



# Mark Twain: A Life

*Ron Powers*

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Mark Twain founded the American voice. His works are a living national treasury: taught, quoted, and reprinted more than those of any writer except Shakespeare. His awestruck contemporaries saw him as the representative figure of his times, and his influence has deeply flavored the 20th and 21st centuries. Yet somehow, beneath the vast flowing river of literature that he left behind -- books, sketches, speeches, not to mention the thousands of letters to his friends and his remarkable entries in private journals -- the man who became Mark Twain, Samuel Langhorne Clemens, has receded from view, leaving us with only faint and often trivialized remnants of his towering personality.

In *Mark Twain*, Ron Powers consummates years of thought and research with a tour de force on the life of our culture's founding father, re-creating the 19th century's vital landscapes and tumultuous events while restoring the human being at their center. He offers Sam Clemens as he lived, breathed, and wrote -- drawing heavily on the preserved viewpoints of the people who knew him best (especially the great William Dean Howells, his most admiring friend and literary co-conspirator), and on the annals of the American 19th century that he helped shape. Powers's prose rivals Mark Twain's own in its blend of humor, telling detail, and flights of lyricism. With the assistance of the Mark Twain Project at Berkeley, he has been able to draw on thousands of letters and notebook entries, many only recently discovered.

It is hard to imagine a life that encompassed more of its times. Sam Clemens left his frontier boyhood in Missouri for a life on the Mississippi during the golden age of steamboats. He skirted the western theater of the Civil War before taking off for an uproarious drunken newspaper career in the Nevada of the Wild West. As his fame as a humorist and lecturer spread around the country, he took the East Coast by storm, witnessing the extremes of wealth and poverty of New York City and the Gilded Age (which he named). He traveled to Europe on the first American pleasure cruise and revitalized the prim genre of travel writing. He wooed and won his lifelong devoted wife, yet quietly pined for the girl who was his first crush and whom he would re-encounter many decades later. He invented and invested in get-rich-quick schemes. He became the toast of Europe and a celebrity who toured the globe. His comments on everything he saw, many published here for the first time, are priceless.

The man who emerges in Powers's brilliant telling is both the magnetic, acerbic, and hilarious Mark Twain of myth and a devoted friend, husband, and father; a whirlwind of optimism and restless energy; and above all, a wide-eared and wide-eyed observer who absorbed every sight and sound, and poured it into his characters, plots, jokes, businesses, and life. Mark Twain left us our greatest voice. Samuel Clemens left us one of our most full and American of lives.

"No one understands the complicated American the world knows as Mark Twain better than Ron Powers. Finally, we have scholarship and writing worthy of the man. Powers's prose is insightful, elegant, and gets to the center of Twain's life, humor, tragedy, and outrage."

Ken Burns

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