

BOOK REVIEW

***Mark Twain and Youth: Studies in His Life and Writings.* Kevin Mac Donnell and R. Kent Rasmussen, eds. Bloomsbury, 2016. Pp. xxv + 313. Softcover. \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-8135-7597-1. Hardcover. \$112. ISBN 9781474223126. Ebook. \$24.99. ISBN 9781474223119.**



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"Youth," Livy Clemens called him. His friend Howells said he was "a youth to the end of his days." Twichell tossed a piece of driftwood into a stream and watched his friend Mark, at 42, "running down stream after it as hard as he could go, throwing up his hands and shouting in the wildest ecstasy." The books everyone remembers are about two boys. Franklin D. Roosevelt called Hannibal the "cradle of the chronicles of buoyant boyhood." At the Hartford house, his girls ruled the roost. In old age, he collected proxy grand-daughters.

For these and many other reasons it's high time for this book, and the editors are well-suited to the task. Kevin Mac Donnell's generosity with his vast collection of Twainiana and his even vaster store of detailed information is legendary. His energy is phenomenal, and he seems to make a habit of sleuthing out a new Clemens mystery every year. R. Kent Rasmussen is another legend, the *Mark Twain Journal's* 2015 Legacy Scholar. He applies poetry and precision to everything he does, from his indispensable reference work *Mark Twain A to Z* to his *Mark Twain for Kids* and his latest, *Mark Twain for Dog Lovers*. Notably, neither the editors nor any of the contributors are receiving compensation for their work; royalties are being distributed to the Twain centers at Berkeley, Hartford, Hannibal and Elmira.

But before the editors take the stage, they surrender it--as who wouldn't?--to Hal Holbrook. Holbrook's foreword is a shocker--though he addresses the book's theme, he also uses the foreword as a podium to express a chilling view of the world as it has unraveled since 1910, the year of Clemens's death.

"I wonder if God invented Man because he was disappointed in the monkey," Holbrook quotes, a line that in *Mark Twain Tonight* never fails to get a laugh. But here, Holbrook turns on his audience: "You think that's a joke? Think again. . . . The century I was born into was not funny" (xi). Holbrook is truly channeling the late-life Clemens here, the so-called "dark" Clemens, but he undercuts even this dismissive stereotype: "Right. So, 'The War Prayer' has nothing to do with us?" (xv). Holbrook's last line is searing--well, you've got to read it all, no spoilers here. His

contribution alone is more than worth the ticket price.

Whew. The lights come back up, and Mac Donnell and Rasmussen enter. With their combined stagecraft, they get down to business: Clemens's unique status as a serious 19th-century author associated with "concepts of youth;" the things he said and the things others have said about these concepts; and the descent of this book from a 1961 work, *The Innocent Eye: Childhood in Mark Twain's Imagination*, by Albert E. Stone Jr.

Stone concentrated on the portrayal of youth in Clemens's works, while *Mark Twain and Youth* directs much of its energy toward biographical issues as well. And since 1961, Mac Donnell and Rasmussen point out, so much primary material has either been unearthed or rescued from obscurity by publication that a fresh look at the subject is well justified. "Critical insights into Twain's writings and biography have followed paths that could not even have been imagined during the mid-twentieth century," they write (xxi).

They move on to describe the book's approach, and briefly foreshadow the work of the 25 essayists and their 26 essays. (The indefatigable Henry Sweets of Hannibal does double duty.) These are organized into five sections: "Overviews," "The Clemens Family," "Sam Clemens's Life Experiences," "Mark Twain's Writings," and "Modern Perspectives."

The stage lights dim again, and a spotlight beams on the first of these essayists. One by one the other members of the cast enter. To conclude (no doubt to the reader's relief) this theatrical metaphor, Mac Donnell and Rasmussen have handled their co-directors' role well. While every one of these essays is scholarly and authoritative, each avoids academic jargon. Mac Donnell has previously written about another author that such treatment shows "a sign of respect for his reader, just as medical personnel are increasingly trained to avoid medical nomenclature as a sign of respect when talking to patients." The co-editors also minimize what might be called "footnote intrusion," using parenthetical documentation and minimal endnotes.

How to give a foretaste of 26 essays, each one of them intriguing? (I mean this seriously: No clunkers here.) I think the best way is to pick one at random from each of the five sections. In the interests of disclosure: This book is dotted with friends, a number of whom have spoken in "The Trouble Begins at 5:30" lecture series that I ran for six years at the Hartford house. (The series continues under the able direction of James Golden, an essayist here.)

In the very start of the "Overviews" section, Holger Kersten's "Mark Twain on Youth and Aging," carries on the tale of Clemens's remarkable youthfulness and the perception of his youthfulness among his contemporaries, and carries it through to his own attitudes toward age. Kersten, who opines about American literature from the cool distance of the University of Magdeburg, says that "it is hardly possible to pin down Clemens to an unequivocal position" (6) on this issue. As in so many other of his positions--on religion, on war, on race, on anything--Clemens saw no need to be consistent. He yearned for youth as a time "full to the brim of the wine of life" (8). Yet he also could value (through the voice of Sandy McWilliams, a 72-year old angel in *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven*) the chance "to sit quiet, and smoke and think--not tear around with a parcel of giddy young kids" (9). Meticulously, Kersten reviews the evidence for Clemens's many opinions--and deftly analyzes these opinions--the funny, public, stagey ones; the ones personally expressed in vivid correspondence; and the darker, private ones, as far as we can ever plumb the privacy of this extraordinary man. The editors were wise to put this essay up top. Lawrence Berkove picks up the thread with further exploration into Clemens's "countertheology," Lucy E. Rollin explores children's literature of the era and where Clemens fits in; and Alan Gribben shares how Clemens's lifelong reading informed his views on youth.

"The Clemens Family" is a subject near and dear to the heart of those lucky enough to work at the Hartford house. John Bird writes on "Sam and Livy as Parents": "Parenting, of course, is both an inexact science and highly individualized, developed in partnership, relying on the experience of each parent's upbringing, practiced mostly in private, but also reacting to the pressures and attitudes of society at large, and very much an evolving, adaptive, and improvisational process" (55). How Samuel and Olivia Clemens developed their partnership is an intricate and fascinating tale. Bird describes Livy's roles, including that of home-schooler, alone and in tandem with

governess Lilly Foote; and Livy's punishments, which started with an interrogation, moved on to closing the offending child in a dark closet, and then, if the child was incorrigible, to "whipping" her with a letter opener, probably one made of flexible horn and--Clemens says--never applied in anger. Clemens even lauded her disciplinary restraint in print, in a letter to the *Christian Union* in 1885, which did not exactly please the very private Livy Clemens. Clemens himself, another essayist in this volume points out, thinking to spank Jean, instead "fraternized with the enemy," (181) as he put it.

Bird carries his parenting survey briefly into the Clemens literature, touching on *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and the other classics--seeing, for example, Jim as a surrogate father for Huck. Ultimately, he concludes, the Clemenses' parenting "shares more with the latter part of the twentieth century than the latter part of the nineteenth century," (63) perhaps omitting the letter opener. Other essays here include "Sam and his Siblings" by Sweets, an exploration of a possible literary use of Langdon Clemens's death by Joseph Csicsila, and essays on the daughters themselves: Golden on Susy, Cindy Lovell on Clara, and Karen Lystra on Jean's last years.

"Sam Clemens's Life Experiences" contains a miscellany of biographical subjects, including an oddity that might rank with Clemens's *What is Man?* for its Socratic form. Victor Fischer and Benjamin Griffin, both Mark Twain Project editors deeply involved in the editing of the definitive *Mark Twain's Autobiography*, offer not a dialogue between an Old Man and a Young Man, as in Clemens's work, but an exchange between an Old Editor and a Young Editor. The matter for debate is how much Clemens's attitudes about Youth--and indeed about determinism and free will and moral education--can be gleaned from the *Autobiography*, and if any firm knowledge can be salvaged from his aforementioned inconsistencies, his pose as a "bad little boy," and his sometimes manufactured or misremembered memories. It's an entertaining *jeu d'esprit* of genuine intellectual substance from two great scholars--one of whom is in fact older than the other. Other subjects in this section are "Sam's Boyhood Friends" (Sweets), "Health, Disease and Children" (K. Patrick Ober), and "Mark Twain's Angelfish" (Barbara Schmidt).

"Mark Twain's Writings" is the longest section, with eight essays. These include a treatment of the early work by David E. E. Sloane; of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Peter Messent; of *The Prince and the Pauper* by Hugh H. Davis; of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* by Debra Ann McComb; and of *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* by Ronald Jenn. Two more general essays treat "Gender Bending as Child's Play" by Linda A. Morris and "Orphans and Adoption" by Wendelinus Wurth.

Andrew Levy, whose *Huck Finn's America: Mark Twain and the Era That Shaped His Masterpiece* made a splash when it came out two years ago, provides the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* essay. A superb writer, he sheds new light on a book that has been written about hundreds of times. "One cannot say the topic of childhood and *Huckleberry Finn* is something new," he writes, "as that is among the most ridiculous things one could possibly say about the book" (176). But he develops the idea that the little-discussed issues of childhood in the book are as important as the much-discussed issues of race in the book. The "buoyant boyhood" of FDR's phrase, the straw-hatted idyll of fishing and mischief, is not what Clemens is talking about, Levy argues. In the critical literature, he says, it's hard to find a "serious" reading of *Huckleberry Finn* on youth. He says the book's portrayal of the anguish of abuse, the sadisms of education, the child's separation from nature are worth far more consideration. He points out the interesting fact that the period Clemens was writing *Huckleberry Finn* was the same period that he was recording his own children's behavior--both funny sayings and moments of insight--in "A Record of the Small Foolishnesses of Susie and 'Bay' Clemens (Infants)." He finds a child's struggle against adults in the events of the much-discussed final chapters of the book. This is a fresh view of this section, whose tedium I've always ascribed to Clemens's habit of losing interest in the final stages of writing a book. In sum, Levy argues, "a story about the failure of American adults to raise their children humanely and wisely is being told *inextricably* from a story about endemic and cyclical racism" (183).

In the final section, "Modern Perspectives," Shelley Fisher Fishkin writes of "Black and White Youth in Mark Twain's Hannibal," Mark Dawidziak writes of "Mark Twain and the Movies," and Jocelyn A. Chadwick writes of "Mark Twain Meets Generation Z." Like all the essays I've

mentioned only by name or subject here, each is a gem. But I like how the editors have chosen to run John R. Pascal's essay, "A Secondary School Perspective," to conclude this work, because Pascal stands aside and lets 14-year-old boys (for the most part--one would hope for more girls, but he teaches in a boys' school) have their say. Youth gets in the final words on this subject, and they are, as always, couched in as imaginative ways as Susy and Clara did in the "Small Foolishnesses." I liked "Even though Mark Twain was being corrosive, he always spoke against something that was truly wrong" (259). Corrosive, indeed. How brilliant to hand over the issue of Mark Twain and Youth to--well, youth!

We breathe the air of fresh encounters as these young people speak: "Have you ever fallen victim to a cheater? No doubt you have. Here our Jim Smiley was robbed of his money and dignity on a simple bet!" (261). And "I cried when Huck cried for Buck Grangerford" (267).

The two Homers who edited this book rarely, but occasionally, nod. Here and there indented paragraphs of block quotations are not indented, giving the reader the unnerving impression that the essayist has lapsed into the first person, and in Clemens's voice. "Lily" Gillette Foote is Lilly Gillette Foote. The collaborator with Peter Messent on the forthcoming collection of Clemens-Twichell letters is not the excellent scholar named. In fact there are two of them: Harold K. Bush and, er, this reviewer.

But these can all be fixed when the next printing rolls around. And it will roll around. Mac Donnell and Rasmussen have added an important collection to the body of Twain criticism. It is stunningly broad and full of fascination. The way they have herded their academics and independents, their literary analysts and biographers, into a comprehensive whole is stunning. And what an important theme. They conclude their eloquent introduction: "Youth was at the core of Twain's writings; his own youth the prism through which he framed his narratives, and his narratives the prism through which his readers view not only American culture but all of humanity in our most tragic and comic moments."