

## Spring Rain and Mark Twain

Donald R. Frey, MD

Originally published in Dr. Frey's blog "A Family Doctor Looks at the World."

<https://afamilydoctorlooksattheworld.com>

Without getting into details, I've had to deal with some health issues this past month. I haven't written a damn thing.

Any Midwesterner can tell you that once you've lived through a drought, those first drops of rain that hit your face feel so good they almost make you dizzy. So it is with writing, I guess. I don't know when I'll write again. But right now, it feels pretty good.

My home state of Missouri has produced an array of authors. Langston Hughes, T.S. Eliot, Tennessee Williams, Dick Gregory, and of course, Chuck Berry. Most came from the more cultured Eastern side of the Show-Me State. My own Northwestern corner, in contrast, is better known for Harry Truman, Walter Cronkite, and everyone's favorite outlaws, the James boys.

But of all the Missourians who ever touched their pen to a page, none could really hold a candle to Samuel Clemens, aka Mark Twain.

Volumes have been written about Twain. They sit alongside the volumes he himself wrote. There's no need to recapitulate his life here. Suffice it to say he ranged from Hannibal, Missouri to Nevada to California to Connecticut to New York and eventually throughout the world. From the time he could walk, he soaked up everything he saw. And in his work, he spilled it all out like a flood.

He wrote compulsively, page after page. Editing carefully, he never minced words, but never strung them out either. In language as plain as worn denim and manure-stained boots, he threw the world at his readers. The joy and the pain. The humor and the tragedy. The humane and the inhumane. The racism and the kindness. The people who were beaten down and the people who were incredibly wealthy for no other reason than just being lucky as hell.

Yes, he made damn good money doing it. Much of it he blew. But in the end, he was someone who simply had to write.

And all of it in longhand, thousands of words each day. As he aged, his dominant right arm became so arthritic he could barely use it. So he forced himself to learn to write with his left.

Faulkner called him the Father of American Literature. Hemmingway went further. "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*," he declared. "It's the best book

we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since."

And Twain did it all with no formal training in the art of writing. No classes in literature. No creative writing courses. He was forced to drop out of school in the fifth grade to support his family. All he could do was devour every book he could get his hands on.

He's often remembered for a sarcastic wit that could make you fall out of your chair. But beneath it all, was the pain of someone who'd seen tragedy after tragedy after tragedy.

"The source of all humor," he wrote, "is not laughter, but sorrow."

He hated racists, colonialists, and imperialists. He raged against the Spanish-American War. He insisted Teddy Roosevelt was a bag of hot air, who didn't do nearly enough to reign in turn-of-the-century Wall Street financiers.

His words could cut down the high and mighty like a scythe through ripe wheat. "What if I were an idiot?" he once asked. "And what if I were a member of Congress? But I repeat myself."

Later it was "First God made idiots. Then he made School Boards."

Wouldn't he have a field day with those two institutions today.

The human ego was likewise his target, as was religious pomposity. "I believe the only reason God created man was because he was disappointed with the monkey," he quipped.

He travelled to Hawaii, and couldn't understand why Christian missionaries couldn't just leave the Islanders alone. In Australia, India, and South Africa, he was outraged at how Europeans treated native peoples. "Man is the only animal that loves his neighbor as himself, and then cuts his throat if his theology isn't straight," he grumbled.

In what many consider the greatest novel ever written, a young boy named Huckleberry Finn rafts down the Mississippi River with a runaway slave named Jim. Over time, they bond, and Huckleberry learns the reason Jim has run away—he learned that he was about to be sold down river, and possibly separated forever from his wife and daughter.

Jim misses his wife and daughter terribly and worries about their future. The pain is so powerful Jim sometimes cries himself to sleep at night. He's determined to somehow gain his freedom, find a job, and save enough money to buy his family out of bondage.

But Huckleberry is terrified by what his religious upbringing has taught him. Preachers in Missouri insisted that slavery was ordained by the Almighty, and to assist a runaway slave was sure to bring about the wrath of God. Hell and damnation would be waiting.

This makes Huck tremble. An eternity in hell? He's torn as to what to do. Finally, while Jim is sleeping, Huck

writes out a letter to give to the authorities explaining that Jim is a runaway.

But after the most intense soul-searching a young boy can do, Huck makes his decision. He tears up the letter, and refuses to betray Jim. In what may be the most profound seven words ever written, Huck says simply, "All right, then, I'll go to hell."

In an era of hypocrisy, extreme nationalism, and wild-eyed religiosity, how many today would have the courage and insight of that scruffy kid from Missouri?

Since his death, Twain has been both praised and

scorned, his books sometimes promoted and too often banned. He's been called a saint, a sage, and a genius by some and a scoundrel, a blasphemer, and a hypocrite by others.

But through it all, his words still stand. Plain, often unsophisticated, sometimes vulgar, and frequently uncomfortable. Just like he was.

We could only wish that another like him would emerge at time when this world needs them most.

And if any of you would like to respond, and have your own favorite quote(s) by Twain to add, feel free to do so.