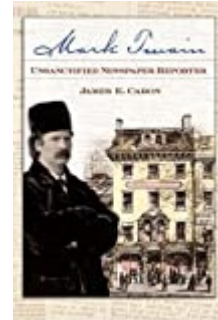


James Edward Caron. *Mark Twain: Unsanctified Newspaper Reporter*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008. xiv + 448 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1802-5.



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The Show Must Go On: Mark Twain and Journalism

The phrase might sound more elegant in French, but the English version suffices: “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” *Mark Twain: Unsanctified Newspaper Reporter* effectively demonstrates how and why Samuel Clemens became a writer with lasting merit. As author James Edward Caron develops his themes about Clemens’s literary alter ego, Mark Twain, and his comic performance within the confines of journalism, anyone who has the challenge of teaching college journalism, history, or related disciplines will have an “ah-ha” moment of clarity about the popularity and contemporary entertainment value of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*. The style and substance of those news entertainment television programs mirror the comedic techniques employed during the early newspaper career of Clemens between 1862 and 1867, a time that includes the creative evolution of the pen name Mark Twain as a comic literary device.

Caron’s study also foreshadows the future success of Twain’s popular, book-length projects by tracing Clemens’s literary birth and the evolution of his writ-

ing style through his travel letters and his newspapering exploits in Nevada and California. The book develops discussion points and issues of importance for various readers—journalists, writers, editors, scholars, Twain enthusiasts.

Many journalists, writers, and editors have developed their literary voices and writing competence through early careers as newspaper reporters and columnists. To survive the demands of reporting and editing, they quickly learn to balance exacting information-gathering skills with the desires of their various audiences for creativity. Such was the situation for Clemens as he both honed and discarded journalistic practices. Caron skillfully presents a critical debate by comparing and contrasting the artistry of literary writing and the marketplace requirements of journalistic writing. In fact, Caron’s title is derived from the fact that Clemens dubbed himself an “unsanctified newspaper reporter” (p. 105).

Scholars, too, must analyze writing techniques

within the context of popular culture and history. Caron extensively references previous studies of Twain while offering his own perspective about the early years of Clemens's writing career. He indicates that "a thorough examination of the contemporary context undermines long-accepted tenets of Mark Twain scholarship" and concludes that Clemens's connection to the comic tradition of the Old Southwest has been overstated or "misstated" (p. 8). As he applies this premise to the humorous short story "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog," Caron notes that a tension between art ("high brow") and commerce ("low brow") existed in the periodical marketplace of the time. Clemens did not submit the tale about betting on a jumping frog contest for publication in the elite *Californian* in 1865 because the publication, with its editorial policy advocating quality (not quantity), reflected Clemens's higher "literary aspirations" (p. 217).

Caron further provides literary scholars understanding regarding the use of a pseudonym as a literary device to create comic laughter. He writes in his prologue that "Mark Twain was no more—and no less—than the vehicle by which Sam Clemens expressed his comic genius" (p. 3). As scholars know, however, the use of the pseudonym was somewhat complicated because Twain could be both a narrator and a comic character in his stories.

And, of course, the book provides Twain enthusiasts with examination of some of the early and largely neglected writings and travel letters published under the byline of Mark Twain. Caron particularly focuses on analysis of the travel letters from Hawaii and the letters chronicling Clemens's 1866 trip from California to New York City. At the same time, however, Caron does not pad the book by delivering Twain's writings on a wholesale basis. Often, the reader will need to source the actual Twain piece elsewhere to compare with Caron's narrative—an arrangement that prompts a not-unwelcome interaction between reader and text.

Another note about organization: Caron structures the book in the format of a play with "Acts" and "Scenes" instead of chapter groupings. This unusual display of content emphasizes Caron's contention that Clemens, despite the moniker of newspaperman, served up entertainment and used the name "Mark Twain" to exploit the "theatricality of everyday life" (p. 395). Twain provided Clemens the artistic license to mix fact and fiction. And Caron traces the evolution of Twain's writing on a spectrum that reaches a final category of "reporting yarns" or outright hoaxes (p. 135).

Caron effectively achieves his goal of profiling the

early phase of Clemens's professional writing career—the time prior to Twain's debut on a national scale with the 1869 publication of best-selling *The Innocents Abroad*. And although much of Clemens's talent as a writer developed by practice, he also observed and was influenced by the craft of others. Caron contributes to the scholarship about Twain by contrasting and comparing the writing of Clemens alongside several of his contemporaries—and competitors. In particular, Caron presents California writer Charles H. Webb as the "best model of a comic writer" with whom Clemens would have been familiar (p. 227).

From July 1863 until the following May, Webb wrote a series called "Things" for the respected *Golden Era* literary magazine. He then transferred the column to his literary weekly, the *Californian* (for which Clemens eventually wrote). Webb commented upon society through a humorous persona, "Inigo." Caron assessed that Webb had "the ability to explicate what he observes and thus to provide the expected sociological, psychological, or moralistic depth to social events and people's behavior" (p. 228). It might be noted here that the first three letters signed "Mark Twain" were written from Carson City and published in Nevada's *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise* on February 3, 5, and 8, 1863 (p. 110). Yet, as Caron documents, "Clemens brewed his initial Mark Twain character from a series of comic experiments" based upon the literary tradition of using narrators and comic characters (p. 116). Even his use of a pen name had precedent. When Clemens first arrived in Nevada and began working in the silver mines, he submitted a few comic letters signed "Josh" to the *Territorial Enterprise* (p. 101).

So, within the context of the culture's literary heritage, it was Webb who helped Clemens solve the problem of having Twain be both "dramatized vehicle and spokesman" for the satire "Whereas," the telling of a supposed letter from a young woman about her travails in being engaged to an accident-prone fellow. When Clemens reprinted this piece in 1867 in *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches*, the problem had been solved. Webb had eliminated the first section and retitled the piece "Aurelia's Unfortunate Man" (p. 244).

Still, for all of his own talent, Webb distinguished and elevated the writing of Clemens. On November 3, 1865, Webb wrote in the *Sacramento Union*: "To my thinking, Shakespeare [sic] had no more idea that he was writing for posterity than Mark Twain has at the present time, and it sometimes amuses me to think how future Mark

Twain scholars will puzzle over that gentleman's present (p. 393).
hieroglyphics and occasionally eccentric expressions (p. 393). Wherever he is, consider Webb still amused.

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