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## 'Mark Twain': Voice of America

By GEOFFREY WOLFF

Toward the close of his wise and lively biography, Ron Powers brings the reader to Mark Twain in London, June 1897. A correspondent for The New York Journal knocks on the great man's door and begs comment on two telegrams from the newspaper's editor. The first: "If Mark Twain dying in poverty, in London, send 500 words." A follow-up: "If Mark Twain has died in poverty send 1,000 words."

This encounter provoked one of Twain's celebrated declarations, correcting the Journal editor's confusion of a cousin's grave illness with his own: "The report of my death was an exaggeration." Well, not - as Powers shows - that much of one. With more than a dozen years to live, by 1897 the 61-year-old Samuel Langhorne Clemens, who called himself Mark Twain, was financially ruined, creatively exhausted and emotionally broken, living in despairing self-exile and laboring to honor the boneheaded speculative debts that had bankrupted him. His beloved eldest daughter, Susy, had only months earlier died of meningitis. His wife, Olivia, chronically frail, was despondent. He was worn out from lecturing and from writing on demand, on terms so humiliating that Century magazine, in its contract for 12 articles, specified his obligation to be funny.

This mandate Twain declined to sign, drawing the line. He was never one to shy from drawing a line. He could charm, be adorable on stage and on the page, but *cave canem*: Twain's bite was worse than his bark. One of the many virtues of "Mark Twain: A Life" is its scrupulous justice, a stern yet tolerant account of rage and gentleness, affection and malice, creative genius and financial idiocy. This is no small achievement: Twain was a bareback rider on cyclones of change during the second half of America's 19th century. His energy - as a son, sibling, riverboat pilot, silver prospector, polemicist, stand-up comedian, journalist, publisher, entrepreneur, husband, traveler, novelist, witness, mover and shaker - was so ferocious in its effect on people and events as to distort the best-willed observer's perspective.

If it is a huge challenge to achieve a humanely balanced yet dramatic account of this icon, Powers is formidably equipped by experience, geography, curiosity, patience and open-heartedness to succeed. He roots for his man, deploring his cruelty but giving him a second chance, then a third. Keeping his thumb off the scales that weigh Twain as great or overrated, he referees the weighing, verifying that the process is fair and that the scales are not defective.

Powers comes to this adventure with both trained and natural powers of verification. He grew up in Twain's Hannibal, Mo., and has written lovingly of his hometown ("White Town Drowsing") and of Samuel Clemens's childhood in Hannibal ("Dangerous Water"). Echoing his subject's frequent tongue-in-cheek admonitions to readers regarding the free-market exchange of fact and fiction in his work, Powers warns that he won't bother to justify his contextual naming of his subject, referring to him variously as "Sammy," "Sam," "Clemens" and "Mark Twain." Persons failing to understand these rules will be "prosecuted" or "shot."

Powers's determined variations on his subject's identity (let's stick with Mark Twain) are a benign symptom of his purposeful audacity in taking control of such a busy and shape-shifting character, living through such contested, exploratory and blood-soaked decades. Twain has had biographers aplenty, beginning with Albert Bigelow Paine and his three-volume authorized as-told-to, a "fawning deification" published two years after Twain's death. If Twain's greatest work has been banned by school boards and bumpily denigrated as coarse hackwork (by Jane Smiley, in Harper's Magazine), Ernest Hemingway pugnaciously declared that all modern American fiction descends from "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." Recent queer theorists have elaborated (and how!) on suggestions advanced by Leslie Fiedler's 1948 essay, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" Powers rightly tips his hat to Justin Kaplan's "Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain" (1966), whose imaginative resolution of Twain's often warring personalities and close reading of the work set a high standard for literary biography.

It must have been daunting for Powers - and Kaplan before him - to make sense of this story. There is so much of it! As many as 100,000 letters, along with piles of journals - and both the letters and journals clue-ridden with strike-overs, legible erasures, variations and author's notes. It would be difficult enough if Twain's world were a microcosm, William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, say, or John O'Hara's Region. But here is the Mississippi River, the Civil War (both sides), the Nevada silver mines, San Francisco, New York, Washington, the Holy Land, European spas, European capitals, the Alps, Bombay, Elmira, N.Y., and Hartford, Conn., Hawaii, South Africa, unto the Antipodes.

Twain had the fidgets and traveled compulsively: tramping by foot, on horseback, in stagecoaches and railroad cars, by steamships (piloting paddle wheels and luxuriating on transoceanic liners). He lived like a bum among bums in mining towns as rough as Deadwood and like a grandee among what passed in America for the aristocracy. He was a public-pleasing showman who calculated his charm with the cynicism of a hustler, and an exacting writer fearless in his indifference to a reader's approval.

Powers makes sense of this crowded, whipsawing life through the agency of common sense. He maintains his balance and good will - not to mention his good humor - despite the tumult of Twain's experiences. He recounts the cultural and political history of his subject's time (1835-1910) with easy authority, managing patience in showing off his homework, waiting for the occasion of a crisis or epiphany or change of occupation to give the context of steamboat travel, for instance, or the spread of news culture during the 1860's or the public consequences of photography. He uses history organically rather than as a pro forma timeline. He knows the quiddities of publishing, mining, transportation, typesetting, land and stock speculation, political oratory, theological dispute, the business and logistics of showmanship.

His reading of the texts is always responsible, often shrewd and calculatingly modest. Generally, he is content to let the words speak for themselves. If Twain's evolving attitudes toward race and money and women and organized religion create an ambiguous mosaic, his best sentences are sharp and clean, in little need of elucidation. Powers is humbly good-natured in his encounters with the Freudian delegation of Mark Twain critics, advancing a nice Oedipal theory about the writer's chaste but emotionally charged entanglement with a priggish older woman, whose approval he desperately sought. A repressed sexual attraction? Powers writes: "Given the givens of Victorian protocol, what better way to defuse such dangerous feelings than to cast her as a 'mother'? It's just a thought."

His subject is too grand to be contained by a thesis, although a reader may hear the far-off sound of an ax being ground against that worn-down stone, the eternal conflict between Palefaces and Redskins, America's Party of Hope versus its Party of Memory. Powers - rightly vigilant in his avidity to protect Huck against the "sivilizing" of Aunt Sally, and Mark Twain himself against the suffocating Gilded Age proprieties of the writer's patrician wife and neighbors - sometimes puffs up with hot air in his antagonism to the baleful influence of Brahmin Boston. At such moments Powers, if briefly, assumes the rhetorical manner of an after-dinner testimonial orator.

These bloviations - references to the American Dream and such - generally (and generalizingly) fall at the ends of chapters, but not always. In the midst of an otherwise articulate account of Twain's complex view of class comes this: "But now the winds of the Industrial Age were blowing strong, and on them was the manly, true scent of the worker, the rising scourge of decadent monarchs." Such blarney is mercifully beaten away by Powers's more characteristic wit, as when he calls Keokuk, Iowa, "a hotbed of rest." And his command of Twain's era is so authoritative that he can compress an entire sociology of class and consumption into an offhand reference to Twain's Hartford mansion, with its manifestation of "Victorian material display as evidence of moral and intellectual worth."

Occasionally, Powers, excited by demotic idiom, is tempted into slangy silliness. He writes of "kicking some major Britannia butt"; reports that Mark Twain "was ready to rock." It's jarring to read that Twain "tried to get some shut-eye" or "partied hearty" with Nathaniel Hawthorne's daughter or "hung with" a friend or "tried his luck at hanging 10" during a Hawaiian "surfin' safari." Powers's most serious lapse of proportional judgment may be to insist that his subject, in his celebrity, was "the nation's first rock star."

More typically, Powers warms to those sights, sounds and processes that most inspired and animated his subject. A couple of passages early in this biography are virtuoso performances of descriptive re-creation, worthy of Twain. The object of veneration is the river steamboat: "a civilization of chandeliers, brass fittings, draped windows and gold-framed mirrors; of red velvet carpets and gilded saloons and skylights of colored glass; a civilization of oil paintings and calliopes and great stacked bales of cotton to be exchanged somewhere for great stacks of money." Fifty-some pages later this is followed by a contextual rumination, proceeding from the objective to the personal, which was Twain's own humanizing progress. "Floating palaces, people called steamboats, and 'moving mountains of light and flame.' To villagers and backwoods farmers whose daily prospect differed little from that of the aboriginals they had displaced, steamboats cracked through from some brilliant parallel universe: they subjugated the natural world under a spreading curtain of smoke, sparks, sound and light."

I am moved by Powers's grave and lovingly respectful treatment of Twain's winding down. With many years but few pages to go, the biographer tells us that Mark Twain "aged, and he died. . . . As with many old men of means, he was prey to loneliness and deep brooding, and to conspiracies among the people he'd drawn close to him, and he was witness to the sordid struggles among these same people for the rights to his soul. Unlike most old men, he was the most conspicuous person on the planet - his own estimation, but likely true. . . . Like most old men with a skill, he employed what he had left of it; he wrote a lot, and some of it was pretty good."

That's O.K.

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