Author Q&A – Mark Dawidziak

Mark Twain's Guide to Diet, Exercise, Beauty, Fashion, Investment, Romance, Health and Happiness

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How and why did this book come to be?
I started thinking about this book right after *Mark My Words: Mark Twain On Writing* was published in 1996. Every time I turned around, it seemed a friend of mine had his or her nose stuck in a self-help book about diet, finance or exercise. It also seemed like an anti-self-help book could be made out of Mark Twain's "advice" on such matters, so, mostly for fun, I started cobbling it together. A myriad of other books took my time and attention, but I'd return to this over the years, expanding and building on the concept. So, in a way, this is like getting top publish your hobby.

How long did you work on it?
Long germination period. This was about 19 years from first outline to publication. That's not unprecedented for me. It was 19 years from first discussion to the publication of *Jim Tully: American Writer, Irish Rover, Hollywood Brawler,* the 2011 literary biography I wrote with Paul J. Bauer. Of course, that book was one of the many that got in the way of this one. But Mark Twain advised that it's best to keep three or four ships under construction in your "literary shipyard."

Did anything amusing (or not so amusing) happen in the course of writing the book or finding a publisher?
My agent was trying to sell another book for me, and it seemed like we hit a wall on that front. So she asked me the question that basically boils down to "What else you got?" I ran several ideas by her, and, almost as an afterthought, mentioned this "Mark Twain's Guide to . . . " concept I'd been working on since the mid-'90s. Almost didn't mention it. But she was pretty certain she could find a home for it, and she found a good one.

How does this book complement and differ from your previous work?
Well, there have been three previous Twain-centric books: *Mark My Words: Mark Twain On Writing* (1996), *Horton Foote's The Shape of the River: The Lost Teleplay About Mark Twain* (2003) and *Mark Twain in Ohio* (2015). So it's obviously a continuation of this fascination with Mark Twain. BUT, when you move past these four books, it's a deeply schizophrenic resume. There are works in the horror field (fiction and non-fiction). There are histories of landmark television shows. There are literary studies. There are plays. There is more than 35 years of newspaper work. Indeed, I have Mark Twain friends who have been stunned to learn I'm a TV critic at a newspaper. I have friends in the horror field who are surprised that I have some kind of standing as a Mark Twain scholar (shaky as that stand might be). I have theater friends who don't know about the other parts of my life. Basically, if I could have stuck to one thing, I might have been successful.

When did you become interested in Mark Twain? Was there a trigger event as a child or adult?
I was 10 years old when CBS aired the TV special of Hal Holbrook's *Mark Twain Tonight!* on March 6, 1967. I'd already seen a couple of the film versions, including *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1938) and *The Prince and the Pauper* (1937), and I'd read the *Classics Illustrated* comic books of *Huckleberry Finn* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court,* but this was putting a personality to the this towering figure behind the stories. I was fascinated, but the fascination really took off in high school, when I started reading everything by and about Twain I could find. It was the first time I realized that a writer could be heroic.

What's your favorite Twain novel and why?
Twainiacs tend to take *Huckleberry Finn* out of the equation. It's in the discussion for the great American novel, so we typically start the question with, "Excluding *Huckleberry Finn* . . . " And, excluding *Huckleberry Finn,* my favorite is *Pudd'nhead Wilson,* perhaps because it plays so wonderfully on duality and twins – two rich Twain themes. It also a deceptively challenging book that delves deeply into issues of prejudice, bigotry, and racism. So, after *Huckleberry Finn, Pudd'nhead Wilson,* followed closely by *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.*

Do you have a favorite (or several favorite) Twain quote/s that were included?
Many, many. I'll limit it to three. "Do not part with your illusions. When they are gone, you may still exist, but you have ceased to live." "If a man doesn't believe as we do, we say he is a crank, and that settles it. I mean it does nowadays, because now we can't burn him." And, "Let us endeavor so to live that when we come to die even the undertaker will be sorry."

We know you perform as Twain … how did that part of your career come about and how does it inform your study of Twain?
I first performed as Mark Twain in 1979. I was 22 and living in Tennessee. It took about two hours then to look like Mark Twain at 70. The makeup process is considerably shorter 36 years later. But, at every age, inhabiting that white suit always has been remarkably pleasant – like taking a leisurely stroll with an old friend. And I suppose that's what it is. If it informs my study of Twain in any way, it's because of the hint you get of how Twain connected with his audience. There's kinship there that doesn't exist with other writers, who, let's face it, tend to be anonymous. You feel that kinship when you walk out on stage. And even when I venture into rough observations about the "damned human race," I remember what Hal Holbrook once told me about these scorching comments: They'll "take it" from Twain where they might not listen to anyone else. You get to carry a little of that magic on stage with you, and inhabiting that suit and interpreting his words, you can't help gaining a bit of insight and understanding.

Are there any modern personalities that you think are "Twain-like" in their public persona or who remind you of Twain in certain ways? If so, who and why?
Not in a complete sense. Twain is like the great white whale of American literature. The works and the life are so big, it's difficult to keep them in perspective. It's why there is no one definitive, comprehensive, reliable, readable and indispensable biography of Twain. You need a shelf of books to even get started. In the same way, a lot of modern performers have bits and

pieces of what Twain represented on the American landscape. Many people immediately think of Jon Stewart, for instance, and he's definitely on the short list, but political commentary was only one small part of Twain's arsenal as a writer. I think you could take Jon Stewart, Fran Lebowitz, Garrison Keillor, Dave Barry, Tina Fey, Chris Rock, Calvin Trillin, David Sedaris, Carl Reiner, Steve Martin, Stephen Colbert, Paul Theroux, Anthony Bourdain, Carol Burnett and many others, put them all together, and you still wouldn't have Mark Twain. But they all represent bits and pieces of the legacy, covering the whole landscape.

What do people generally not understand about Twain?
How vast the literary output was. He mastered as staggering range of styles and genres: short stories, novels, travel books, humor, letters, essays, children's literature, science fiction, mystery, journalism, poetry, speeches, criticism. About the only form he couldn't master (and he tried) was plays.

If Twain were alive today, what periodical do you think he would write for, if any? What subject matter would he be most likely to skewer? Would he take to social media?
Since Mark Twain was a master of deflating pomposity, hypocrisy and ignorance, he would have no shortage of targets (today or at any time in human history, since he understood that the human nature doesn't change). He might write for a couple of periodicals he did write for, the Atlantic and Harper's. I suppose you also could The New Yorker and Vanity Fair to that list, but I think Twain, as versatile as he was, would have found all sorts of outlets for his humor, from online sites (his own, probably) to television, where, today, he probably would be what is called a hyphenate – a writer-producer in charge of his own stories. He started his own publishing house, so why wouldn't he take charge today as an executive producer?

Not including Twain, who are your favorite authors?
Long list. It includes Charles Dickens, John Steinbeck, Robert Louis Stevenson, Dashiell Hammett, Anton Chekhov, James Agee, Rod Serling, Edgar Allan Poe, Jim Tully, Flannery O'Connor, H.L. Mencken, Willa Cather, Ray Bradbury, Walker Percy, Richard Matheson, Eugene O'Neill, William Butler Yeats and Harlan Ellison.

Which books are in your to-be-read pile right now?
John Lahr's *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh*