

Subjects Fixed in Amber

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Ron Powers. 2005. *Mark Twain: A Life*. New York: Free Press. 722 pp. + xi. Illus.

In the prologue to *Mark Twain: A Life*, Ron Powers establishes the broad context for his addition to the shelf of Twain biographies and sets the direction for the chapters that follow:

Mark Twain's great achievement as the man who found a voice for his country has made him a challenge for his biographers. His words are quoted, yet he somehow lies hidden in plain sight—a giant on the historical landscape. He has been so thoroughly rearranged and reconstructed by a long succession of scholarly critics that the contours of an actual, textured human character have been obscured. And his voice, not to mention his humor, has gone missing from many of these analyses. (6)

Powers asks, “What is it about [Twain’s] writing—nearly all of it problematic, much of it mediocre, a healthy part of it unfinished, some of it simply awful—that continues to exercise the very scholars who expend so much energy trying to reduce him to their pet formulas and crusades?” (6). He argues that the dominance of scholarly treatments has obscured the man behind Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) and that there is a long-established bias in Twain scholarship that severely limits both an appreciation of Twain’s literary accom-

plishments and a understanding of his literary failures because scholars (and biographers) have ceased looking for the man and have, instead, sought biographical and literary evidence to support their own agendas. While Powers is right about the way that literary biography and cultural theory at times obscures Samuel Clemens's all-too-human story, the contrast drawn here between the scholar and the lay reader is merely a straw man argument that uses an anti-scholarly bias as the foundation for a fairly conventional compilation of biographical facts and observations. Here we do have a portrait of a man, but it is drawn in rather broad strokes and ultimately reinforces rather than complicates the iconic Mark Twain.

Criticizing others for having agendas does not obscure your own. Like recent biographers (for example, Fred Kaplan in *The Singular Mark Twain: A Biography* [2003]), Powers attempts to add shading and depth to Mark Twain's image; however, Powers does seem to hold fast to the notion, first established by Van Wyck Brooks (*The Ordeal of Mark Twain*, 1920) and then conventionalized by Justin Kaplan (*Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain*, 1966), that there was a deep split in the dueling identities of Sam Clemens and Mark Twain (Fred Kaplan, in contrast, challenges this split and works to offer a portrait of an integrated personality; for example, see his "Introduction" for a brief statement of his approach). The issue here is how the tension between literary creativity and convention that grew within Samuel Clemens as he sought a national audience became manifest in his public persona.

A related issue is how that persona (or, indeed, whether that persona) eclipsed the man. For Powers, the persona is a cultural representative. As he moves along in his story, he often alludes to the image of the American vandal that Clemens created within *Innocents Abroad* (1869) and argues that Clemens revisited that construct from time to time to focus his iconoclastic and, at his most caustic, rude, even crude swipes at American assumptions and beliefs. One example is Hank Morgan, "ancestor of the Vandal" (523), whose only response to chivalry and the church and, perhaps, the criticism of Matthew Arnold, is apocalyptic violence. Powers emphasizes that pose and its influence in Clemens's eventual success as a challenger of American cultural convention (even if the pose was also and often at the heart of some of Clemens's early embarrassments; for example, the narrative voice in the misunderstood Whittier Birthday speech). Powers's main interest is how Samuel Clemens created Mark Twain, and then how what began as a fairly conventional literary device (the pseudonym) blossomed into a mighty literary and

cultural force with a voice and personality that could claim an immediate audience for a piercing social and cultural critique.

Unlike the threat that Brooks saw in the personality split, however, Powers does not see this as a Frankenstein tale in which the creator is ultimately driven to distraction by the creation. Powers notes that Clemens was ultimately drawn to the notion of the dream self and to a Hyde-like tendency for chaos in human nature; however, “Mark Twain,” while propelling creative freedom, which at times devolved into burlesque, eventually reinforced Samuel Clemens’s humanity. As the story progresses, Powers offers ample evidence that “Mark Twain” helped to embolden Clemens to become a spokesman for a range of beliefs, concerns for racial and social justice most prominently. Clemens’s writing—both nonfiction and fiction, humorous and serious—manages to prod and prick readers into an acute awareness of injustice. Clemens’s own bouts of conscience schooled him well as he began to explore social issues. Perhaps one way to look at Powers’s work is to see it as an extended description of how a man’s fight against his own demons and how his creative descriptions of that fight act as a catalyst for social (regional, national and, later, international) change, as a longitudinal study of how events in a person’s life prompt and affect creative response. To a point.

Told using a conventional timeline, which Clemens would describe as from cradle to grave, the biography begins with a careful rendering of Samuel Clemens’s childhood. Powers uses the diminutive “Sammy” to describe the young boy who lives through the stresses of family life marked by the deaths of siblings as well as the prolonged financial failures of his father, failures that haunt the family after John Marshall Clemens’s death in 1847 (while at times the references to “Sammy” and then “Sam” can be overly familiar, the variations do help place Clemens both geographically as well as developmentally). Throughout, Powers focuses on supposed touchstone events: for example, from the childhood years (roughly to 1853 and Clemens’s first journey East) Powers focuses on the death of John Marshall Clemens, especially as Samuel Clemens attempts, far into adulthood, to deal with the results of his father’s purchase of land in Tennessee and his and his brother Orion’s various financial failures. A thread of financial worry seems to be Clemens’s patrimony. A possible maternal legacy is introduced with the story of Jane Clemens’s ruined romance, which precipitated her marriage of John Marshall. Powers threads Clemens’s own failed romance with Laura Wright through Clemens’s adult life and interjects it as an echo at

various times during Clemens's marriage: in 1880 Clemens receives a letter from young David Watt [Wattie] Bowser, a student of Laura Wright Dake's school in Dallas and as late as 1908 Dake wrote to Clemens asking for help financially—Clemens sent the \$1,000 she requested. The conflicting hopes for money and love inform Samuel Clemens's fear of loss and set up a true dichotomy within Clemens.

There is an impressive amount of detail, which is both a blessing and a curse: at times the whole of the story becomes overwhelming and as experience is piled atop experience, Clemens's literary accomplishments grow or are set aside. Powers does introduce long paragraphs of historical background at times, which does help set the broad context for the events in Clemens's life; however, these rush by too quickly to do anything more than offer a glance at the larger world. The pace is disciplined throughout: each chapter covers a distinct time period, often one year, and the narrative marches ahead with few asides (there are several, however, in the discussion of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that cover both some of the critics' problems with the novel as well as the novel's place within American culture). In all, the biography offers the full panorama of Samuel Clemens's life; however, the final chapters do rush through a particularly dark time in Clemens's household: of the 627 pages given to the presentation of the life, Powers spends 550 pages covering roughly fifty-five years that take us from the beginning of Sam Clemens's life through the triumph of *Huckleberry Finn* and the satisfaction of the 1880s. The final two decades receive a good deal less attention. In a discussion that deals so much with Clemens's public life, the proportion seems problematic. Clemens's final years, while not particularly successful literarily (at least if publication is the criteria for success; Clemens still did write a lot during these years), clearly marked his growth as a legend for the American public. Perhaps Clemens's decline during the last decades is too bleak when contrasted to his earlier triumph, a triumph that has dark undercurrents but somehow manages to prompt both reconciliation and resurrection for Clemens. Not so the final years.

Importantly, the biography draws readers into the web of Samuel Clemens's relationships and underscores both the stunning accomplishment and abject folly of the man. The heft and the complexity of Clemens's story comes out of Powers's look at personal relationships, ties that unite Clemens's personal and professional life. The dominant relationships are those Clemens shared with William Dean Howells and Olivia Clemens. Each brought a specific and complementary strength to Clemens; each plays more than a supporting role

and becomes a full partner in the Samuel Clemens's life. Other biographers have focused on Clemens's long and productive relationship with William Dean Howells. The story of Howells's and Clemens's relationship has been told repeatedly, from Howells's own *My Mark Twain: Reminiscences and Criticisms* (1910) to Frederick Anderson, William Gibson, and Henry Nash Smith's *Selected Mark Twain–Howells Letters 1872–1910* (1967) to Kenneth Eble's *Old Clemens and W.D.H.: The Story of a Remarkable Friendship* (1985) to Leland Krauth's *Mark Twain & Company: Six Literary Relations* (2003) to Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson's recent *William Dean Howells: A Writer's Life* (2005). Powers, however, is very good at demonstrating the full extent of Clemens's dependence on Howells. The two met early in their careers in 1869 and continued as friends until Clemens's death in 1910. Powers offers a compelling picture of their complex exchanges, and he rightly points out just how demanding a friend (and at times a literary collaborator) Sam Clemens could be. Clemens often asked Howells to undertake the hard work of editing and correcting proofs of his work, even when he was no doubt aware of the heavy responsibilities on Howells to complete his own projects. Clemens would have been lost without Howells; with him (perhaps *because* of him), Clemens found his own best voice and was able not only to shape his writing but also to find an ally who would tout his work with little or no thought to the ethical complications of editing Clemens's work and then reviewing the results. While the relationship (like all of Clemens's relationships) had its ups and downs, Howells was a steady and steadying presence in Clemens's life. Their collaboration on several theatrical projects never was successful, but they shared a bond through writing and reading that was irrepressible.

Writing and reading also formed the basis of Clemens's relationship to his wife Olivia. Powers's discussion of their epistolary courtship does underscore the early fragility of their connection. That story has also been told before, most notably by Dixon Wecter in *The Love Letters of Mark Twain* (1947), by Resa Willis in *Mark & Livy: The Love Story of Mark Twain and the Woman Who Almost Tamed Him* (1992), and most recently by Susan Harris in *The Courtship of Olivia Langdon and Mark Twain* (1996). Powers offers a useful summary of the path through which Sam Clemens entered the Langdon circle, an entry that helped educate Clemens into liberal social ideology. Much more than an economic rise, Clemens's winning Olivia assured his movement toward a deeper sense of moral righteousness and had a profound impact on his social conscience.

The courtship set the tone for the couple's life together. Powers demonstrates the depth of their attachment as he runs through the losses of their first two years of marriage: the deaths of Olivia's father Jervis Langdon, Livy's friend Emma Nye, and the couple's first child, Langdon. Powers is also good at describing their life, which at its calmest, was a whirl of social and literary demands. Looking for the touchstone moment, Powers (like most biographers) is taken with the idea that the Clemenses were most affected by the death of their second child, Susy, in 1896 from spinal meningitis just as Sam, Olivia, and their second daughter, Clara, reached England at the end of their world tour, which was undertaken to help pay back the debts that resulted from the 1894 bankruptcy. Susy's death was a blow (a blow which the Howellses also shared—they lost their daughter Winnifred in 1889); however, when it is placed amid the crush of life that took the Clemenses from Elmira to Buffalo, New York, to Hartford, Connecticut, to Europe (several times; for nearly a decade between 1891 and 1900), back to New York, and once again to Europe (where Livy died in 1904), it becomes one more trauma in a life filled alternately with blessings and pain. Perhaps the death of Langdon in 1872 (when he was just shy of two years old) was not as crushing as the death of their second child, but that may be because they had so long a time with Susy. Livy was strained by both deaths; Clemens was certainly more verbal about the effect of Susy's death (and about what he saw as his own responsibility for the bankruptcy and the stress that prompted Susy to remain behind as they took to the world speaking tour). But silence over the death of a child is no indicator of shallow feeling. In fact, for Clemens it might actually indicate a deeper and more profound sense of loss and torment.

Livy was the glue that held the Clemens family together. While her physical health was always somewhat in question, she clearly had a strong will to be able to match the volatility of her husband and see him through, and advise him during, his long career. Her health ultimately failed, but not until she had seen her husband's return to financial stability and watched her children grow to adulthood. Jean Clemens (the third daughter) faced a terrible hardship because of her epilepsy (the malady effectively pushed her out of the family and into various care facilities during the late 1890s where she remained for the most part until her final reconnection with home in 1909). Clara Clemens's career in music was never fully realized, and her marriage in 1909 came amid a cloud of animosity that ran through the family's relationship with Isabel Lyon. Both stories are barely touched upon by Powers as he sprints through the final

decade of Clemens's life. His reading of this time is much more benign than the perspective offered by Hamlin Hill in *Mark Twain: God's Fool* (1973) and serves more as a brief summation rather than an analysis of Clemens's final years in the American spotlight.

These tales of friendship, love, and loss are told within the broad public context of Samuel Clemens's literary career. It is the literary Mark Twain that Powers is most interested in. One of the lasting impressions of this biography is the image of Samuel Clemens as a literary worker. Writing for Clemens was primary, a way to live as well as a way make a living. The juxtaposition of the literary work (the lectures, stories, essays, and novels) with the demands of personal writing (the volume of letters Clemens wrote is staggering) helps the reader understand Samuel Clemens's deep and abiding faith in the written word. And that may be one reason for the limited look into Clemens's old age: Powers's overall focus on Samuel Clemens as literary/cultural giant. A critical look at the last decade adds considerable shading and perhaps an unwelcome tarnish to the icon that we have come to recognize as "Mark Twain."

Powers begins his final chapter of *Mark Twain: A Life* with this summary comment:

So endeth this chronicle. It being strictly a history of a *man*, it must stop here; the story could not go much further without becoming the history of an *old* man. Which is to say, the history of every old man. Which is to say, a history that depends for much of its nourishment to readers on the extract of pathos. (618)

It is a riff on the close of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Mark Twain wrote,

So endeth this chronicle. It being strictly a history of a *boy*, it must stop here; the story could not go much further without becoming the history of a *man*. When one writes a novel about grown people, he knows exactly where to stop—that is, with a marriage; but when he writes of juveniles, he must stop where he best can.

Unquestionably, Powers ties Samuel Clemens with his child hero and links the two mercurial characters Mark Twain and Tom Sawyer within a tale that highlights literary production and accomplishment. This final echo is not lost on the reader. Both Clemens and Powers use the summation to fix their subjects in amber, to keep readers focused on the story just told, on a look backward rather than on a

movement into the coming frames and the problems of adulthood (for Tom) or old age (for Clemens). For Clemens's Tom, perpetual childhood radiates a mythology that delays the reality of adult life; for Powers's Mark Twain, the deliberate emphasis on the early and middle career rather than on the final years, allows readers to keep in mind a human being whose complications, while myriad, can be safely contained, which preserves the overall impression of a life without its final act of falling into regret and chaos.