

PROVIDENTIAL PASSAGE A BOOK REVIEW

By: Job Conger

Mark Twain: A Life

by Ron Powers

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hardbound, 722 pages with photographs—
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at Amazon - \$23.10

Most English majors remember professors' admonitions to write logically, stay on topic and to write every day if we hoped to be successful purveyors of the printed word. During or before those days, we read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and still today, connect the name Twain to a short story about a jumping frog out west. As I savor *Mark Twain: A Life*, I consider a minor crime, this mere cursory understanding of the man who was "Hunter S. Thompson" a century before that star-crossed comet passed by our world. In this two-part review of the book, I want to expand, in figurative dots and dashes, your understanding of the man and my appreciation of the author of this hefty, literary tome who, in his own way, exemplifies the Eastern establishment whose approbation Sam Clemens sought .

. . . and won.

In his wildly successful books and equally rewarding lecture touring, Mark Twain would depart established lines of thought to turn on a dime and interject points, not as stream of consciousness, but as seemingly inspired adlibbed interjections, all of it meticulously crafted into that apparent spontaneity.

His wife called him Youth in the many letters exchanged during and after the typically Victorian courtship. And in his perspective of his times, Clemens remained a "youth" as his affable outlook became increasingly burdened by disillusion.

The book begins with Clemens' unannounced 1869 visit to the offices of the Atlantic magazine in Boston to thank William Dean Howells for his positive review of his new book, *The Innocents Abroad*. With this flash forward technique, author Powers gives us a narrative "snapshot" of the new kid on the national block. He shows us the times: an age in which real "literature" meant what was written east of the Allegheny Mountains and north of Virginia. It was an age of Emerson and Longfellow. No Southern or Western

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Vintage Visions Uncorked!

By: Liz Huck

Join us at IMO's February 15 @ 7:00 p.m. for a very special evening – the long-awaited release of *Vintage Visions*!

The 2006 PWLF anthology celebrates the pleasures, perils, and inspiration of the fruit of the vine. You'll savor a heady bouquet of your Forum favorites, with a tantalizing overtone of new voices, all bottled in delectable cover art by Sam Davis.

After a brief open mic, *Vintage Visions* contributors will decant their poems and prose. We'll also celebrate

the uncorking with some special events:

Two bottles of wine, red and white, will be raffled off at \$1 a ticket. A free ticket to anyone who takes out or renews a PWLF membership that night.

Along with your copy of *Vintage Visions*, you can pick up a CD recorded at First Night Springfield 2006. Marcellus Leonard, Anita Stienstra, and others read poems for the New Year. The book and CD will be available for purchase as a package, as well

as separately – the perfect gift for any poetry fan on your list!

Mark your calendar now, and join us for the festivities!



BEFORE THE BLOG

"Commonplace-book. Formerly *Book of common places.* *orig.* A book in which 'commonplaces' or passages important for reference were collected, usually under general heads; hence, a book in which one records passages or matters to be especially remembered or referred to, with or without arrangement." From *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971. First usage recorded: 1578.

Several years ago when I realized how useless it was for me to make New Year's resolutions I couldn't keep (i.e. give up food) I decided to start resolving to do things I really liked doing but never allowed myself time for. Since then I've read a lot more books and planted a lot more flowers.

One habit I have tried to cultivate off and on is to keep a journal. But for some reason I find myself going great guns for a week and then nothing for six months. This year I've decided to begin keeping a Commonplace Book. Call it a blog for one, or a reader's diary, it somehow seems less intimidating (and less navel-gazing) than the journal. My understanding of the form was somewhat limited so I did a little research online and what follows is what I've found.

Commonplacing is the practice of entering literary excerpts and personal comments into a private journal, that is, into a commonplace book or, to use a 17th century synonym, a *silva rerum* ("a forest of things"). Typically the excerpts were regarded as exceptionally

...as such they are often especially quotable.

insightful or beautiful or as applicable to a variety of situations, and so as such they are often especially quotable.

Students with literary tastes, in days when books were hard to come by, kept 'commonplace' or notebooks into which they copied out verses or prose extracts that particularly appealed to them."

An early practitioner of reflective journaling was Thomas Jefferson. He would synopsise and capture the key points of his readings and add his own reflections, recording them in a journal which he called his 'commonplace book.' One of his biographers quoted Jefferson as saying 'I was in the habit of abridging and commonplacing what I read meriting it, and of sometimes mixing my own reflections on the subject.'



by: Corrine Frisch

One Medievalist says that commonplace books are a place we find women's writing in an era where there's less than we might like. With the availability of relatively cheap paper beginning as early as the 14th century, people began to collect knowledge in commonplace books. Bits of quotes, reference materials, summaries of arguments, all contained in a handy bound volume.

There are several commonplace books now being kept online, but I still like the feel of pen on paper. I find it ironic that a book devoted to the unusual or outstanding should be called commonplace. Just another example of the mystery of our language. I must remember to note that in my new (un)commonplace book.

NOMINATIONS FOR THE BOARD ARE DUE BY FEB. 24, 2006

THE LONG-SOUGHT NEUTER PRONOUN

By: Vicki Bamman

As writers, we've all bewailed the lack of a gender-neutral third-person singular pronoun in English. Linguist John McWhorter says that English already has the word we are looking for, and we use it all the time in informal speech and writing: they.

Grammar books and word scolds tell us that it doesn't make sense to use "they" for the third person singular because it is plural. He says "They is

singular as well as plural for the simple reason that...the language has changed and made it so." He points out that in English, "you" began as plural, with "thou" being the original second person singular form. "There were once indignant grammarians who decried the use of you in the singular as illogical." Today, however, thou is now relegated to the Bible and jocular imitations of archaic speech, while you is both plural

and singular."

So, there you have it: an authoritative voice who says you can write and speak the way you already do. The language has changed, and they can be used as a singular pronoun.

Source: John McWhorter, *The Word on the Street*(1998)

FEBRUARY 2006

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			1 Open Mic @ IMO's 7 p.m.	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15 Vintage Visions Uncorked! @ IMO's 7 p.m.	16	17	18
19	20 PWLF Board Meeting @ IMO's 6:30 p.m.	21	22	23	24 Nominations Due for PWLF Board	25
26	27	28				

MARCH 2006

Sun Mon Tue Wed Thu Fri Sat

			1 IMO's Open Mic @7 p.m.	2	3 NTM Deadline for submission	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15 Featured Reader - Nancy Ganguli IMO's@7 p.m.	16	17	18
19	20 PWLF Board Meeting @ IMO's 6:30 p.m.	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31 Ballots for Board Election must be postmark by today!	

PROVIDENTIAL PASSAGE

(Continued from page 1)

writer had made an impression with the Eastern intelligentsia until the name Mark Twain began circulating in the years before publication of his first book. By the time he headed east for the second time in his life, he had sculpted his writing with news and anonymous letters to editors, often stirring up the dust, for newspapers in California in the 60s. Many of his humorous takes about the people and places had also been published in the East where they reached many eager readers. His essays and style were known. They had set the table. The Innocents Abroad was the appetizer, and the New England shakers and movers ate it up.

For a Missouri kid, Boston was atmospheric territory. He was the only child of Marshall and Jane Clemens to succeed exceedingly. His father and older brother Orion proved chronically inept dreamers who never attained more than modest and temporary financial security for their families. Marshall died long before Sam showed promise of his ultimate career. His younger brother Henry died in late youth serving as a laborer on a Mississippi stern wheeler at the same time Sam was a certified riverboat pilot. Sister Pamela did okay.

By the side of Marshall's deathbed in 1847, Sam sobbed to his mother, "I'll promise anything if you

don't make me go back to school. Anything!" Jane made her conditions known and for some years, Sam made good his promise. In Hannibal, Sam learned the trade of typesetting and began writing for area newspapers. He could have found work for the rest of his life that way, but he wanted more. And he had to get out of Hannibal. At age 17 he traveled to New York City. He changed

Throughout his life Sam would write regularly to his family ...

trains in Springfield, "the closest he would ever come to Abraham Lincoln," Powers notes.

Throughout his life Sam would write regularly to his family and send support checks whenever possible. For two "halcyon" years he was a riverboat pilot, the top of the river travel profession chain. And though he left the river as the Civil War approached, the river never left him. He headed west, became a miner and never found his mother lode. He walked 120 miles to Virginia City and became a full-time writer for the first time in his life. They byline Mark Twain appeared for the first time in print February 3, 1863.

Powers shares the full context of the times surrounding the upstart writer. Where earlier books might have provided footnotes to obscure references, Powers fleshes it out so that we know the

man and his world.

Twain's first book began with a steamship voyage with 65, mostly high-middle-class Christians to the Holy Land by way of Europe. Twain, financed by a California newspapers commission, signed aboard as a minister. It was the first luxury cruise to be launched from the US. The inconsistency of the loftiest "saints" who thought nothing of breaking off pieces of classic buildings and ruins at holy sites grated on him (he called them vandals), and his reaction to such hypocrisy led to the book. The Innocents Abroad was a runaway success. The first half of his life (and this review) conclude with his marriage to Olivia Langdon, daughter of a wealthy New York industrialist. After settling into Hartford, CT, enjoying domestic tranquility (rare in his life) and a young son named after his father in law, Sam Clemens would navigate currents, eddies, sandbars and tides the rest of his life which made his riverboat life seem like a cake walk.

A synopsis of that life and concluding comments about how Ron Powers reveals Twain's tempestuous trek to 21st century readers follows next month.

Don't wait for next month. Run, don't walk, to your favorite book merchant and buy the book.

COMMITMENT AND ENERGY NEEDED

To nominate yourself for the PWLF Board, submit a nomination in writing, stating your qualifications and what benefit you bring to the forum leadership. The nominations will be, either in part or whole, printed in the March 2006 issue of PenChant. Include in your nomination letter, all information you believe necessary for the purpose of winning a position on the Board.

Deadline for submitting nominations is February 24, 2006. Send them via email to: sheehan_t@sbcglobal.net or snail mail to PWLF Election Committee, P.O. Box

5666, Springfield, IL 62705.

If you would like to nominate another member for a position on the board, you must first secure agreement from the nominee that he or she is willing and able to serve. Please include a statement in the nomination information you submit verifying that you have spoken with the nominee and they have agreed to serve, if elected. This is an opportunity for members to make their voice heard in the future and destiny of our organization. We need leaders who can continue to guide our efforts to increase support and appreciation of Literary Arts.

NTM Guidelines

Open to students grades six through twelve; Submit one to three poems or artwork; Include name, address, age, school, year in school, and contact information—(e-mail or phone number)

Mail to:
NTM, P.O. Box 202
Chatham, IL 62629

e-mail to:
navigatingthemaze@yahoo.com
Submission deadline March 3, 2006



Poets & Writers Literary Forum

P. O. Box 5666
Springfield, IL 62705

Email: submissions@pwlf.com

If you are interested in contributing to the PenChant, please contact any of the PWLF Board members.

It is through the contributions and energy of all that we are successful.

Your Forum needs strong leadership. Please either volunteer or encourage anyone you know with administrative skills to volunteer for the Board. Let's keep the Forum thriving.

PWLF

To increase awareness and appreciation of Literary Arts

CLASSIFIEDS

Poetry and Prose Wanted: . Information on deadlines and submission guidelines available at:

~ www.pwlf.com

~ www.pitchblackbooks.com

~ www.daybreakpoetry.com

Submit work today!

Poets & Writers Literary Forum of Springfield

Calendar of Events

Feb. 1st—7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Open Mic at IMO's

Feb. 15th—7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Vintage Vision Uncorked!

IMO's

March 1st—7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Open Mic at IMO's

March 15th—7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Featured Reader

Nancy Ganguli

IMO's

*Last Sunday of each month—
Poetry Parnassus @ Joe's to Go—South 6th Street 1 to 3 p.m.*



A Word or Two

By: Vicki Bamman

The dictionary is wonderfully full of wonderful words. Someone said that the dictionary is “the universe between covers.” I keep finding words that I didn't know existed, and they indicate the existence of worlds of knowledge and ideas that I haven't penetrated yet.

When I was looking at erudite, I found another wonderful word: *erumpent*, an adjective that means “bursting forth.” In botany, it is used for something that is “prominent, as if bursting through the epidermis.” With the political campaign season beginning, think of the usefulness of that word: the erumpent young candidate... the erumpent scandal....An erumpent scandal differs from a burgeoning one because the figurative meaning of burgeon is “to grow or develop rapidly, to flourish.” I imagine that an erumpent scandal would simply burst upon the world's headlines overnight. The word is related to “eruption,” and you know how sudden those can be. Remember St. Helen's, the beautiful, quiescent volcano that blew up unexpectedly one day.

I thought bumptious might be a synonym for erumpent, but it's not. While I was looking for bumptious, I came across buncombe, or bunkum which

means insincere talk, nonsense, or humbug. Bumptious means “unpleasantly forward or conceited; arrogant and quarrelsome.” Think of it: the bumptious boy bellowing bunkum. The erumpent politician can get away with bunkum but not with being bumptious.

Here's another word I found as I strolled through the dictionary: *bunbury*. Bunbury is obviously taken from Oscar Wilde's play, *The Importance of Being Ernest*, and means to travel for the pleasure of traveling or sightseeing. That's my kind of hobby. Now, hobby is another interesting word. It comes from *Hob*, a familiar form of the name *Rob*! Besides being a favorite pastime or topic of conversation, it is also a kind of horse. In the Middle Ages, there was a kind of species of falcon. A hobbyhorse is a hobby, or a toy horse, or a one-person horse costume. And here's my prize word: *hobbyhorsical*. It is used humorously, and means eccentric, full of whims. It describes perfectly my involvement with the dictionary!

There are thousands of words in a good dictionary, and looking up any word can be an adventure if you are in love with words.