

## The Library of America interviews Shelley Fisher Fishkin about Mark Twain

In connection with the publication in March 2010 of *[The Mark Twain Anthology: Great Writers on His Life and Works](#)*, edited by Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

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*Could any other writer garner plaudits from a group as diverse as Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jorge Luis Borges, Chuck Jones, Erica Jong, and Barack Obama? The cast of contributors to The Mark Twain Anthology is so rich—more than sixty writers who range from Twain’s contemporary, William Dean Howells, to novelist Min Jin Lee, born 133 years later. You mention in your introduction that the book could easily have been two or three times as large. How did you decide what to include?*

I sought a mix of familiar suspects and fresh faces: I wanted the book to contain some surprises. I gave priority to contributors who were literary figures in their own right rather than academic critics because I wanted the book to reflect the ways in which writers have engaged Twain as a fellow writer. (“The difference between the almost right word & the right word,” Twain wrote, “is really a large matter—it’s the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.”)

Twain travelled more widely than virtually any other American author of his era, and his works travelled as well—both in English and in translation—shaping world literature in unexpected ways in the process. I wanted the book to reflect that. To that end, I sought out work by respected writers published originally in Europe, Asia, and Latin America that had not previously been translated into English—including pieces by Cuba’s most famous public intellectual, by Nobel laureates from Denmark and Japan, by a famous Russian poet, etc.

Certain threads take the foreground—African-American writers commenting on Twain and race, for example. I wanted to include responses to the full range

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of Twain's writings, not just *Huckleberry Finn*. I included pieces critical of Twain, as well as pieces that were appreciative. And finally, I sought a mix of genres: essays, letters, poetry, fiction, memoirs—and distinctive portraits of Twain by artists ranging from French surrealist Jean Cocteau to James Montgomery Flagg (of “Uncle Sam Wants You” fame) to Chuck Jones (creator of Bugs Bunny, Road Runner, and Wile E. Coyote) to contemporary artist Barry Moser.

### *What was new and distinctive about Twain's writing?*

Time and again Twain defied readers' expectations, forging unforgettable narratives from materials that had not been the stuff of literature before. As William Dean Howells put it, “He saunters out into the trim world of letters, and lounges across its neatly kept paths, and walks about on the grass at will, in spite of all the signs that have been put up from the beginning of literature, warning people of dangers and penalties for the slightest trespass.”

From the breezy slang and deadpan humor that peppered his earliest comic sketches to the unmistakably American characters who populated his fiction, Twain's writings introduced readers around the world to American personalities speaking in distinctively American cadences. H. L. Mencken wrote in the *New York Evening Mail* in 1917, “His humor was American. His incurable Philistinism was American. His very English was American. Above all, he was an American in his curious mixture of sentimentality and cynicism, his mingling of romanticist and iconoclast. [Emerson's] *English Traits* might have been written by any one of half a dozen Germans. The tales of Poe, printed as translations from the French, would have deceived even Frenchmen. . . . But in *Huckleberry Finn*, in *A Connecticut Yankee*, and in most of the short sketches there is a quality that is unmistakably and overwhelmingly national. They belong to our country and our time quite as obviously as the skyscraper or the quick lunch counter.”

Sometimes writers outside the U.S. embraced the freshness of what Twain was doing with greater enthusiasm than Americans did. I found, for example, that the first book published anywhere, in any language, on Twain, was published in French in Paris in 1884 by a twenty-four-year-old Henry Gauthier-Villars (best known today for being the controversial first husband of the writer Colette). “Hello then, charming writer with no model or imitator!” Gauthier-Villars wrote. “I bid you welcome among us, newcomer with endless verve; the sound of the hurrahs you have raised has already crossed the ocean. We have been waiting for you . . . the cheerful Yankee with the ringing laugh, the inimitable Mark Twain!”

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*There seem to be many Mark Twains. In your book *Lighting Out for the Territory* you list some: “a funny man with a talent for literature of the low sort; a serious author who despaired of being tarred forever with the ‘humorist’ label; a satirist so subtle his meanings were often missed; a polemicist so direct his messages were often pointedly ignored.” Could you guide readers to the pieces in this anthology that celebrate the Twain they like best?*

Readers interested in Twain as a humorist will enjoy G. K. Chesterton’s descriptions of the “mad logic” of his wit; Jesús Castellanos’ efforts to describe the “indeterminable and delicious something” in Twain’s “way of saying things precisely as they are not;” and Michael Blakemore’s comments on Twain as the author of a “play that makes audiences laugh so much they break the seats.” Twain’s review of his own book *Innocents Abroad*, published anonymously, is hilarious. (Casting himself in the persona of a humorless, literal-minded British reviewer Twain wrote, “That the book is a deliberate and wicked creation of a diseased mind, is apparent on every page.”) Readers who care more about Twain’s social and political criticism will read with interest the essays by José Martí, Hamlin Garland, Lao She, and Roy Blount, Jr., among others, along with short comments by Booker T. Washington and Langston Hughes. Those who like their Twain serious and somber will find Theodore Dreiser’s discussion of Twain as a marvelously “gloomy and wholly mechanistic thinker” appealing.

For Twain as a titan of world literature, read W. H. Auden comparing Twain with Charles Dickens, or Maks Erik comparing Twain with both Dickens and Sholem Aleichem. Ángel Guerra and José Martí compare Twain with Cervantes; Jorge Luis Borges, with Ricardo Güiraldes and Rudyard Kipling. For the impact Twain had on children who would grow up to become prominent writers and artists, read the pieces by Marina Tsvetaeva, Grant Wood, Chuck Jones, David Bradley, and Ursula K. Le Guin.

The index of Twain’s works at the back of the book will help any reader discover how many works the *Anthology* covers. Twain’s greatest hits are well represented with David Ross Locke, Thérèse Bentzon, José Martí, Eduard Engel, and Livia Bruni on *The Innocents Abroad*; David Bradley and E. L. Doctorow on *Tom Sawyer*; T. S. Eliot, Jorge Luis Borges, W. H. Auden, Ralph Ellison, Kenzaburo Oe, Norman Mailer, and Toni Morrison on *Huckleberry Finn*; and José Martí, Hamlin Garland, and Kurt Vonnegut on *A Connecticut Yankee*. But Twain’s less familiar works get their share too: William Dean Howells on *Joan of Arc*; Hal Holbrook on *Letters from the Earth*; Ursula K. Le Guin and Lu Xun on *Eve’s Diary*, Ralph Wiley on *Tom*

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*Sawyer Abroad*; David Bradley on “How to Tell a Story”; Erica Jong on “1601”; and Min Jin Lee on “The £1,000,000 Bank-Note” and “The \$30,000 Bequest.”

***Considering the thousands of books of criticism published about the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, it must have been difficult to narrow your selection down to the ones you chose: pieces by Sterling Brown, Leslie Fiedler, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Toni Morrison, and the hilarious critical send-up in Huckspeak by John Seelye. Why did these get the nod?***

It *was* very difficult to narrow it down. The piece by poet and critic Sterling Brown is the first acknowledgment from a black writer on the care with which Mark Twain portrayed Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* and of the respect that Twain had for him. Brown’s characterization of Jim as “the best example in nineteenth-century fiction of the average Negro slave (not the tragic mulatto or the noble savage), illiterate, superstitious, yet clinging to his hope for freedom, to his love for his own,” a figure who is “completely believable, whether arguing that Frenchman should talk like people, or doing most of the work on the raft” prefigures analogous readings of the novel by a younger generation of black writers that includes Ralph Wiley and David H. Bradley. Sterling Brown’s work paved the way for informed examinations of black stereotypes in American fiction and their cultural import by later writers such as Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison. In her essay Morrison observes that in addition to the publication of *Huckleberry Finn* “the 1880s saw the collapse of civil rights for blacks,” a sign that the country wanted “to bury the combustible issues Twain raised in his novel.” “The nation, as well as Tom Sawyer,” Morrison writes, “was deferring Jim’s freedom in agonizing play.” Her response to efforts to take the book out of the curriculum in American high schools is succinctly eloquent: “the cyclical attempts to remove the novel from classrooms extend Jim’s captivity on into each generation of readers.”

I couldn’t see this book *not* including the iconic and controversial essays by T. S. Eliot and Leslie Fiedler—each had an important impact on conversations about the book when they came out—Eliot arguing for the absolute aptness of the ending, and Fiedler focusing on the centrality of race and male bonding not only in this book, but in so much of nineteenth-century American literature.

Referring to Huck’s decision not to return Jim to his owner, W. H. Auden, a British-born poet who became an American citizen, writes, “What Huck does is a pure act of moral improvisation,” a peculiarly American act based on assumptions about the world an Englishman would be unlikely to share. His comment

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echoes something Twain wrote in a notebook: “What is an Englishman?” Twain asked, and answered, “A person who does things because they have been done before.” “What is an American?” he asked, and answered: “A person who does things because they *haven’t* been done before.” Finally, John Seelye, in his memorable riff on the critics in *Huckspeak*, gives us a pure act of *literary* improvisation, reminding us that audacious wit and *chutzpadik* critical clowning were alive and well in twentieth-century America.

*In your critically acclaimed and provocative work of literary detection, Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices (1993), you uncovered the many African-American voices Twain was personally familiar with that informed and inspired his writing. The anthology includes several moving pieces, those by David Bradley and Ralph Wiley in particular, that testify to the comment Ralph Ellison made in a 1991 interview with you: “He made it possible for many of us to find our own voices.” Is this still a controversial claim? What do you think Twain would make of this impact of his work?*

The most memorable stories Twain heard during his childhood were those he heard in the slave quarters from specific slaves whom he recalled years later in autobiographical recollections, in “How to Tell a Story,” and elsewhere. The engaging mock-sermons of a “satirical slave” named Jerry that Twain listened to daily in his youth were his introduction to satire as a tool of social criticism, as he tells us in “Corn-Pone Opinions.” As an adult, Twain was exposed to such gifted storytellers as Mary Ann Cord (who told the story that is at the center of “A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It”); Frederick Douglass (whose rhetorical gifts Twain describes admiringly in a letter); and the young black servant he profiled in “Sociable Jimmy” (“the most artless, sociable, exhaustless talker” Twain had ever met, to whom Twain listened “as one who receives a revelation,” and who played a role in the genesis of *Huckleberry Finn*).

Twain became a writer at a time when characters who spoke in dialect were generally objects of ridicule and sources of comic relief. But speakers like those mentioned here taught Twain the complex, subtle, and serious uses to which dialect and vernacular speech could be put; and American literature would never be the same. I believe that few would deny today the important role that African-American voices and speakers like these played in making Twain the writer he became. As Ralph Ellison told me in our interview, reading Twain, and seeing the

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ways in which he transformed vernacular speech into art helped many black—and white—authors in the century that followed find their “own voices” as writers.

Borges cites his agreement with the statement that “*Huckleberry Finn* taught the whole American novel to talk.” The idea that that talk was indelibly shaped by black voices as well as white ones is now widely accepted. As Ralph Wiley honed his skills as a satirist centering his writing on race and racism in American society, Twain, a writer Wiley viewed with a mix of jealousy, respect, and awe, was a constant inspiration. And as David Bradley tells us in his powerful autobiographical essay, Twain played a key role in his decision to become the kind of writer he became, a writer who engages history and memory with a sharpness that Twain himself would have relished.

***In the excerpt from his memoir *Callus on My Soul* (2000) humorist and activist Dick Gregory maintains that there have only been three geniuses in comedy: Mark Twain, Lenny Bruce, and Richard Pryor. Is it possible to identify what makes Twain’s humor so enduring?***

Twain himself provides us with a pretty good answer when he writes that “humor must not professedly teach, and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever. By forever, I mean thirty years. . . . I have always preached. That is the reason that I have lasted thirty years. . . . I was not writing the sermon for the sake of the humor. I should have written the sermon just the same . . .” Twain’s humor both teaches and preaches—but it dresses those lessons and sermons in such delicious wit that we don’t necessarily realize we’ve been preached at or taught a thing.

On the occasion of receiving an honorary degree from Yale in 1888, Twain referred to himself as a writer known for his humor and then chose to remind the world that the humorist’s trade “is a useful trade, a worthy calling; that with all its lightness and frivolity it has one serious purpose, one aim, one specialty, and it is constant to it—the deriding of shams, the exposure of pretentious falsities, the laughing of stupid superstitions out of existence; and that whoso is by instinct engaged in this sort of warfare is the natural enemy of royalties, nobilities, privileges and all kindred swindles, and the natural friend of human rights and human liberties.” Or, as Satan would later put it in Twain’s *Mysterious Stranger*, “your race, in its poverty, has unquestionably one really effective weapon—laughter. Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution—these can lift at a colossal humbug—push it a little—weaken it a little, century by century; but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.” Twain’s humor endures

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because it is true to its “one serious purpose”—“the deriding of shams, the exposure of pretentious falsities, the laughing of stupid superstitions out of existence.” It may make us wince. But we still come back for more.

*Sixteen of the pieces in the book are new translations from Chinese, Danish, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian, Spanish, and Yiddish of articles about Twain previously unavailable in English, and two other little-known selections are pieces that were translated previously from Chinese and Russian. You note that the writers of these articles probably encountered a quite different Mark Twain from the one American readers found. Why was that? Did different nationalities respond to different aspects of his work?*

When European contemporaries of Twain read *Innocents Abroad*, a book replete with irreverent digs at some of the icons of their civilization that was written with an American audience in mind, naturally they were taken aback. But once they got over the shock of this upstart daring to dissent from the expected pieties, they found themselves laughing at themselves no matter how hard they tried not to. Despite Thérèse Bentzon’s efforts to discount as ignorant bluster Twain’s satirical take on her country—France—she found herself struggling to describe (somewhat enviously I think) the “unquenchable verve” of his humor. And when the German writer Eduard Engel wrote that “ignorance, good humor, and wit form such a strange mixture” in Twain’s “The Awful German Language” (an appendix to *A Tramp Abroad*) “that when reading it one really does not know if one should get angry or laugh,” he tells us that he “preferred the latter and advises any reader of this appendix to do the same.” Engel, the great turn-of-the-century authority on German, credits Twain with having somehow aptly hit upon many “a sad truth” about the language, such as when he is deploring the “parenthesis disease” that allows a “sort of luminous intellectual fog” to substitute for “clearness,” or when he considers the frequently convoluted, interminable quality of German sentences. (This is the piece, after all, in which Twain refers to German as a language in which a man can “travel all day in one sentence without changing cars.”) Some Europeans dug in their heels and chose to be permanently offended, refusing to forgive Twain for the cheekiness of having dared to write *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* or *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*; but more found that it was easier to laugh at themselves, even if they weren’t in the habit of doing so.

Until recently, readers in the U.S. were likely to be unfamiliar with the Mark Twain that writers in China and the Soviet Union had been praising for

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much of the twentieth century. As Maxwell Geismar put it in *Scanlan's Monthly* in 1970, “During the Cold War era of our culture, mainly in the 1950s although extending back into the '40s and forward far into the '60s, Mark Twain was both revived and castrated. The entire arena of Twain's radical social criticism of the United States—its racism, imperialism, and finance capitalism—has been repressed or conveniently avoided by the so-called Twain scholars precisely because it is so bold, so brilliant, so satirical. And so prophetic.” But while most Americans in the twentieth century had been encountering a “castrated” tame Twain, to borrow Geismar's word, readers in China and the Soviet Union were encountering a Twain unafraid to launch salvos at the hypocrisy and failings of the country that he loved. Writers in this volume such as Lao She, Yan Berezniy, and Abel Startsev help us see how imperatives of the Cold War distorted Americans' understanding of Twain's role as a social critic. In part *because* Chinese and Russian writers and critics lauded the Twain who was a searing critic of his country, American writers and critics largely dismissed *that* Twain as a figment of the Communist propaganda machine, downplaying the validity of Twain's criticisms of his country—which were also criticisms of *their* country. With one or two exceptions, not until the 1990s would American scholars generally decide that Twain's social criticism deserved their full attention.

***Leave it to Gore Vidal to celebrate Twain the anti-imperialist in his introduction of Following the Equator and Anti-Imperialist Essays. Vidal is hard put to “tell just where [Twain's anti-imperialism] came from.” Can you help provide some context?***

Although Twain is often quoted as announcing his “conversion” to anti-imperialism as the nineteenth century drew to a close, we are reminded by the Chinese writer Lao She that Twain showed signs of opposition to imperialism as early as 1868, when he published a piece called “Treaty with China” in the *New York Tribune*. Critics have read *A Connecticut Yankee* (1889) as another milestone in the evolution of Twain's attitudes on this issue. I see Twain's anti-imperialism as a natural outgrowth of his well-honed sense of social justice, a development fueled by his travels around the world that allowed him to witness imperialism firsthand. As Twain wrote in *Following the Equator*, “No tribe, howsoever insignificant, and no nation, howsoever mighty, occupies a foot of land that was not stolen. When the English, the French, and the Spaniards reached America, the Indian tribes had been raiding each other's territorial clothes-lines for ages, and every acre of ground in the continent had been stolen and re-stolen 500 times. The English, the



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French, and the Spaniards went to work and stole it all over again; and when that was satisfactorily accomplished they went diligently to work and stole it from each other. In Europe and Asia and Africa every acre of ground has been stolen several millions of times. A crime persevered in a thousand centuries ceases to be a crime, and becomes a virtue. This is the law of custom, and custom supersedes all other forms of law. Christian governments are as frank to-day, as open and above-board, in discussing projects for raiding each other's clothes-lines as ever they were before the Golden Rule came smiling into this inhospitable world and couldn't get a night's lodging anywhere."

*The last essays by Ron Powers on "The War-Prayer" and by Roy Blount Jr. on "The United States of Lyncherdom" address some of the darker writings of Twain's later years. Was Twain's puckish irony shading into pessimism at this point in his life?*

Twain did grow increasingly pessimistic about humankind and about his country during the last decade of his life. But that pessimism—which is often attributed to all of the personal losses that he suffered—stemmed at least as much from his sense that his country had lost its way in the world, that it was emulating the worst failings of European nations when it set about acquiring an empire of its own. Careful readers of that puckish irony associated with his early years, however, will also find seeds of the exasperation and despair in it.

*Many pieces testify to the impact of Twain's writing, but for me the most memorable describe how charismatic Twain was in person. Most moving is Helen Keller's account of when the deaf and blind fourteen-year-old visited Twain at his home. Twain reads to her while she "sits near him in a low chair, my elbow on the arm of his chair, so that my fingers could rest lightly on his lips." How characteristic was this of personal encounters with Twain?*

I find Helen Keller's writing about Twain incredibly special, both because it is so vividly rendered—because Keller herself is such an astute observer—and because it captures the remarkable intensity of their unique friendship. When Twain received a copy of the autobiography she published at age 22 and sent to him, he wrote her a warm letter of thanks, saying, "I must steal half a moment from my work to say how glad I am to have your book and how highly I value it, both for its own sake and as a remembrance of an affectionate friendship which

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has subsisted between us for nine years without a break and without a single act of violence that I can call to mind. I suppose there is nothing like it in heaven; and not likely to be, until we get there and show off. I often think of it with longing, and how they'll say, 'there they come—sit down in front.' I am practicing with a tin halo. You do the same."

I am also fond of several other personal encounters described in the book—such as Rudyard Kipling's account of his trek, as a young journalist, from Allahabad, India, to Elmira, New York, to interview his hero; or José Martí's description of a reading he heard Twain give in New York; or Theodor Herzl's story about a reading Twain gave in Paris. I was surprised, frankly, by the affectionate tone of William James' comments about his interactions with Twain in Florence, since I didn't think that James would be drawn to Twain in this way: he wrote his friend, Josiah Royce, "Mark Twain is here for the winter in a villa outside the town, hard at work writing something or other. I have seen him a couple of times—a fine, soft-fibred little fellow with the perversest twang and drawl, but very human and good. I should think that one might grow very fond of him, and wish he'd come and live in Cambridge."

***You are the editor of the twenty-nine-volume Oxford Mark Twain, A Historical Guide to Mark Twain, and Mark Twain's Book of Animals, and you are the author of Was Huck Black?: Mark Twain and African American Voices and Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture, as well as over two dozen articles about Twain. How did you first become involved with Mark Twain?***

My mother startled me out of a cocoon of cartoons and cocoa one blustery Saturday morning when I was eleven and took me to visit Mark Twain's house in Hartford, Connecticut. I was less impressed by the Tiffany-designed interior, mosaic tiles, oriental carpets, and stenciled wall coverings than I was by the phone booth—complete with a report card Mark Twain used to grade the phone company—or the fireplace with a divided flue that let you bask in the warmth of a crackling fire while watching the snowflakes fall right above it, or the strange, complicated machine in the basement that was designed to set type automatically but never quite did what it was supposed to and somehow ate all of Twain's money instead. That whole magical afternoon my mother beamed. She knew what she was doing, all right. She was planting the seeds of a lifelong fascination with the

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man who had lived in that house. Soon after we returned from Hartford she began reading *Tom Sawyer* to me as a bedtime story. I thought Huck and Tom could be a lot of fun, but I dismissed Becky Thatcher as a bore. I didn't read *Huckleberry Finn* until junior year in high school, when it was assigned in my English class. It was the fall of 1965. I was living in a small town in Connecticut. I expected a sequel to *Tom Sawyer*. So when the teacher handed out the books and announced our assignment, my jaw dropped: "Write a paper on how Mark Twain used irony to attack racism in *Huckleberry Finn*."

A year before, the bodies of three young men who had gone to Mississippi to help blacks register to vote—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—had been found in a shallow grave; a group of white segregationists (the county sheriff among them) had been arrested in connection with the murders. America's inner cities were simmering with pent-up rage that had started exploding in the summer of 1965, when riots in Watts left thirty-four people dead. None of this made any sense to me. I was confused, angry, certain that there was something missing from the news stories I read each day: the why. Then I met Pap Finn. Pap Finn, Huck tells us, "had been drunk over in town" and "was just all mud." He erupts into a drunken tirade about "a free nigger . . . from Ohio; a mulatter, most as white as a white man," with "the whitest shirt on you ever see, too, and the shiniest hat; and there ain't a man in town that's got as fine clothes as what he had. . . . they said he was a p'fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything. And that ain't the wust. They said he could *vote*, when he was at home. Well, that let me out. Thinks I, what is the country a-coming to? It was 'lection day, and I was just about to go and vote, myself, if I warn't too drunk to get there, but when they told me there was a State in this country where they'd let that nigger vote, I drawed out. I says I'll never vote agin. Them's the very words I said. . . . And to see the cool way of that nigger—why, he wouldn't a give me the road if I hadn't shoved him out o' the way." Why did a drunk Pap Finn railing against a black college professor from Ohio whose vote was as good as his own tell me more about white anxiety over black political power than anything I had seen on the evening news?

Mark Twain knew that depicting racists with chilling accuracy could expose the viciousness of their world view like nothing else could. It was an insight echoed some eighty years after Mark Twain penned Pap Finn's rantings about the black professor, when Malcolm X famously asked, "Do you know what white racists call black Ph.D.'s?" and answered, "'Nigger!'"

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Mark Twain taught me to recognize the supreme irony of a country founded in freedom that continued to deny freedom to so many of its citizens. He also taught me how powerful irony and satire could be in the service of truth. I found it exhilarating to analyze why it was so important that Twain never let Huck figure out he was doing the right thing all along—why a naïve narrator could be such an effective vehicle for conveying to readers the moral bankruptcy of the world in which he lived. It was exciting to read between the lines and under and around and behind them to try to figure out what the author—as opposed to his characters—was really trying to do and how he did it. I now recognize that those were my first steps on the path that led to a career teaching and writing about literature.

### *Do you have any favorites among the pieces included in the anthology?*

I love Helen Keller’s recollections of Twain and George Bernard Shaw’s letter to Twain. I find Erica Jong’s insight into the link between two pieces Twain wrote in the summer of 1876—the quasi-pornographic language experiment “1601” and the first portion of *Huckleberry Finn*—inspired and persuasive. I find Hal Holbrook’s stories about how audiences have responded to the Twain he gave them in his performances of *Mark Twain Tonight!* for more than half a century riveting (a good omen for his soon-to-be-published memoirs). David Bradley’s eloquent narrative about how Twain helped make him the kind of writer he became never fails to impress me. Min Jin Lee’s essay (“Money as an American Character”) on how Twain gave her permission to write about money always strikes me as smart and fresh and insightful. I like the page of the “sampler” that includes dueling quotes from Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Delano Roosevelt about the worth of *A Connecticut Yankee*. And I have great admiration for Roy Blount, Jr.’s “America’s Original Superstar,” on how “Mark Twain skewered the powerful, mocked the pious, and helped change a nation”—a compelling coda to a wonderfully rich and diverse collection.

### *This year marks the one hundredth anniversary of Mark Twain’s death. Which of the many things he can teach us is most valuable for us to learn today?*

Dick Gregory writes that Twain “was so far ahead of his time that he shouldn’t even be talked about on the same day as other people.” Twain’s quirky, ambitious, strikingly original fiction and nonfiction engaged some of the perennially

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thorny, messy challenges we are still grappling with today—such as the challenge of making sense of a nation founded on freedom by men who held slaves; or the puzzle of our continuing faith in technology in the face of our awareness of its destructive powers; or the problem of imperialism and the difficulties involved in getting rid of it. Twain understood the potential of art in the service of truth, and he grasped the potential of humor in the service of morality. Humane, sardonic, compassionate, impatient, hilarious, appalling, keenly observant, and complex, Twain helped define the rhythms of American prose and the contours of our moral map.

In a speech in 1908, Howells referred to “Mark Twain, originally of Missouri, but then of Hartford, and now ultimately of the solar system, not to say the universe.” Twain was one of the country’s first genuinely cosmopolitan citizens, someone who felt as much at home in the world as in his native land. Twain teaches us to be global citizens, suspicious of jingoism, chauvinism, misplaced pride, xenophobia, racism, and exploitation; and fiercely protective of human rights, human liberties, and justice. He teaches us how to unmask hypocrisy, humbug, cant, and sham.

Twain also models for us the possibility of personal change. After all, how did this child of slaveholders come to write one of the country’s greatest anti-racist novels? In a paper he read in Hartford in 1887, Twain wrote, “What is the most rigorous law of our being? *Growth*. . . . *We change*—and *must* change, constantly, and keep on changing as long as we live.” Twain gives us the tools we need to become more compassionate, self-aware citizens of the world who take responsibility for the state of our society and our role in it.

### ***What do you think is the most under-appreciated work by Mark Twain?***

If I had been asked this question a few years ago, I would have said his 1898 play *Is He Dead?*, which lay unpublished, unproduced, and largely forgotten in the archives for over a century. But I don’t think I would call it “under-appreciated” now, since tens of thousands of people have laughed themselves silly watching the play since its Broadway debut in 2007 (both on Broadway, and in the over seventy productions that have been mounted since its Broadway run ended in 2008). Although it’s far from unknown, I think we don’t appreciate Twain’s brilliant 1899 essay, “My First Lie and How I Got Out of It,” as much as we should. It is there that he came up with the crucial concept of the “the lie of silent assertion”—“the silent assertion that nothing is going on which fair and intelligent men are aware of and are engaged by

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their duty to try to stop.” But I guess I’d have to say that a good candidate for “the most under-appreciated work by Mark Twain” would be “Treaty with China,” which he published in the *New York Tribune* in 1868. This piece, which is an early statement of Twain’s opposition to imperialism and which conveys his vision of how the U.S. ought to behave on the global stage, has not been reprinted since its original publication. But it will be republished in 2010 when it will appear in the second issue of the *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, an online, open-access, peer-reviewed journal sponsored by the University of California-Santa Barbara and Stanford, along with an article appraising its significance.