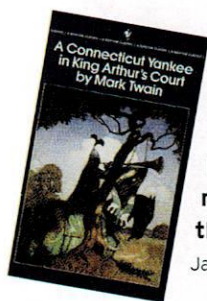
THE BOTTOM LINE: An American classic, with a truly immortal hero and message.

A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (1889)

Unlike his earlier novels, a more pessimistic look into human nature and society, and a blasting contempt of monarchy and aristocracy.

THE STORY: Hank Morgan, a 19th-century mechanical genius, wakes up in 6th-century England. He escapes a death sentence and secures an important position in Camelot as Sir Boss, a prominent dissident of the Round Table. But the Church, superstition, and class tensions transform the society into a war zone.

"It is not a novel; it is a ponderous political pamphlet. . . . this book of Mark Twain's is one of the most significant of our time." William T. Stead, Review of Reviews, Feb. 1890.



"Here [Twain] is to the full the humorist, as we know him; but he is very much more, and his strong, indignant, often infuriate hate of injustice, and his love of equality, burn hot through the manifold adventures and experiences of the tale." William Dean Howells, Harper's Magazine, Jan. 1890.

"A book, however, that tries to deface our moral and literary currency by bruising and soiling the image of King Arthur. . . is a very unworthy production of the great humorist's pen." London Daily Telegraph, Jan. 13, 1890.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A whimsical, important book. Prescient in the notion that creating modern democracies entails more than transferring modern technology and markets.

The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson, and the Comedy of Those Extraordinary Twins (1894)

This novel possesses all of the elements of a mystery: reversed identities, a terrible crime, and a courtroom drama. Yet, like *Huck Finn*, the satirical novel strikes at the real criminal: racial prejudice and slavery in the antebellum South.

THE STORY: Roxana, a light-skinned slave, switches her baby with her white owner's baby. Her natural son, Tom Driscoll, grows up privileged, but becomes a criminal who finances his gambling debts by selling her to

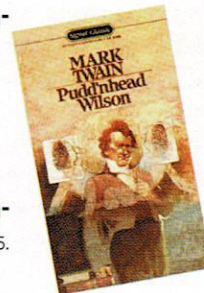
WHAT DID MARK TWAIN READ?

Twain had more than 1,000 books in his personal library. "The man who does not read good books," he purportedly said, "has no advantage over the man who can't read them." Here's a sampling of what he read:

- The Koran
- The Bible
- Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*
- John James Audubon, *The Birds of America*
- Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*
- Plutarchus, *Plutarch's Lives*
- Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*
- Homer, *The Iliad and The Odyssey*
- William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet, The Merchant of Venice, Macbeth*
- Henry Richard Dana, *Two Years Before the Mast*
- Daniel Defoe, *Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*
- Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*
- Ida Tarbell, *History of Standard Oil Co.*
- James Fenimore Cooper, *Leather-Stocking Tales*
- Walt Whitman, *Autobiographia and Leaves of Grass*
- Woodrow Wilson, *A History of the American People*
- Emile Zola, *L'Assommoir* ■

a murderous slave trader. Meanwhile, Roxana raises Valet de Chambre as a slave. And the lawyer David ("Pudd'nhead") Wilson tries to untangle this mess. . .

"If anybody but Mark Twain. . . had had the hardihood to utilize afresh this venerable stage machinery of fiction, we should have been tempted to class his work with such cheap stuff as that of Wilkie Collins, Hugh Conway, and the dime novelists. But Mark Twain, somehow, has lifted it all into the region of literature." H. H. Boyesen, *Cosmopolitan*, Jan. 18, 1895.



". . . a somewhat gloomy but powerful tale of the slavery times." *Spectator*, March 16, 1895.

"[I]t is clear that Pudd'nhead Wilson is to Mark Twain what Poor Richard was to Franklin." *Saturday Review*, Dec. 29, 1894.

"This curious volume is as full of the characteristic humor of Twain as is the best of his work." *Cincinnati Commercial Gazette*, Feb. 3, 1895.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A dark burlesque that digs deep into ingrained racial stereotypes and people's inability to see beyond them. ■