

Dear Mark Twain,  
*God Knows Where*

I know you were America's most famous and best-loved author. Despite being dead for a century, you're still as celebrated as ever.

I understand that the first volume of your unexpurgated autobiography has just appeared, a hundred years after your death. It was embargoed for a century in accordance with your wishes, although some heavily edited versions have appeared. Although you never liked having your diction changed, I hope you will agree that *structure* was always a problem for you.

I know you were thinking about an autobiography for many years, but could not decide on the method to use. You said you definitely didn't want a conventional cradle-to-grave structure. In the end you hired a stenographer to follow you around and record your stories while you talked and talked. In effect there was no structure at all. This made it very difficult for anyone to edit the 2,000 pages you left behind. However your autobiography does set out "the storm of thoughts that is forever blowing through one's head".

I understand you worked briefly as a journalist before training as a steamboat pilot. You had a brief and inglorious spell as a Confederate soldier – and then deserted.

Your assumed name of 'Mark Twain' is derived from the call for safe water from riverboat pilots. Your real name was Samuel Clemens.

Your first book was 'The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, and Other Sketches' published in 1867. Your next book 'The Innocents Abroad' - was an account of your travels with others Americans through Europe and the Holy Land in 1869, and this was a best seller. 'Roughing It' in 1872 was another successful travelogue. You went on to write perennial favourites such as 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn' and 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer' and works of social criticism. What unites these works is your quintessential Americanness. You asked yourself "Are you an American?" And your answer was: "No, I am not *an* American, I am *the* American."

This seems a rather arrogant answer – but many accept that it is true.

Your themes of the individual and society, capitalism and social justice etc. represent common American preoccupations.

In the 1930s Hemingway stated that all modern American literature comes from one book 'Huckleberry Finn'. It seems that you thought you were the only person who has ever found the right way to build an autobiography.

Although you were many things, at heart you were a speculator, susceptible to get-rich-quick schemes. It's no accident that many of your characters are hucksters and hustlers.

Deception and opportunism are common themes. I gather you were amused when Huck Finn was banned by libraries across the US even though it was very popular.

It seems that your folksy humour is strategically deployed. You wrote out of a tradition of tall tales, and were particularly suited to travel writing. The anecdotal conversationalist dominates the new unexpurgated autobiography. It opens by discussing your many false starts in writing an autobiography.

You were always good at registering contemporary social pressures. I understand that you found the white man's notion that he is less savage than other savages to be humorous.

You said that "Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to".

It seems that your autobiography is driven by outrage – personal as well as social and political – including outrage at American imperialist adventures in Cuba and the Philippines.

You described U.S. soldiers as 'uniformed assassins'. It seems that you would have sympathised with the present day Tea Party's small government agenda; but not its manipulation by corporate interests. I know you were very gregarious and interested in others - including Harriet Beecher Stowe and Lewis Carroll. Some will be disappointed that you did far more sketches of others than of yourself.

I gather that the *second volume* of your autobiography will include most of the previously unpublished material. The first volume relates some old family history and tells us about growing up in the town of Hannibal. It seems that Missouri in 1849 was a frontier where life was ugly, brutish and often short. You experienced much violence including stabbings and shootings; and a slave brained with a rock for some small offence.

Your 250 pages of notes often give much more factual information than you do. I enjoyed your long meditation on childhood summers on a

Southern farm. I note that your mother taught you to consider a young slave boy's feelings.

You say that Tom Sawyer was based largely on yourself; while Huck Finn was based exactly on a boy called Tom Blankenship. The latter was ignorant, unwashed and insufficiently fed; but he had as good a heart as ever any boy had.

It seems strange that Huck Finn is such a popular book, but has also been banned a lot. It is an ambivalent story about individualism and race. I imagine you would argue that the book has racist characters, but is not a racist book. It seems that the casual use of the word 'nigger' reflects how illiterate white boys at the time would have described a slave. Huck Finn struggles all the time between selfish individualism and collective responsibility. It seems that you were fundamentally suspicious of government.

You were not good at depicting female characters. I see that your wife Olivia managed to persuade you eventually to support women's suffrage. Your deep love for Olivia and your daughters is apparent. It is sad that you outlived her and three of your four children. Susy's death at the age of 24 of meningitis is particularly sad. I note your comment that man is loving and loveable to his own, but is "otherwise the buzzing, busy, trivial enemy of his race". He is selfish even in death.

I hope to see further volumes of your unexpurgated autobiography in due course.

Eric Browett  
November 2010