



The Autobiography of Mark Twain

Mark Twain, Charles Neider

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Mark Twain's autobiography is a classic of American letters, to be ranked with the autobiographies of Benjamin Franklin and Henry Adams.... It has the marks of greatness in it--style, scope, imagination, laughter, tragedy."--From the Introduction by Charles Neider

Mark Twain was a figure larger than life: massive in talent, eruptive in temperament, unpredictable in his actions. He crafted stories of heroism, adventure, tragedy, and comedy that reflected the changing America of the time, and he tells his own story--which includes sixteen pages of photos--with the same flair he brought to his fiction. Writing this autobiography on his deathbed, Twain vowed to be "free and frank and unembarrassed" in the recounting of his life and his experiences. Twain was more than a match for the expanding America of riverboats, gold rushes, and the vast westward movement, which provided the material for his novels and which served to inspire this beloved and uniquely American autobiography.

The Autobiography of Mark Twain Details

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From Reader Review The Autobiography of Mark Twain for online ebook

Hannah Cook says

When it was good it was very very good but when it was bad it was boring af.

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Hadrian says

I'd give this 4.5 stars if I could.

Incredibly humorous and charming, as is natural of Twain. Very many interesting anecdotes about his life and encounters with the figures of his time. Many timeless observations throughout. Also a refreshing format for a biography, he just talks about whatever pleases him at the time. The only problem is for such an enormous book, I was expecting a lot more which was devoted to the actual autobiography. The scraps and notes are still worth looking at, though.

Larry Bassett says

This is NOT the Mark Twain Post 100 years Autobiography that everyone is talking about. This book was copyrighted in 1959 by the editor Charles Neider. The 2010 Autobiography of Mark Twain. Vol. 1 is found elsewhere on GRs.

Neider's most important book, however, was arguably The Autobiography of Mark Twain (1959), in which he fashioned a chronological structure that was lacking in the original material and included never-before-published passages. Certainly the most widely read version of Mark Twain's autobiographical writings, that book has played a major role in shaping the public image of Mark Twain the man. Source: <http://faculty.citadel.edu/leonard/js...>

This 1959 version is hardly an autobiography in the born-lived-died sense. In fact, it took me about 50 pages before I figured out that I was going to be disappointed if I continued to look for that kind of an autobiography. This book is really a series of short stories told as if a Mark Twain impersonator was standing up in front of you on stage. With Mark Twain it is always hard to figure out when he is telling the truth. His name is even fiction. His speaking style is often as if he is telling a story. Twain tells stories about his years on the lecture circuit traveling the U.S. and the world telling stories. He is known as an amazing storyteller.

If this was a book of short stories and that was what I was looking for, I would probably give this book three stars. But I was looking for something a little more like an autobiography. I thought that it developed more of a coherent whole feeling toward the end. More like one big connected story rather than a random selection of short stories. I am wondering how the new 2010 autobiography will handle my quest to read something about the life and times of Mark Twain; maybe it will have to be a biography. Please let it not be Wikipedia!

Lavinia says

Most of it is funny. And it's frustrating when, compared to Twain, I'm leading an incredibly dull life. Everything that is interesting, funny, outrageous, supernatural & all seems to happen to him. And oh, the envy on his wittiness!

In some parts, it's touchy. Not only the episodes about his mother and brother (characters in his books – Sid and Aunt Polly, for those who remember), but especially the memories about his wife and daughters. Susy's biography, written when she was about 14 (have no idea if it ever got to be published) is at the same time, funny, objective and delicate.

In some smaller parts it's boring – consider the episodes about his troubles with business partners, copyrights a.s.o. But then again, family comes into sight, with focus on his wife, Olivia, an extremely determined woman, who always found a way to get out of financial problems.

Chip Walter says

I'm not sure this is a book that you read cover to cover. It's more like a Mark Twain smorgasbord. Twain wanted to make sure that his autobiography wasn't predictable. So it doesn't unfold in any well ordered way which is fine. It really is just a series of reminiscences, anecdotes, tales and memories. The differences that it's Mark Twain who is telling the stories. So in almost every case not only are they fascinating because they are about him and about his life, but because they are being told to you by a master. So I didn't try to read this page 1 to the very end. Instead I dipped into it from time to time before I went to sleep, got hold up a great story, a vivid memory, and hilarious anecdote, and then I went off to sleep with Mark Twain's voice in my head. It reminded me in some ways of listening to my grandfather tell me stories about his life whenever I was a 10-year-old. I wasn't sure all the stories were true, but he didn't really care, because they were great. So to anyone who loves Mark Twain this is something you want to have near your bed table, or on your library shelf, to be returned to and visited often like an old friend.

Roof Beam Reader (Adam) says

Painful and wonderful.

Read the full review:

<http://classiclit.about.com/od//fl/Th...>

Brian Flatt says

Ok, I have decided to mete out the 5 stars sparingly. The rating wouldn't mean much if it was given to just any old book that I happened to like.

This book though, is without a doubt, one of those few that actually deserves more than 5 stars and it is therefore one of my favorite books of all time.

Why?

Well, I think there are some books that you read and you think, upon closing the last page, "Hmmm, that was a pretty good book", but then if asked about it a few days later you might be hard pressed to remember much if anything about it. Other books you read, they affect you, they touch your life, your heart, your soul, and you are changed, a different person afterwards. I have not read too many of those books.

When people are asked to name the books that have changed their lives, I'm always amused at those whose lists are long. My list is short and this one is on the short list.

I absolutely fell in love with Mark Twain and his autobiography. It is even more interesting when you realize

that Mark Twain never actually wrote an autobiography. What he did write were a grab bag assortment of small books and personal anecdotes, with the intention of someone else compiling it after his death into an autobiography. That is why each version will be slightly different. This is not the version that I read, but Amazon did not have a photo of it, so I chose this one.

I was just so taken in by the humanity of Mark Twain, his was an American life to be sure, but it was more than that. He was a living human being, much more than just one of America's, the world's, most beloved authors. He was also a son, a brother, a husband, a father, a friend. He was all of those and more. He lived the ups and downs of life. He lived through more than his fair share of tragedy and yet in the end, he was never beaten by life's circumstances. He stayed true to who he was. He stayed forever and inimitably, Mark Twain. He laughed, he cried, he was happy, and he was sad. In the end he was supremely human, not a perfect human being, and his flaws are readily apparent.

This was one of the few books that I have read where I actually had tears streaming down my face when I closed the last page.

From his early boyhood, to the many tragedies in his life, all the way up to the end when he lost his daughter and his wife, this book was incredibly poignant. You couldn't help loving this man even more and being sad that we have no equivalent of Mark Twain today. He died himself the following year after his daughter Jean died and the world has been the worse off ever since.

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Jill says

I enjoyed this so much. It is a completely unconventional bio, and the introduction is extremely interesting and helpful in understanding the book's structure: it doesn't have one. As Twain remembered things, he wrote them. They were to be published in the order of composition. I like this. It helps it read more like a journal. There were some really tragic accounts. I think saddest of all are the accounts of the deaths of his children - most especially his infant. His daughters seem to be remarkable people - all of them. The accounts of the vast mounts of money he made and lost and his extensive travel make for a fascinating read in and of themselves. Add to that Twain's trademark tongue-in-cheek humor, and it is a whole lot of fun. I would love to go back and read this after becoming intimately familiar with all his work, because he tells about people upon whom many of his characters were based, and I thought that a lot of fun. Kind of like meeting the characters in real life. I wouldn't call this profound necessarily, but it is certainly very enjoyable and there are many nuggets scattered about it. Great stuff!

Christian says

An extraordinary life and book. This book was dictated in the final years of his life, and I felt like I was sitting in front of Mark Twain and hearing him tell me his story as a friend would. I laughed and got choked up multiple times as I read about his triumphs, misadventures, and losses. It was very interesting to see how many famous stories of his were directly taken from his own life or the lives of those he knew. The structure is unlike any other autobiography I've read, as it follows a generally chronological timeline, but deviates from this course at will and occasionally breaks up the narrative with excerpts from letters and diaries. A fascinating book for any fan of Twain or American history.

John Wiswell says

Why read anyone else on Mark Twain when you can read his own words? Twain was brutally honest, devoting entire chapters to times of personal loss and failure. He covers one particular night when he bombed at a lecture, showing no particular ego. In another he covers the night his brother died with savage emotional honesty. He explains as many aspects of his own development as he can think of, from growing cold in learning the ways of literature, to growing up on the Mississippi, to his spiritual beliefs, to his extremely critical political beliefs. Most of it is witheringly funny and all of it is worthwhile and insightful, casting out on all possible topics, even ones he wasn't comfortable publishing about in his own day. That's why this book contains chapters only released after his death - some decades after. The best bit is that there are still things he wasn't ready to share, not until a hundred years had gone by. By this manner he gets the last laugh, but by this book you'll know what he's laughing about.

Tortla says

I read a selection of chapters actually published (in periodical form) during his life, which was quite heavy on the excerpts from his daughter's biography of him. A conceit that made for this humorist's story, full of satirical and joking anecdotes as it was, surprisingly heartfelt and full of little meditations on mortality (not just his daughter's death at twenty-four, but quite a few other references to friends lost). While still teeming with Twain's trademark wit, of course. It was sweet.

One star off for not rising above prejudices of the time (or at least implicitly accepting racial and gender status quo). And for the unabashed egotism--not of the giant autobiography itself, though I'd never have the gall to write such a vast, unedited thing, but of the overbearing and self-important character he admits to in his descriptions of himself.

Susan Branch says

I started crying from happiness at about page two. When I finished this book, Joe and I got in the car and drove directly to his house in Hartford CT and I cried all the way through that too. He is wonderful, brilliant, genius. Learning about his life from his own pen felt like a gift. From him, I've gleaned tiny informative bits to add to my mental notes on "how to write."

Cathy Wacksman says

Mark Twain is an exceptional writer and this autobiography is worth reading. He expounded a bit much on some of the people he describes, thus making it more of a story than a strict autobiography. The loss of his children and wife were sad to learn.

Kathryn says

I ought to have read through this much faster and less thoroughly since I was looking specifically for musical references while researching a Twain-themed library music program, but I couldn't help but read through most of it, especially towards the beginning. Yes, Twain constantly rambles into miscellaneous musings but those musings are often pure gold, skillfully rendered with often gut-splittingly hilarity.

He was an international celebrity at this point who didn't have to write anything except exactly what he wanted to and what seems to have fascinated him most were individuals from his past, both the obscure (such as citizens of Hannibal) and the great (such as Ulysees S. Grant, who Twain admired and Bret Hart, who he despised).

The descriptions of his boyhood held the most appeal for me and he waxes incredibly lyrical when describing scenes and people from this epoch of his life.

Amelmag says

I defy anyone to read this book and not to love this man. He is witty beyond measure, but it is a gentle humor in the end. The humor of a man who lived life sincerely and felt things deeply. A man of deep wisdom and deeper compassion. It is a self-deprecating humor (for his wisdom is the wisdom of Socrates -- the kind that recognizes its own limitations, its own folly). It is the humor of a man who loved life well, and saw in it, always, something of majesty and mystery and delight.

I don't know that I would have wanted to read this book, rather than having listened to it, for it is true that there is little of organization or continuity. But what matters that, when you are having a conversation (rambling, disjointed, marvelous), with such a man?

"Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them; for he was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset; and knowing that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as have the malady in less attractive forms. His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him." -Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

May says

Striking: his use of chiasmus (crossing of terms in one sentence). For instance: "When I was younger I could remember anything, whether it had happened or not; but my faculties are decaying now and soon I shall be so I cannot remember any but the things that never happened. It is sad to go to pieces like this but we all have to do it" (p. 4). Well, that's high lit and philosophy, all packaged with one powerful sense of humor, plus a touch of teasing. Worse part is that I do feel that way about not remembering right--so he's able to touch me at a very vulnerable spot as well.

Another is: "Perhaps no bread in the world is quite so good as Southern corn bread and perhaps no bread in

the world is quite so bad as the Northern imitation of it" (p. 5). Wow! I read Tom Sawyer (in French...) as a girl, and I see now why I liked it quite a bit. This is good stuff.

I finished this autobiography 2 weeks ago. It was a difficult read, because the format is so chopped up: it takes work to get into a piece, and before you know it, the piece is over and you have to work into a new one. BUT, it was not a finished work, Mark Twain dictated a lot of it toward the end of his life, and it was pieced together after his death. So, lower your expectations if you decide to get intimate with a pretty unusual person. 4 stars because it does not stand as a whole.

There are lots of "jewels" in those pieces: stories of his childhood, like the one of the frozen Mississippi (48-49) and the mesmerizer (66-76) which provides life-long munching material (and great topic to discuss with your teenager during a car drive). Loads of intricate thoughts put into striking forms, like: "As a rule, technicalities of a man's vocation and figures and metaphors drawn from it slip out in his talk and reveal his trade; but if this ever happened in Macfarlane's case I was none the wiser, although I was constantly on the watch during half a year for those very betrayals." This is a great thought: to listen to images used by someone to guess who they are. It's funny too, because it did not work in this case, and Mark Twain is the butt of what has become a joke (isn't it so funny to imagine him working so hard for 6 months with no results?).

Mark Twain ends his autobiography with the death of his daughter Jean (he asked his editor to do so if he thought it appropriate). He also shares the death of his wife and other daughter Suzy. There is little literary value and no humor in those final pieces, and it leaves you with a heavy heart that pain could strip this man of his spirit. Nice though (and reassuring...) that such a vivacious scoundrel could love his wife and their daughters with such dedication until death!

Eric says

Mark Twain on "the Thing Called an Authors' Reading"

"I think that [Thursday afternoon at Vassar] was the first exploitation of a new and devilish invention—the thing called an Authors' Reading. This witch's Sabbath took place in a theatre, and began at two in the afternoon. There were nine readers on the list, and I believe I was the only one who was qualified by experience to go at the matter in a sane way. I knew, by my old acquaintanceship with the multiplication table, that nine times ten are ninety, and that consequently the average of time allowed to each of these readers should be restricted to ten minutes. There would be an introducer, and he wouldn't understand his business—this disastrous fact could be counted upon as a certainty. The introducer would be ignorant, windy, eloquent, and willing to hear himself talk. With nine introductions to make, added to his own opening speech—well, I could not go on with these harrowing calculations; I foresaw that there was trouble on hand."
— Mark Twain, The Autobiography, Volume 1

Virgilio says

“In this Autobiography I shall keep in mind that I am speaking from the grave. I am literally speaking from the grave, because I shall be dead when the book issues from the press”(Twain xxxv).

The Autobiography of Mark Twain explores the many aspects and anecdotes of Mark Twain's life, as well as the many people who influenced Twain and his work immensely. He reveals his personal thoughts of the people around him, and the world around him. He reveals himself as a person who writes what he knows, as many of his beloved characters are based off of people he has known. Since the topic of the book is on his own life, it was very rich and full of detail. This is an exhilarating read, and is easily one of the best books I have read.

Mr. Twain had led very rich and full life, which increase the quality of the piece itself. He goes from having a very incomplete education to having a honorary degree from Oxford University. He's narrowly avoided death by duel, and faces hardship in the forms of massive debt. He is surrounded by loving family members and greedy publishers. He meets many famous people, including President Ulysses S. Grant, who asked Twain for his help when writing his autobiography.

What struck me about this book was that, at the middle of the book, I started to treat it not as a boring biography but as an immersive and interesting story. He presents the events of his life with certain flair. For example, when Twain and a fellow author talk about Twain's private politics:

“Some days afterward I met her again for a moment and she gave me the startling information that she had written down everything I said, just as I said it, without any softening and purifying modifications... She begged me to let her publish.. but I said it would damn me before my time and I don’t wish to be useful to the world on such expensive conditions. (467) ”

However, the writing is a bit sporadic, as he tends to switch from an event from his early childhood to an event later in life. For example, he jumps from talking about his father's style of cooking potatoes, to a feast that is being hosted by the Emperor of Germany. Although he is able to make it flow very well most of the time, it can become a hassle rereading notes trying to understand what was going on.

Mark Twain's presentation of his own life is vivid and full. Though his writing was chaotic at times, the Twain flair makes the chaos more exciting, more lively than an ordinary autobiography. Its dynamic presentation, although exciting, can break the pacing of the book. Also, some points of his life by themselves seem mundane. However, in the end, the strengths of *The Autobiography of Mark Twain* highlights this book as an exciting read.

Yomna Suwaïdan says

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