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FEDERALLY INSPECTED

Author's anniversary
Twain worth rediscovering

By Bill Allen
Senior Reporter

Mark Twain was born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in 1835, a year in which Halley's Comet could be seen streaking across the evening sky. He died in 1910, the next time that well-known comet made its appearance, just as he predicted.

Toward the end of this year Halley's Comet will make its next appearance for the first time since the death of the great American writer. What better time than this to reacquaint oneself with a writer able to capture the "essence of the American spirit?"

1885 is also Twain's 150th birthday, the 100th anniversary of the publication of "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," and the 75th anniversary of Twain's death.

Too often when you read a book review it urges you to buy or not buy the new book based on its merits, and the whole of commercialism sometimes taints your impression of the review. This is certainly not the case here. Any educated American has heard of Mark Twain and probably has some idea of his work.

REVIEW **BLOK**

The names Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn conjure up some kind of image for most of us, and many have read at least something written by Twain. So the advertising gimmick of "something new" isn't the goal of this review.

It takes no money to steep your mind in Twain, as almost any library has several copies of his work. The Bennet Martin Library at 14th and N streets has at least three copies of "The Complete Short Stories of Mark Twain," as well as a large supply of his other works.

Reacquainting oneself with Mark Twain is kind of like reacquainting oneself with America. His humor, sometimes dark satire, sometimes side-splitting slapstick alone makes the books and short stories worth reading. Then, as one becomes involved in the deeper meanings of a masterpiece like "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," you realize there is so much more to his writing than first meets the eye.

As one critic said when comparing Twain with another great American, Abraham Lincoln, "It wasn't only what they had to say, but also the way they said it."

The humor of Twain is universal and timeless, and often contains some underlying comments about human nature. Take for instance this anecdote related first hand to Twain critic Owen Wister, and retold in his "An Homage To Mark



Tony Schappough/Daily Nebraskan

Twain."

"A missionary preached that morning. His voice was beautiful. He told of the sufferings of the natives, he pleaded for help with such moving simplicity that Mark Twain mentally doubled the 50 cents he had intended to put in the plate. As the address proceeded, describing so pitifully the misery of the savages, the dollar in his mind gradually rose to five. A little farther along, the missionary had him crying. He felt that all the cash he carried about him would be insufficient and decided to write a large check.

"And then that preacher went on," said Mark Twain, suddenly whirling at me and coming to standstill, and falling into a drawl, "went on about the dreadful state of those natives. I abandoned the idea of the check. And he went on. And when the plate came around — I took 10 cents out of it."

That kind of humor and insight is exactly the kind people expect of Twain, as when he said, "Everybody is talking about the weather, but nobody seems to do anything about it."

UNL associate professor of English Robert Bergstrom said part of Twain's lasting appeal is that he is "realistic, and not just in the technical sense. His

characters had the sound and feel of a real person. And people are always going to be interested in people, that's never going to change. When you read Mark Twain you feel like you're reading about a living, breathing person.

"The comments he made about society are applicable to situations you could find yourself in today," he said.

Bergstrom, who taught an American humor class where he used Twain, said, "He covers the full range of both human frailties . . . and human goodness."

"Huckleberry Finn" is one of Twain's best-known works and professor Charles Stubblefield, who teaches a class on Twain, said the book should be read as an adult book.

"If you read it as a child," he said, "go back and read it as an adult."

He said many have called it America's greatest novel.

Ernest Hemingway said that "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called 'Huckleberry Finn.'"

Stubblefield said an important reason for Twain's continuing success is that he is timely.

"The things that he was satirizing — the social problems like corruptive influences of power and the misuse of power are still timely today," he said.

One other issue that crops up when discussing Twain is racism. Is "Huckleberry Finn" a racist book?

Bergstrom doesn't think so.

"My personal opinion is that the book isn't racist — it's easy for an Anglo to say that — but I've thought about this a great deal," he said. "The parts that could be considered racist come out of the characters themselves. Twain wants readers to understand the limits of the people talking."

Bergstrom used the example of Huck Finn talking to a woman about an explosion. She asked him if anyone was hurt. Huck replied, no ma'am, just a nigger. She never blinked, Bergstrom said, and said something to the effect that, well that's good, because sometimes people do get hurt in those kind of things.

"Twain is very deliberate in showing her limitations," he said, "and it isn't racist on his part."

Twain was not racist, in the same way Abraham Lincoln was not, but many of Twain's characters certainly were. In the context of his time and writing, Twain was fairer to blacks than any of his contemporaries, almost radically so. He at least saw blacks as human beings — with feelings, emotions, worth, and dreams — and that was something many of his characters and contemporaries couldn't say.

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