

America's Original Superstar

Mark Twain skewered the powerful, mocked the pious and helped change a nation

BY ROY BLOUNT JR.

WHAT, IF ANYTHING, ABOUT this benighted moment of American life will anyone in the future look back on with nostalgia? Well, those of us who have cable are experiencing a golden age of sarcasm (from the Greek *sarkazein*, "to chew the lips in rage"). Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, Bill Maher and Keith Olbermann are digging into our direst forebodings so adroitly and intensely that we may want to cry, "Stop tickling!" Forget earnest punditry. In a world of hollow White House pronouncements, evaporating mainstream media and metastasizing bloggery, it's the mocking heads who make something like sense.

Let not those heads swell, however. News in the form of edgy drollery may seem a brave new thing, but it can all be traced back to one source, the man Ernest Hemingway said all of modern American literature could be traced back to: Mark Twain. Oh, that old cracker-barrel guy, you may say. White suit, cigar, reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated—but he died back in 1910, no? White, male, and didn't he write in dialect? What does he have to do with the issues of our day?

As it happens, many of these were also the issues of his day, and he addressed them as eloquently as anyone has since. The idea that America is a Christian nation? Andrew Carnegie brought that up to him once. "Why, Carnegie," Twain answered, "so is Hell."

What about those Abu Ghraib photographs? In "King Leopold's Soliloquy," a fulminating essay he published in 1905, when he was a very cantankerous 70, Twain imagines the ruler of Belgium pitying himself for the inconvenience of photos show-

TOP: Twain at 15, when he was an assistant at his brother's newspaper in Hannibal, Mo. He holds a printer's stick with the letters SAM

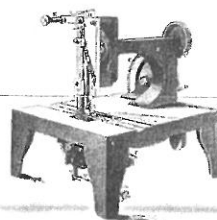
RIGHT: Samuel Langhorne Clemens, a.k.a. Mark Twain, pictured here circa 1900



The Life and Times Of Mark Twain

A side-by-side look at the man and the events that shaped his world

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|---|---|
| <p>1835
Samuel Langhorne Clemens is born Nov. 30 in Florida, Mo. Two months premature, he remains in poor health for the first 10 years of his life.</p> | <p>1835
Samuel Morse invents a commercially viable telegraph and, later, his code for sending messages. Andrew Jackson is America's President.</p> |
| <p>1839
The Clemenses move 25 miles (40 km) to the Mississippi River port of Hannibal, later immortalized as St. Petersburg in <i>Huckleberry Finn</i> and <i>Tom Sawyer</i>.</p> | <p>1837
The first steamship built for North Atlantic ocean travel, <i>The Great Western</i>, is launched. Three years later, Cunard begins regularly scheduled transatlantic sailings.</p> |
| <p>1843-44
The family moves to the home with a whitewashed fence that will provide inspiration for a famous scene in <i>Tom Sawyer</i>.</p> | <p>1846
U.S.-Mexican war, which ends in 1848 with Mexico ceding about half its territory to the U.S.</p> |
| <p>1848
A year after his father's death, Clemens leaves school. Despite having just a fifth-grade education, he goes to work at his brother Orion's newspaper.</p> | <p>1848
The California Gold Rush begins. Few actually strike it rich.</p> |
| <p>1851
His earliest sketch, <i>A Gallant Fireman</i>, appears in the <i>Saturday Evening Post</i>.</p> | <p>1851
Isaac Singer patents the sewing machine.</p> |
| <p>1853
Clemens leaves Hannibal and works as a printer in St. Louis, New York City and Philadelphia.</p> | <p>1859
Charles Darwin publishes <i>On the Origin of Species</i>.</p> |
| <p>1857
At age 22, he boards a steamboat for New Orleans, intending to make his way to South America. Instead, he remains in the U.S. and becomes an apprentice riverboat pilot.</p> | |



ing natives of the Congo whose lands have been cut off by Belgian exploiters. In the good old days, Leopold complains, he could deny atrocities and be believed. "Then all of a sudden came the crash! That is to say, the incorruptible Kodak—and all the harmony went to hell! The only witness I have encountered in my long experience that I couldn't bribe."

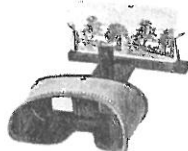
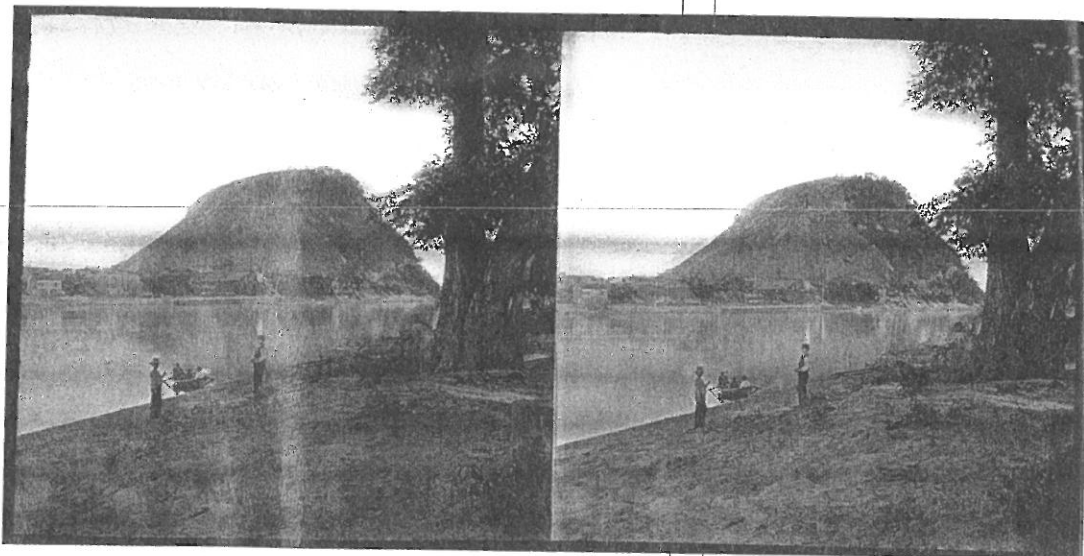
Waterboarding? In 1902, American soldiers were involved in a war to suppress rebels in the Philippines, which the U.S. had taken from Spain in the Spanish-American War, then decided to keep for itself instead of granting the Filipinos the independence they thought they had been promised. That outcome enraged Twain. So did "the torturing of Filipinos by the awful 'water-cure.'"

"To make them confess—what?" Twain asked. "Truth? Or lies? How can one know which it is they are telling? For under unendurable pain a man confesses anything that is required of him, true or false, and his evidence is worthless."

Whether Twain was talking about racism at home, the foreign misadventures of the Western powers or the excesses of the era of greed he initially flourished in after the Civil War, his target was always human folly and hypocrisy, which turn out to be perennial topics for further study.

Here he is in *Letters from the Earth*, speaking in the voice of Satan commenting on the strangeness of man's ways: "He has imagined a heaven, and has left entirely out of it the supremest of all his delights... sexual intercourse! It is as if a lost and perishing person in a roasting desert should be told by a rescuer he might choose and have all longed-for things but one, and he should elect to leave out water!"

Strong stuff, especially when it's funny. Sometimes unsettling too. But the man who said those things came from America's heart. Mark Twain, who was born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in 1835, grew up on the nation's literal main stream, the Mississippi River, in Hannibal, Mo. Having failed to find a ship that would take him to South America and the fortune he proposed to make from coca, by the age of 23 he had become a Mississippi-steamboat pilot. It was a job he held just briefly, but the memory of the river, its enchantments and dangers, found its way years later into his most powerful book, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It



Stereograph of the Mississippi, circa 1880s-1900. Twain traveled up the river from New Orleans to Minnesota in 1882

RIGHT: Daguerreotype of gold miners with a sluice, at the height of the Gold Rush in 1850. Twain would try his hand at mining 12 years later



Twain with his wife Olivia on board the S.S. Northland in July 1895, while on his worldwide lecture tour to pay off the family debts

1861 River traffic is brought to a halt by the Civil War, and Clemens joins a group of Confederate volunteers—for a couple of weeks. He then heads for Nevada to meet up with Orion.

1862 Tries prospecting for silver, then becomes a newspaper reporter.

1863 After trying out various pen names—including W. Epaminondas Adrastus Perkins—Clemens settles on Mark Twain. It's a river man's term for measuring water two fathoms (12 ft. or 3.7 m) deep.

1864 He leaves Nevada and works for a San Francisco newspaper.

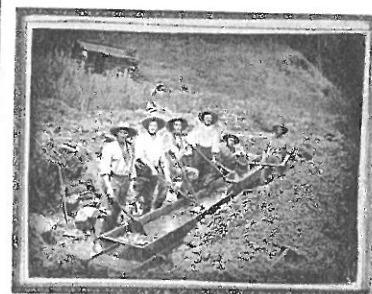
1867 Publishes his first book, *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches*. Travels to Europe and the Holy Land, a trip he recalls in *The Innocents Abroad*.

1870 Marries Olivia Langdon, the daughter of a wealthy businessman from Elmira, N.Y.

1873 Publishes his first novel, *The Gilded Age*, attacking the U.S.'s obsession with money.

1876 *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is published to immediate success. It has never gone out of print.

1861 The Civil War begins. It ends four years later, after more than 610,000 are killed and another 500,000 are wounded.



1867 The U.S. buys Alaska from Russia for \$7.2 million.

1869 Transcontinental railroad completed. 15th Amendment gives former slaves the right to vote.

1876 Alexander Graham Bell receives a U.S. patent for the telephone.

1877 Thomas Edison invents the phonograph, and two years later the lightbulb.

also found its way into his pen name. Mark Twain, the name he began to write under in 1863, was a river man's term meaning a depth of two fathoms, or 12 ft. (3.7 m).

When the Civil War broke out, Twain may have briefly entertained pro-Union sentiments but at length decided to serve with a ragtag bunch of Confederate irregulars. After a couple of weeks, "hunted like a rat the whole time," he thought better of that commitment and, as Huck Finn did, lit out for the territory. This territory was Nevada and California, where he prospected for silver without luck and practiced scurrilous journalism and general drunkardry with zest.

Twain first came to national attention in 1865, when he published a comical short story in dialect, which was eventually titled *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*. ("You never see a frog so modest and straightfor'ard as he was, for all he was so gifted.") It appeared in newspapers all across the country, was received as a whole new kind of hilariousness and made him famous. "At the close of the Civil War, Americans were ready for a good cleansing laugh, untethered to bitter political argument," writes Twain's recent, so far definitive biographer, Ron Powers. And at least in this first moment of his fame, that's what Twain gave them.

In the career as an audience-convulsing lecturer that grew out of that first small triumph, Twain would become, as Powers puts it, "the nation's first rock star." We know his voice only from written descriptions of it. It was resonant enough to hold a large lecture-hall audience rapt. He spoke in a slow backwoods drawl, with many strategic pauses. In 1891 he experimented with an Edison dictating machine but concluded that "you can't write literature with it." (He liked to have a human secretary taking notes and laughing in the right places.) But he wasn't the sort of funny man who laughs at his own jokes. In performance and in life, Twain's facial expression—except, presumably, when he was furious, which was often—was deadpan. After Twain's death, the editor of the *North American Review* recalled that he had known him for 30 years and never seen him laugh.

In the first flush of success, Twain began work on a travel book, *The Innocents Abroad*, that would bring him sizable amounts of money. In that book he simultaneously took on the pretensions of Europe and the spectacle of a bunch of comical American tourists, including himself, making a sustained encounter with an Old World that was never quite as impressive as it was supposed to be.

Travel writing was lucrative, but novels were what serious literary men were ex-

pected to produce, and from the start Twain longed to be taken seriously, to be regarded as more than "merely" a humorist. So by 1873 he had rolled out his first novel, *The Gilded Age*, which he co-wrote with a Connecticut journalist, Charles Dudley Warner. With that book's title, Twain gave the post-Civil War era, a time of boundless greed and opportunism, the name it still has and that it shares, in some quarters, with the era we seem to be willy-nilly emerging from.

Once Twain found his calling as a writer and lecturer, success came quickly and abundantly. He may have been a critic of the Gilded Age, but he wasn't shy about taking on the trappings of a successful man. When the publishing royalties came pouring in, he built in Hartford, Conn., a big, ornate, financially burdensome house in a style that's been called "steamboat Gothic." It has been fully open to the public since 1974, but recently it has run into serious financial difficulties. A few years ago the group that maintains the house added an expensive visitors' center. Now it can't afford the upkeep, and there's a danger that the house will have to close.

He may have been a critic of the Gilded Age, but Twain wasn't shy about taking on the trappings of a successful man

To be honest, it's a spooky place—his favorite daughter died there, ranting and raving—and all the more worth preserving for that. I played billiards there once, on Mark Twain's table, with Garrison Keillor on his radio show. (Radio is a good medium for billiards because you can lie about how many balls you are sinking.) This is not the first time the house has been threatened by debt. That happened in 1891. Back then it was due to Twain's irrational exuberance. He had set up his own publishing company, which flourished for a while but eventually went under. Even before it failed, the Clemenses were compelled to leave the house and go traveling. (In those days, believe it or not, Americans could live less expensively in Europe than at home.) Then their finances got even worse. A marvelous new kind of typesetting machine that Twain had pumped a fortune into had ultimately proved unworkable. Eventually he owed creditors about \$100,000, or roughly 2 million of today's poor excuses for dollars.

But Twain declined to let his admirers

organize a relief fund. He resolved to make enough money himself, writing and lecturing, to pay back every cent. "Honor is a harder master than the law," he said, sounding considerably more righteous than usual. But it was actually his wife, supported by Henry H. Rogers, an otherwise ruthless Standard Oil exec who had volunteered to manage Twain's money, who insisted he not take an easier way out.

Twain mostly stayed abroad for the rest of the 1890s, establishing his celebrity in Europe and touring the world, making speeches and gathering material for his final, largely acerbic travel book, *Following the Equator*. When he returned to the U.S. in 1900, the Gilded Age was fading, but America was throwing its weight around internationally. Now Twain was not only solvent again but much in vogue—"The most conspicuous person on the planet," if he did say so himself. The renewed snap in the old boy's garters resounded around the world, as he took stands on American politics that, as his biographer Powers puts it, "beggared the Democrats' timidity and the Republicans' bombast."

The Spanish-American War of 1898 had met with Twain's initial approval because he believed that the U.S. was indeed selflessly bringing freedom to Cuba by helping it throw off the yoke of Spain. But the Eagle had also taken the Philippines as a possession, and by 1899 was waging war against Filipinos who were trying to establish a republic. "Why, we have got into a mess," Twain told the *Chicago Tribune*, "a quagmire from which each fresh step renders the difficulty of extrication immensely greater." The contemporary ring of that assessment is heightened by statistics. By 1902, when Philippine independence had been pretty much squelched, more than 200,000 Filipino civilians had been killed, along with 4,200 Americans.

As Twain got older and was beset by personal tragedies like the death of his beloved daughter Susy, his view of mankind grew darker. He once told his friend William Dean Howells that "the remorseless truth" in his work was generally to be found "between the lines, where the author-cat is raking dust upon it which hides from the disinterested spectator neither it nor its smell." But in 1900, when he could no longer stomach the foreign adventures of the Western powers, he came right out and called a pile of it a pile of it. In the previous year or two, Germany and Britain had seized portions of China, the British had also pursued their increasingly nasty war against the Boers in South Africa, and the U.S. had been suppressing that rebellion in the Philippines. In response, Twain published in the *New York Herald* a brief, bitter

"Salutation-Speech from the Nineteenth Century to the Twentieth."

"I bring you the stately matron named Christendom," he wrote, "returning bedraggled, besmirched and dishonored from pirate-raids in Kiao-Chow, Manchuria, South Africa and the Philippines, with her soul full of meanness, her pocket full of boodle, and her mouth full of pious hypocrisies. Give her soap and a towel, but hide the looking-glass."

Later that year he published a long essay in the *North American Review*. It was called "To the Person Sitting in Darkness." The title was a biblical reference. The people in darkness were the unconverted, who had yet to see the blessed light. In fact, Twain pointed out, the problem was that they were seeing things too clearly. After years of exposure to Western colonialism, "the People Who Sit in Darkness ... have become suspicious of the Blessings of Civilization. More—they have begun to examine them. This is not well. The Blessings of Civilization are all right, and a good commercial property; there could not be a better, in a dim light ... and at a proper distance, with the goods a little out of focus."

The new century did nothing to improve his disposition. In 1901, U.S. President William McKinley was assassinated. His successor was Theodore Roosevelt, McKinley's 42-year-old Vice President, a blustery hero of the Spanish-American War whom Twain regarded as heedlessly adventurous in his foreign policy. "The Tom Sawyer of the political world of the 20th century," he called Roosevelt. Of course, Twain had been a great deal like Tom himself—as a boy, and as a man for that matter—but that was before becoming the conscience of a nation, "the representative, and prophetic, voice of principled American dissent," as his biographer Powers puts it.

Shortly after becoming President, Roosevelt made news by declaring, out of the blue, that "In God We Trust" should be removed from U.S. coins because they "carried the name of God into improper places." Twain responded, in conversation with Carnegie, that "In God We Trust" was a fine motto, "simple, direct, gracefully phrased; it always sounds well—In God We Trust. I don't believe it would sound any better if it were true."

Religiosity prevailed in Twain's era but not in his heart. Though one of his closest friends, Joseph Twichell, was a minister, Twain derided religions—Christianity, in particular—and the notion of a benevolent deity. His strongest written sacrileges were not published, however, until well after his death. He was a more interesting disbeliever in some ways than today's Bill Maher or Sam Harris or Christopher

RIGHT: Ailing former President Ulysses S. Grant works on his memoirs in June 1885. Twain published them later that year, earning large royalties for Grant's widow



Naismith and his wife discuss the game he invented as a college student, which used peach baskets



Twain, left, with his friend Standard Oil executive Henry H. Rogers, circa 1907. Rogers had helped Twain out of bankruptcy a decade earlier

RIGHT: Twain loved to travel by water. This picture was taken around 1908, after he published Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven, about a sailor who arrives at the wrong port



1884

Twain starts his own publishing house. It releases Ulysses S. Grant's memoirs, which become a best seller.

1885

Publishes *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which he had been working on for a decade.

1891

Nearly broke, the family leaves for a cheaper life in Europe.

1894-98

Twain embarks on a global lecture tour that forms the basis of *Following the Equator*.

1896

Daughter Susy dies, age 24, while he is in London. Another child, Jean, would die in 1909 at age 29.

1900

Begins writing polemical essays and moralistic fiction, attempting to combat the evils of the "damn'd human race."

1904

His wife Olivia dies while they are in Florence, Italy.

1910

Twain dies April 21 at age 74 and is buried in Elmira, N.Y.



1880

The New York *Daily Graphic* publishes the first screened photograph, using the newly developed halftone process.

1881

Former slave Booker T. Washington is selected to become principal of the new Tuskegee Institute.

1883

Brooklyn Bridge is completed.

1888

George Eastman perfects the Kodak, a camera for amateurs.

1891

James Naismith invents basketball.

1896

First motion-picture shown on a public screen.

1898

Spanish-American War.

1900

Olds Co. begins mass-producing automobiles in Detroit.

1901

Marconi sends the first transatlantic telegraph.

1903

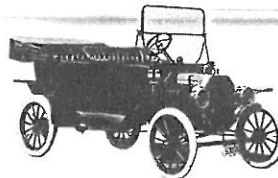
Wright brothers make first flight.

1904

U.S. takes over construction of the Panama Canal.

1908

Ford introduces the Model T.



America's Favorite Funnyman
For more photos of Mark Twain, go to time.com/twain

TIMELINE: FROM TOP: BETTMANN—CORBIS (2); NO CREDIT: FORD MOTOR CO.—AP; COURTESY OF THE MARK TWAIN PROJECT—THE BANCROFT LIBRARY; HUCKLEBERRY FINN: STAPLETON COLLECTION—CORBIS; BLOUNT: JOAN GRISWOLD

Hitchens, who readily dismiss religion as inflammatory nonsense. Twain, who was full of inflammatory nonsense, could appreciate the indigenous blessednesses he encountered around the world. Stopping in Benares, India, "the sacreddest of sacred cities," Twain discovered that "Hindoos" venerate flower-garlanded phallic stones with enormous gusto, which led him to muse on the durability of the impulse to believe. "Inasmuch as the life of religion is in the heart, not the head," he observed, religions are hardy. "Many a time we have gotten all ready for the funeral" of one faith or another, "and found it postponed again, on account of the weather or something."

What put Twain off about religion was its bossiness and its alignment with corrupt community values that people—those standing to profit—insisted on calling a higher power. The very expression "moral sense" made him curl his lip. He denounced his own conscience, which frowned upon his anarchic instincts, his love of enjoyment, and made him feel guilty and rebellious.

The pivotal moment in *Huckleberry Finn* is when Huck decides not to do what his conscience tells him is right, to turn in "Miss Watson's Jim" as a runaway slave. Instead, he decides to abide by his personal affection for Jim, although the upshot will be, according to all he has been taught, eternal damnation for violating the norms of society and its view that a slave is the rightful property of its owner.

As Twain became increasingly angry over the years, less the jester and more the Jeremiah, there was grumbling in some quarters that he had been better when he was funnier. (You could call this the Woody Allen problem.) The New York *Times* accused him of "tumbling in among us from the clouds of exile and discarding the grin of the funny man for the sour visage of the austere moralist."

The *Times* had a point. As a social critic, Twain was most enjoyable when he followed his natural humorous tendency to denounce folly and iniquity in all directions. This is what he was doing in *Following the Equator* when he wrote, "All the territorial possessions of all the political establishments in the earth—including America, of course—consist of pilferings from other people's wash. No tribe, however insignificant, and no nation, howsoever mighty, occupies a foot of land that was not stolen. When the English, the French, and the Spaniards reached America, the Indian tribes had been raiding each other's territorial clothes-lines for ages, and every acre of ground in the continent had been stolen and restolen 500 times."

Trv rallying a cause with that. Then



The Essential Mark Twain

The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County

Twain's first success, a tall tale that helped earn him his reputation as a humorist

The Innocents Abroad

Twain travels through Europe and the Holy Land, skewering those places and also his fellow American "pilgrims"

Roughing It

The author heads west to make his fortune, fails as a prospector but starts to develop a name as a wisecracking writer

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

The classic novel about a born rascal and the scrapes he gets into. The ultimate boys' book. And girls' book too

Life on the Mississippi

Twain's journey from callow youth to riverboat pilot, amusingly and wistfully remembered 20 years later

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

One of the crown jewels of American literature. An alert boy and a runaway slave float down the Mississippi, on the lam from a corrupt civilization

The Private History of a Campaign That Failed

Twain's recollection of his brief time as a Confederate irregular is a memorable account of the folly of war

The United States of Lyncherdom

An angry, mocking essay condemning the murder of blacks by whites. Twain's version wasn't published until 2000

there's the long essay Twain produced in 1901, "The United States of Lyncherdom." This is not a single-minded polemic. It registers the horror of lynchings but also undertakes to empathize with people who attended them. Their motivation, Twain argued, is not inhuman viciousness but "man's commonest weakness, his aversion to being unpleasantly conspicuous, pointed at, shunned, as being on the unpopular side. Its other name is Moral Cowardice, and is the commanding feature of the make-up of 9,999 men in the 10,000..."

As a remedy, Twain proposed, tongue in cheek, that sheriffs might be dispatched to communities where a lynching was about to take place. If they could rally enough

citizens to oppose the hideous deed, that would make the anti-lynching position the new conventional wisdom that everyone would flock to conform to. But a problem—where to find enough sheriffs? Why not draft them from among the Christian missionaries spreading the malady of Western civilization in China? (Missionaries were a favorite target for Twain.) In China, he told his readers, "almost every convert runs a risk of catching our civilization... We ought to think twice before we encourage a risk like that; for, once civilized, China can never be uncivilized again... O compassionate missionary, leave China! come home and convert these Christians!"

There is something upsetting, off-balancing, about "The United States of Lyncherdom" that has kept it alive all these years. It's against lynching, all right, but it seems to take more of an interest in being against righteousness. It makes you wonder whether you yourself, possibly, or let's say your grandmother, might have appeared, smiling, in a photograph of a lynch mob. And just as you're about to block out that queasiness, Twain slams in a snippet of what a particularly despicable lynching (in Texas, as it happened) was like. Oh, God. (The man was slow-roasted to death over a coal-oil fire.) And then, when he starts taking off on the missionaries? I don't know that I want to express this opinion. But there's no getting around it: it's funny.

Not only was "The United States of Lyncherdom" politically incorrect, it still is. It blames one of the most shameful aspects of American history on moral correctness, the herd mentality that prevailed among Americans who regarded themselves as right thinking. Twain decided that the country, or at least his readership, was not ready for that essay. It wasn't published until 1923, when Twain's literary executor slipped it, hedgily edited, into a posthumous collection. Not until 2000 did it appear in its original form, and then in an obscure, scholarly publication. It takes a genius to strike the funny bone in a way that can still smart nearly 100 years later. The nation's highest official accolade for comedy is the Kennedy Center's Mark Twain Prize for American Humor, which will be awarded this November to the late George Carlin—another man whose commentary grew bleaker and more biting in his last years. But old Mark, unvarnished, might be too hot for cable, even, today.



Blount has written introductions for six editions of Twain's work. His next book, *Alphabet Juice*, will be published in October by

Farrar, Straus & Giroux