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Truth in the rough

The 100-year embargo lifts on Twain's autobiography, revealing much advice and inspiration on nature, writing and journalism

By FRANCESCA LYMAN

— “I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can’t stand it. I been there before.”
—*Huckleberry Finn*

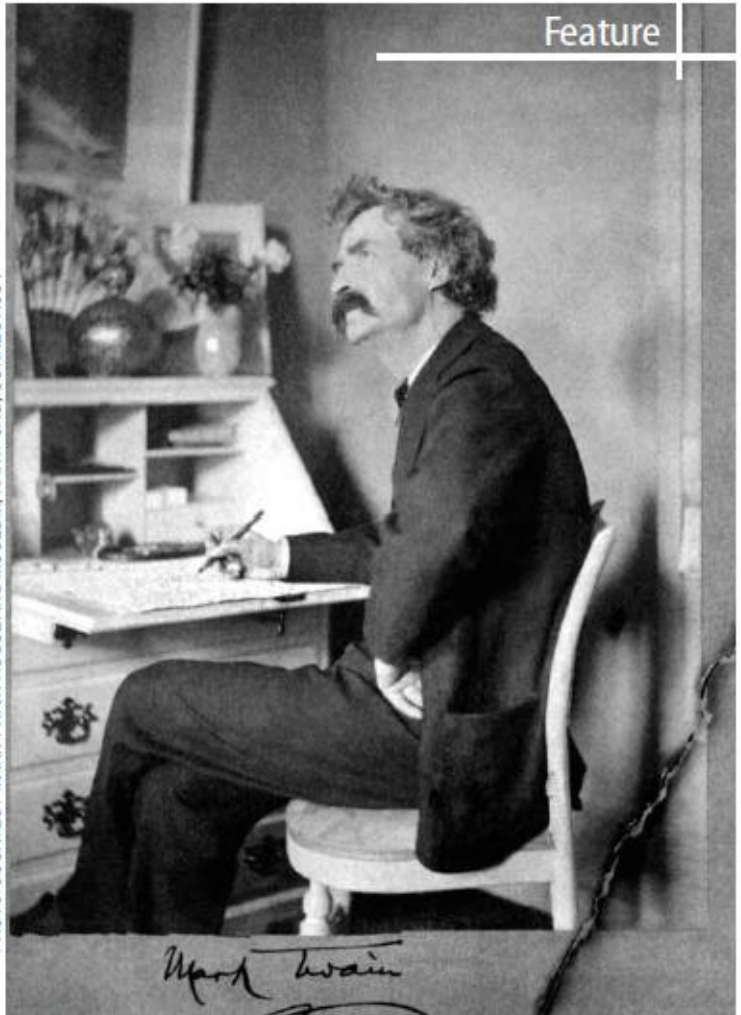
Last summer, I watched my impetuous nephew and niece from Atlanta, Nico and Margo, aged 12 and 9, ‘light out for the territory,’ as they ventured forth into the Pacific Northwest’s North Cascades mountains, exploring its timbering and mining towns; pitching tents and going camping; swimming out into the middle of a glacier lake; and floating their own rafts made out of driftwood.

Their first Westward journey recalled the rambunctious tall tales of Samuel L. Clemens and his unruly comic alter-ego Mark Twain. With one last hour before having to pack for their flight back to *sivilization*, and their first week of school, the young adventurers pleaded for one last ramble in “the enchanting forest.” They said the woods looked like it was from the age of “dinosaurs, with ferns everywhere,” filled with wasps’ nests so huge they’d “only seen them in cartoons before.” And it sure brought to mind another of Twain’s boisterous witticisms: “I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.”

To even make reference to the immortal Huck calls for some nerve, and, I’ll admit, that wasn’t on the minds of my young charges (even if they would probably have been keenly interested to learn that Clemens left school at the age of little more than 12). Their first journey West came in what’s been dubbed the “Year of Mark Twain.” 2010 was the 175th anniversary of his birth, as well as being aligned with the 125th anniversary of the publication of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

This year marks another milestone, too: The fulfillment of the classic author’s dying wish to have his complete and

PHOTO COURTESY MARK TWAIN HOUSE AND MUSEUM, HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT



Mark Twain writing *Tom Sawyer* in his study. After a career in journalism that took him to the West, Mark Twain married and moved to New York State, where he wrote the novels *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, and kept copious journals.

uncensored *Autobiography* published 100 years after he died. The first time a writer ever imposed such an embargo, Twain suppressed it so that he could speak freely “with his whole frank mind.” The long-anticipated *Autobiography of Mark Twain* — or at least the first of its three volumes — offers another chance to reflect on his importance as a writer, humorist, public speaker, essayist, journalist and philosopher — perhaps why the book has jumped to the top of best-seller lists already.

“When you catch an adjective, kill it. No, I don’t mean utterly, but kill most of them — then the rest will be valuable..” — Letter to D. W. Bowser, 20 March 1880

Not so surprisingly, the book also reveals Twain to be a voice relevant to environmental writers. A hefty, 737-page tome, filled with letters, snippets of news, notes, essays, journal entries and fragments, and affectionate family portraits, this four-pound volume weighs in too heavy to fit in a backpack. And, unlike the well-worn copy of *Walden* that is the bible of many
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environmental writers, it could tip a river raft.

Much of the material in it has been published before, but never as Twain wished it, in all its digressive, “convoluted glory,” as reviewer Tim Adams of the *The Guardian* observes. “The thing uppermost in a person’s mind is the thing to talk about or write about,” writes Twain, whose memoirs read like the 19th century equivalent of a blog. Meandering in fits and false starts, the book is packed with heaps of new material, including biting charges against specific people and politicians that Twain found too potentially hurtful to be published during his lifetime and some prophetic social criticism.

As our families ventured forth on camping trips into the North Cascades, I couldn’t wait to revisit this favorite author, plunging back into *Roughing It*, *Innocents Abroad*, and Samuel Clemens’ adventures in journalism in the far West of California and Nevada, where he first adopted his pen name of Mark Twain. The name has its origins in the call of the riverboat leadsmen, whose line sank to a depth “marked” as safe in “two” fathoms of water, assuring that the water wasn’t too shallow and thus safe to navigate. It was a paradoxical epithet for someone whose life often sailed rough seas.

The man who would be called America’s “Homer” (by Ralph Waldo Emerson), a literary wellspring of “all American writing” (by Ernest Hemingway), our country’s “Voltaire” (by George Bernard Shaw), and our country’s best-known humorous writer, first gained notoriety as a journalist. Having spent at least 20 years as a reporter, and as a writer of nonfiction and satirical sketches, he started earning a living as an apprentice printer as early as age 13.

Without any formal education, he had to compensate with a scrappy, self-taught knowledge, learning typesetting, printing, riverboat piloting, and new trades like silver prospecting, which he would fail at but later report on in newspaper articles and travelogues such as *Roughing It*.

In the course of reporting for newspapers across the West, he experimented with a variety of comic personas in satiric sketches and swashbuckling frontier tales. However, his fame really didn’t come until several years after the publication of his newspaper story, “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” republished as a book in 1867, when he was 32 years old, and *The Innocents Abroad*, his irreverent take on the glories of European culture, published two years later.

Given Twain’s roots, it is perhaps unsurprising that Twain stood up for the common person, and the powerless, while

The difference between the almost right word & the right word is really a large matter — it’s the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.

- Letter to George Bainton, 10/15/1888

lampooning the moneyed and powerful. While he grew up in a slave-owning family, he became a staunch abolitionist over time; he also grew to support women’s rights, civil rights, anti-imperialism, and what was then the beginnings of an animal rights’ movement, anti-vivisectionism. Twain wrote: “Of all the animals, man is the only one that is cruel. He is the only one that inflicts pain for the pleasure of doing it.”

And it is the dark, angry social critic side of Twain that emerges most strongly in this new volume. Twain gives full vent to his then unpopular anti-imperialistic political views, expressing

anger over the U.S. military intervention in the Philippines, referring at one point to American soldiers as “uniformed assassins” for their role in waging war on innocent civilians, the so-called Moro Crater Massacre.

His “War Prayer,” condemning this incident, was first published in 1923, and recently resurrected by opponents of the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, in these new memoirs, he is more sharply critical of President Theodore Roosevelt, charging that “He knew perfectly well that to pen 600 helpless and weaponless savages in a hole like rats in a trap and massacre them in detail during a stretch of a day and a half from a safe position on the heights above was no brilliant feat of arms. He knew perfectly well that our uniformed assassins had not upheld the honor of the American flag.”

Elsewhere, he also takes stabs at moneyed interests and oil billionaires, such as John D. Rockefeller and his son, whose “Bible classes” provoked ridicule at the time. “Satan”, he writes, “twaddling sentimental sillinesses to a Sunday-school, could be no burlesque upon [him].” Twain uses the word “grotesque” to characterize him; one wonders what he’d say about some of our prominent talk show hosts today who use the media as a pulpit to preach a gospel of free-market capitalism mixed with Divine Right?

Twain was a maverick for his time and, even a hundred years later, still seems new and fresh. Robert Hirst, the book’s general editor and curator of the Mark Twain project, calls him America’s “first blogger.” That’s not so surprising because as a riverboat pilot he began keeping a journal, alongside his ship’s log, which is, after all, what a *weblog* is an imitation of.

For his autobiography, he dictated to a stenographer during the last three years of his life, in an almost stream-of-consciousness fashion that captured the impression of the moment rather than any standard chronological order. “I hit upon the right



PHOTO COURTESY MARK TWAIN PROJECT, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

In his later years, Mark Twain devoted himself to his autobiography, which he wanted withheld from publication until a century after his death.

“Only presidents, editors and people with tapeworm have the right to use the editorial ‘we’.”

- Mark Twain

way to do an Autobiography, start it at no particular time in your life; wander at your free will all over your life; talk only about the thing which interests you for the moment; drop it the moment its interest threatens to pale, and turn your talk upon the new and more interesting thing that has intruded itself into your mind meantime.”

Some call his 100-year embargo a case of egoism that would insure his immortality; even his choice of pen name and authorial image has a strangely modern sensibility that may have been a form of ‘branding’ before there even was such a thing. Already, his autobiography is on many best-seller lists; Twain even has his own *Facebook* page.

“It is just like man’s vanity and impertinence to call an animal dumb because it is dumb to his dull perceptions.” - Mark Twain

I don’t want to say this too loud, because Twain might be listening from the grave and snap peevishly at me, but I think Mark Twain may even have actually been a close, if not closet, compatriot of us eco-writers. If Twain were alive today, would he be writing about the global impacts of American consumerism, and its effects on the environment? Such quotes give a hint: “Civilization is a limitless multiplication of unnecessary necessities.”

Given his role as a leader in the Anti-imperialist League, it’s likely he would have been a critic of globalization; that view certainly informed his culinary tastes, according to Andrew Behrs. Author of the book *Twain’s Feast*, Behrs paints him as one of the original *locavores*, a champion of regional flavors and fresh, wild, locally cultivated recipes. “Whether wild or domestic, the dishes were based less on recipes than on the quality of the ingredients,” writes Behrs. “At its heart, Twain’s feast was about the connection between food and place, the way that the things that sustain us depend upon places we remember and love. That lesson remains as vital as ever.”

The author of the line “Denial ain’t just a river in Egypt” devoted his life to exposing the hypocrisy of a nation dedicated to freedom but based on slavery; how would he write about the rampant denialism surrounding global warming, today? What would be his views on population, given such statements as these? “Often it does seem a pity that Noah and his party did not miss the boat.”

Before devoting himself to the craft of writing as a reporter, he’d spent hours observing nature and the landscape. As a Mississippi River riverboat pilot, he’d memorized the bends, rivulets, currents and depths of the waterway for the 1,200-plus miles between St. Louis, Mo., and New Orleans. According to Ron Powers, author of *Dangerous Water*, a biography of Clemens as a boy (and himself a native of Twain’s hometown), the author’s formative imagination was shaped by that meandering river, its floodplains, its unexpected tributaries, its cave systems and the whole surrounding terrain of

“In the real world, the right thing never happens in the right place and the right time. It is the job of journalists and historians to make it appear that it has.” - Mark Twain

Hannibal, Mo., beyond whose town limits “lay hillside forests of oak and walnut and sycamore, open fields awash in dandelion and columbine and wild ginger.”

According to Dayton Duncan, a co-writer with documentary film director Ken Burns of a PBS series on the life of Twain, “Twain’s lesson for environmental journalists is to be acute observers, and equally sharp writers.” No one, says Duncan, could describe a coyote running the way he did in *Roughing It*. “If you’ve ever seen a coyote on the move, you understand how good Twain was at seeing it, remembering it, and then putting it into words,” Duncan says.

Twain’s *coyote* “dropped his ears, set up his tail, and left for San Francisco at a speed which can only be described as a flash and a vanish! Long after he was out of sight we could hear him whiz.”

Twain has inspired countless writers and artists. The creator of the famous *Wile E. Coyote* of the ‘Roadrunner’ cartoon credits his character as originating with Twain’s description of his *coyote*, “a long, slim, sick and sorry-looking skeleton with a gray wolf-skin stretched over it, a tolerably bushy tail that forever sags

“To get the right word in the right place is a rare achievement.”

- Letter to Emeline Beach, 10 Feb 1868

down with a despairing expression of forsakenness and misery, a furtive and evil eye, and a long, sharp face, with slightly lifted lip and exposed teeth. He has a general slinking expression all over.” The animal, he concludes, is “a living, breathing allegory of Want. He is *always* hungry.”

Another of Duncan’s favorites is Twain’s description of sagebrush, from his days spent in Nevada, in *Roughing It*: “Sagebrush is a very fair fuel, but as a vegetable it is a distinguished failure. Nothing can abide the taste of it but the jackass and his illegitimate child the mule.” In another place, he says that “when crushed,” it “emits an odor that isn’t exactly magnolia and equally isn’t exactly polecat — but it is a sort of compromise between the two.”

Without a doubt, Twain’s main tool as a writer was humor, but he also relied on hard fact and clear description. What makes him distinctive, too, is his attention to detail, adherence to fact, and reliance on his own understanding of reality rather than any second-hand knowledge. He fiercely insisted on the highest standards not just for himself but for anyone proclaiming to be a writer: “The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.”

Scholars today regard him in some ways as the first major professional writer, as a literary entrepreneur who shrewdly marketed his image and his literary wares, adopting new technologies like the typewriter (and even creating some successful media products, like a self-adhering scrapbook). But what inspired him to write was a sense of deep conviction and obligation to the public, to portray life honestly ... even caustically. For those reasons, we reporters and writers can look

to Twain for inspiration and good advice to this day, perhaps even more now than ever before.

In 1900, late in his life, he wrote in the draft of a letter to an unnamed editor, "Plain clarity is better than ornate obscurity." As much as any important novelist or figure in American literature, Twain was profoundly a journalist, and saw journalists as vital to a democratic society. "Truth is tough," he wrote. "It will not break, like a bubble, at a touch; nay, you may kick it about all day, like a football, and it will be round and full at evening."

Francesca Lyman is a journalist and author of The Greenhouse Trap, with World Resources Institute, and Inside the Dzanga Sangha Rain Forest. Mark Twain has always held a mystique for her, she confesses, not just as a functionally recovering English major but for personal reasons: Her father, Thomas W. Lyman, canoed with a pal down the full length of the Mississippi River, after his service in the Navy, and brought the family to live for a time not far from the great river, outside the tiny town of Makanda, Illinois. She can be reached at chicha19@comcast.net.

SOURCES:

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Harriet Elinor Smith, ed., *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, University of California Press, 2010.

Here it is free! <http://tinyurl.com/36t9u7n>

PBS, Mark Twain documentary <http://www.pbs.org/marktwain/>

The Mark Twain Project <http://www.marktwainproject.org/>