

## Mark Twain: The Gift of Humor

By Harold H., Jr. Kolb

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Mark Twain is America's—perhaps the world's—best known humorous writer. Yet many commentators in his time and our own have thought of humor as merely an attractive surface feature rather than a crucial part of both the meaning and the structure of Twain's writings. This book begins with a discussion of humor, and then demonstrates how Twain's artistic strategies, his remarkable achievements, and even his philosophy were bound together in his conception of humor, and how this conception developed across a forty-five year career.

Kolb shows that Twain is a writer whose lifelong mode of perception is essentially humorous, a writer who sees the world in the sharp clash of contrast, whose native language is exaggeration, and whose vision unravels and reorganizes our perceptions. Humor, in all its mercurial complexity, is at the center of Mark Twain's talent, his successes, and his limitations. It is as a humorist—amiably comic, sharply satiric, grimly ironic, simultaneously humorous and serious—that he is best understood.

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## Editorial Review

### Review

In *Mark Twain: The Gift of Humor*, Kolb has assumed the Herculean task of providing a comprehensive study of the core of Twain's lasting attraction to readers over the course of the last 150 years, his understanding of, and incorporation of a depth of understanding of humor far surpassing that of his contemporary 'phunny phellows,' and many of our twenty-first century practitioners. That he has succeeded in his mission must be regarded as nothing less than an astounding achievement, one which renders this work worthy of including in the library of every serious student of Twain. It can confidently be concluded that *Mark Twain: The Gift of Humor* is the benchmark on the subject against which any forthcoming attempts will be measured for the next century. (*Mark Twain Forum*)

At a time when most literary critics are as giddy as teenagers to embrace the latest intellectual fad, Kolb's magisterial 500-page study around the disarmingly uncontroversial claim that Mark Twain was, first and last, a humorist.... There are so many highlights in Kolb's discussion that a reviewer is helpless to do more than gesture toward some of the book's more surprising episodes.... If a single image emerges from Kolb's panoramic study, it would be that of Mark Twain as an 'amiable' humorist, a writer whose innate sense of disparity fostered a profoundly sympathetic vision of human beings and the world they inhabit. There are many interpretive treasures in this book. (*American Literary Realism*)

### About the Author

**Harold H. Kolb Jr.** is emeritus professor of American literature at the University of Virginia, where he was the founding director of the American Studies Program and the Center for the Liberal Arts. His writings include articles and monographs on American literature, American history, humor, composition, legal writing, natural history, and education.

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