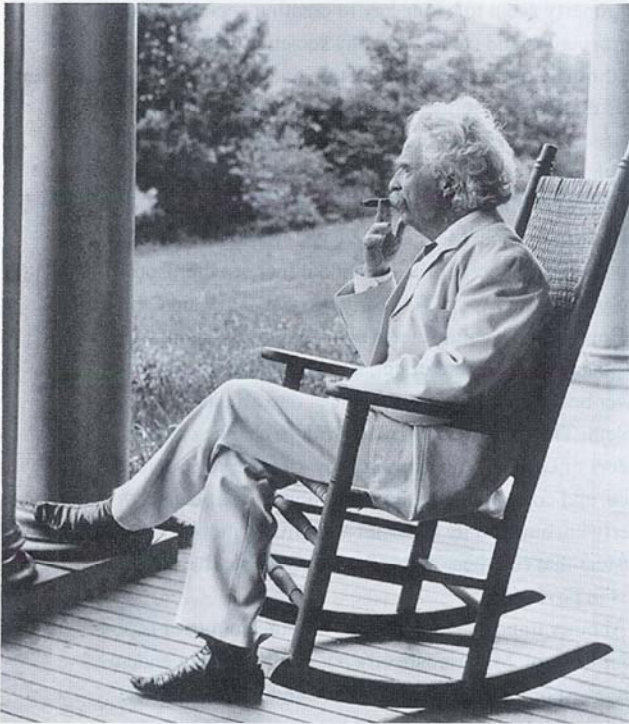


A Mark Twain Centennial

Celebrating the man who gave America its first voice.



This year marks a century since the death, on April 21, 1910, of the most American of American writers, Mark Twain. On the night before that passing, Halley's Comet shone in the skies as it made its closest approach to Earth. Just a year before, Mark Twain had said to a friend: "I came in with Halley's Comet in 1835. It is coming again next year, and I expect to go out with it.... The almighty has said, no doubt, 'Now here go these two unaccountable frauds; they came in together, they must go out together.' Oh! I am looking forward to that."

Just as Abraham Lincoln helped forge our identity as a truly united United States, Mark Twain gave a young nation a voice to sing of itself. His stories and essays are suffused with an unalloyed American folk poetry freed from the straitjacket of literary prose. Twain wrote in his notebook, "My works are like water. The works of the great masters are like wine. But everyone drinks water." Has any other writer ever tapped as deeply the easy grace and direct simplicity of American speech?

Twain held strong opinions about a passel of subjects, and he possessed the gift of being able to state these views in memorable ways: "It's better to keep your mouth shut and appear stupid than to open it and remove all doubt." "Be careful about reading health books. You may die of a misprint." "It's easy to give up smoking. I've done it many times." He also had a lot to say about style, literature, and the American language that he, more than any other writer, helped to shape:

On American English, compared with British English. The property has gone into the hands of a joint stock company, and we own the bulk of the shares.

On choosing words. The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.

More on word choice. A powerful agent is the right word: it lights the reader's way and makes it plain. A close approximation to it will answer, and much traveling is done in a well-enough fashion by its help, but we do not welcome it and applaud it and rejoice in it as we do when the right one blazes out on us. Whenever we come upon one of those intensely right words in a book or a newspaper the resulting effect is physical as well as spiritual, and electrically prompt: it tingles exquisitely around through the walls of the mouth and tastes as tart and crisp and good as the autumn-butter that creams the sumac-berry.

On style (in a letter to a 12-year-old boy). I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words, and brief sentences. That is the way to write English—it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it, and don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in.

When you catch an adjective, kill it. No, I don't mean utterly, but kill most of them—then the rest will be valuable. They weaken when they are close together. They give strength when they are wide apart.

On dictionaries. A dictionary is the most awe-inspiring of all books; it knows so much.... It has gone around the sun and spied out everything and lit it up.

On literature. A classic is something that everyone wants to have read, but nobody wants to read.

On reading. The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can't read them. 📖