



## Review: Mark Twain and Youth: Studies in His Life and Writings, eds. Kevin McDonnell and R. Kent Rasmussen

✎ Clair A. Sheehan ☐ Reviews

Review: *Mark Twain and Youth: Studies in His Life and Writings*. Edited by Kevin MacDonnell and R. Kent Rasmussen (Bloomsbury, 2016) [Buy here](#).

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The recent emergence of Mark Twain's discussion-style autobiography has helped to preserve a place in American modernity for that gilded age author, and offers further insight into much of his idiomatic philosophy. Oddly, it also provides further definition to the term 'ghost writer.' On the instruction of the author the mainly dictated manuscript, which became his autobiography, was to be published posthumously. Accordingly, it lay largely undisturbed for one hundred years. The lengthy delay however, afforded Twain licence to tell the truth as he saw it. Twain claimed in an 1899 interview (*AMT 1 2*) that a "book that is not published for a century gives the writer a freedom he could secure in no other way. In these conditions you can draw a man without prejudice exactly as you knew him..." As a result, the long awaited volumes of *Autobiography of Mark Twain* did not appear until 2010, 2013, and 2015, a full century and more after his passing. Consequently, the second decade of the new millennium found the late Mark Twain ventriloquizing his voice, and throwing his prescient ideas forward for a fresh generation of scholars to grapple with. In *Mark Twain and Youth: Studies in His Life and Writings*, editors Kevin McDonnell and R. Kent Rasmussen have banded together some of the most eminent researchers working in this area of American literature in order to begin the grappling. As McDonnell and Rasmussen point out in their comprehensive introduction to this volume, this is "the first new book" to provide a thorough examination of Twain and youth since Albert E. Stone accepted that challenge in 1961 (xxi). They call attention to the fact that a "wealth" of "primary sources and fresh biographical information" has been uncovered recently, making it essential that this area be revisited (*ibid*). The editors have shown further discernment by inviting celebrated nonagenarian Twain impersonator, Hal Holbrook, to offer the foreword to a text centred, predominantly, on youth.

Placing, as the vanguard to the essays, the impressions of a man who has portrayed Twain longer than his alter ego Sam Clemens, lends an authority to the work that is immediately apparent. For decades Hal Holbrook has been performing as Mark Twain, successfully recreating Twain's lecture tours, both live and for television (xii), making the author's views accessible to a new audience. Holbrook's knowledge, gleaned from his long-considered observation of the man and his words, provides a crucial backdrop to the scholarly articles that follow in the body of *Mark Twain and Youth*. These include investigations into Twain's writing, his background and family, and the many life-challenges he faced. The final section concludes by placing a contemporary lens over his life and work, and then picturing him through it. Taking the text as a whole it becomes increasingly clear why Twain's voice remains pertinent more than a century after his death. His concepts and witticisms, along with the barb which is frequently concealed behind them, have been channelled through these modern-day writers for anti-tire study. He links both youth and Twain's words directly to the present by quoting an argument between children: "In *Tom Sawyer Abroad* Tom and Huck are 'disputing about a subject rather too large for them'" (xv), namely they are considering going on Crusade. It is clear to discerning ears that Twain is satirising the concept of a holy war, and a reflective Holbrook makes the argument current by asking: "Did Twain ...see this religious war in the Middle East coming at us now, including ISIS, over one hundred years ago?" (xvi). Thus *Mark Twain and Youth* begins by introducing Twain as much more than a nineteenth-century writer whose work focused on youth. As Holbrook's essay implies, to do only that would be to "detour around the gut and soul" of the author and his work (xiii). Drawing regularly on recently provided material, the essays in this compilation drive a straight route toward the essence that was, and in many respects still is, Mark Twain.

The editors of *Mark Twain and Youth* decided on a useful strategy for the framework of their text. They invited their contributors to consider several aspects of Twain's life and imagine the role youth featured in each. The essays in Part One take a broad view of the subject, beginning with Holger Kersten, whose essay "Mark Twain on Youth and Aging" points out that, though the "nation watched the famous author grow old," he long remained associated with youth for his followers and family (3). Kersten's focus, however, is primarily centred on Twain's own perception of age, particularly after he "broke the back of life" and "started down-hill toward old age" (4). His research is supported by close readings of lesser-known Twain publications and the recent *Autobiographies*. Complete with a photograph of the writer surrounded by children, Kersten's article supplies a fitting opening to the study. In the essay that follows, "Same Damned Fools," Laurence Berkove challenges some of the assumptions often brought to an examination of Twain's work. Namely, he confronts the perception that Twain was a writer who "nostalgically celebrated an idyllic period of innocence in American history" (14). Berkove effectively argues that, "[b]eneath the 'smiling aspects'" of Twain's humour dwells a "countertheology" that is imbedded in "almost all of his important works" (20). Here again rigorous examination of Twain's work, along with his revived personal sentiments, helps to provide a more developed understanding of the man, his beliefs, and his time. Lucy Rollins follows on with a comparative piece on "Children's Literature in the Nineteenth Century." In her study she subtly reminds us of the difference between stories written 'for' children and those written 'about' them. Rollins evaluates some of the popular children's literature of the era, highlighting the "stern morality that had dominated" during Twain's own childhood (27). She argues that "Post-Civil War" writers of the calibre of Louisa May Alcott and Lewis Carroll were occasioning change in the way children, and stories that featured them, were presented. Rollins pinpoints how Twain's work both differed from and reflected those texts. Her conclusion reasons that Twain's books hold a place in both the 'for' and 'about' genres. By "treating didactic morality lightly" and "engag[ing] his child characters with adult issues" Twain effectively managed to entertain and inform both generations of readers (29). The following "Overview" article, "Mark Twain's Lifelong Reading," compliments Rollins's examination of nineteenth-century children's literature by considering what was contained in Twain's personal library. Here, Alan Gribben uses supporting evidence in order to judge what texts Twain was likely to have been familiar with, and how they may have informed his own philosophy. Gribben contends that the author's modest upbringing and "lack of formal education" did not hinder him from "reading diversely," thereby gaining perspective that transcends formal study (42). Unlike today, nineteenth-century novels were less likely to be allocated to a specific reader category: "Everyone of any age" was as likely to be familiar with a text which today would be classified to a specific genre or age-group (31). There was a more "flexible...division between 'child[...]' and 'adult' publications" during Twain's lifetime, and he, Gribben contends, had eliminated neither category from his library (30). Supported by the newer material from the Twain archives, Gribben reflects on some of the arguments Twain himself presented in *Is Shakespeare Dead?* (1909). He views the author in a manner similar to the one Twain applied to his examination of Shakespeare, but Gribben comes to a less pithy, more charitable, conclusion. Rather than doubt Twain's auto-didactical powers, Gribben determines "Clemens's self-education as a reader... [to be] a victory for human will over circumstance" (43).

Broadly, the four "Overview" essays in *Mark Twain and Youth* reflect the four sections that follow in Parts Two to Five. These respectively cover "The Clemens Family," "Sam Clemens's Life Experiences," "Mark Twain's Writing," and "Modern Perspectives." Defining these divisions makes it easy for scholars and Twain enthusiasts alike to pinpoint exactly where their area of interest is most likely to be examined. In Part Two, contributors focus on specific aspects of Clemens's family life. For example, Joseph Csicsila uses recent archival material to draw a direct trajectory from the death of Twain's infant son, Langdon Clemens, to the writing of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* – a connection that can only be linked through close observance of archival material. Other contributors to this segment examine the influence Twain's parents and siblings had on his work. His happy, early-married life is shown in his relationship with his daughters, while his noticeably pessimistic later writing is persuasively linked to the various family tragedies that haunted his declining years. Part Three examines "Sam Clemens's Life Experiences." These articles pay particular attention to autobiographical detail, gleaned for the most part from the newly published *Autobiographies*. Henry Sweets, who looked at Clemens's siblings in the previous section, opens this segment by focusing attention on the children of anti-bellum Hannibal, Missouri. He discusses the impact that the geography of the area, particularly the Mississippi River, had on the lives of the children, and how their individual natures inspired the writer's later works. Health and children's life expectations during the nineteenth century are then considered K. Patrick Ober. His analysis links "the life-threatening illnesses of children" during the nineteenth century to Twain's perceived scepticism of organised religion (134). This is poignantly shadowed in the next piece when Barbara Schmidt directed her gaze on the lonely Mark Twain of the early twentieth century. In "Mark Twain's Angelfish" Schmidt addresses Twain's later-life fascination with a group of young girls to whom he gave the collective title the "Angelfish Club" (141). To Twain this "Aquarium" seemed a natural part of aging (142). However, the motivation for its establishment raises the suggestion of impropriety, especially in the increasingly guarded society we have since become. Following the deaths of his wife and daughter, Susy, circumstances affected a separation between Twain and his two remaining children, Clara and Jean. Using Twain's own analysis, Schmidt explains that he had "reached the grandpapa stage of life; and what [he] needed was grandchildren" (136). Because of this lack, she reasons, he gathered around himself "surrogate granddaughters" (136), "dear young creatures to whom life [was] a perfect joy and to whom it [had] brought no wounds, no bitterness, and few tears" (141). The complexity of Twain's relationship with these girls, and how it was perceived, is broached, but not fully investigated here, leaving room for a more comprehensive study of this topic in the future.

Part Four, "Mark Twain's Writing," examines youth in his more familiar novels, again primarily supported from the recently released material. Readers with a specific interest in a particular text can go directly to this segment to find the latest assessments of the author's iconic works and tropes. Using youth as the catalyst, the writers in this section address race, slavery, gender, child protection, and religion, observing throughout how Twain used his work to expose anomalies and flagrant exploitation within society. These essays also challenge preconceived notions about Twain's oeuvre. They seem to demand that we pause and consider how much has actually changed in the century since Twain dictated his *Autobiography*. This leads smoothly into the final segment of this well-organised study. In Part Five Twain and his work are surveyed with fresh eyes; indeed, "Modern Perspectives" offers insights that may have been unthought-of during the lifetime of the author. The initial piece in this section, "Black and White youth in Mark Twain's Hannibal," examines the continuing impact Mark Twain had on the place of his birth and its economy. But, significantly, it also acknowledges the life and contribution made by a rarely discussed black resident of the slave town, Henry Dant (1835). Shelley Fisher Fishkin begins her discussion of race relations, and how they evolved into the twenty-first century in Clemens's hometown of Hannibal, Missouri, by considering the precarious lives children led in the now "idealized" backdrop to Twain's most famous narratives (223). While it is clear from the text that white children's lives were less than idyllic, Fishkin successfully supports her contention that for black children life was even more perilous. Her argument around race then becomes more current. She focuses attention on a recent bid to 'whitewash' history in "America's Hometown" (233):

*In 2005, the Mark Twain Boyhood Home decided (over the objections of a board member) to place 'several text panels addressing Twain's experience with slavery in Hannibal' in the home's Interpretive Center, costing the museum 'the goodwill of its largest donor' (...).But one would never know from the exhibit hall that racism persisted after slavery ended – or that racism (rather than slavery) was a target of Twain's criticism throughout much of his career... (233)*

The whitewashing of history, and Twain's background in particular, is nowhere more apparent than in the several Hollywood depictions of Mark Twain and his protagonists. Dawidziak contends that Twain shaped horrific images that would do Edgar Allen Poe proud" (245), yet, Hollywood's favourite trick "is to shy away from this profoundly scary and unnerving stuff...until... [it] has lost most of its potency"(245). Although Dawidziak sees merit in some of the early film versions of Twain texts, he finds that, in general "filmmakers tend to stray alarmingly far from the characters and themes of Twain's books" (240). For example, the 1993, Disney version, *The Adventures of Huck Finn*, takes the lead character "in directions that violate the spirit of Twain's novel" (240), while the "well-scrubbed 1973 musical *Tom Sawyer*," produced by Readers Digest, is deemed to offer "the happy postcard approach" (245). These "caricature versions," and how they have helped to develop modern impressions of the man and his work (247), are ably analysed in "Mark Twain and the Movies" (238). After thoroughly tasting the "saccharine sweetness" of most of the available films on Twain (244), the conclusion is drawn that, "the real Twain is being hidden from view," and a very different person from the man met in the *Autobiographies* has emerged from Hollywood (247). The film versions of Twain's work do, of course, impact on "contemporary" students and their "relationship to the texts," and in the final two articles in *Mark Twain and Youth*, the continuously sticky topic of how to teach Twain in the postmodern era is addressed (248). Jocelyn A. Chadwick's "Mark Twain Meets Generation Z," and John R. Pascal's "A Secondary School Perspective," are very useful resources for any lecturer currently called on to teach Twain for either second or third level courses.

The title of this text, *Mark Twain and Youth: Studies in His Life and Writings*, may seem to be a familiar theme for an edited book on both the man and his work. But, in this collection, MacDonnell and Rasmussen have not chosen articles that hark back to a familiar repertoire. These essays look at the subject with contemporary objectivity, and are conversant with the recently published resources from the Twain archives. Thus, they correspond to the latest information, and offer an up-to-date glimpse at the true philosophy behind the writings of Mark Twain. In consequence, the text in many ways invites scholars to revisit the writings of the iconic nineteenth century author, but to do this with a twenty-first century understanding. It tempts us to, perhaps, move past the so frequently analysed Twain tropes, to see where his "satiric glint" now finds "its target" (xviii).

### Works Cited

*AMT 1 Autobiography of Mark Twain Volume 1*. Ed. MTP editors. Berkeley: UCP, 2010.

MacDonnell, Kevin and Rasmussen R. Kent. *Mark Twain and Youth: Studies in His Life and Writing*

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