

## The Life of Mark Twain: The Early Years, 1835-1871

**Gary Scharnhorst**

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Mark Twain famously spent his later years writing his autobiography, which per his instructions was published a full century after his death, but he always spun stories about his life with varying degrees of accuracy. In the lengthy and thorough *The Life of Mark Twain*, veteran author Gary Scharnhorst tries to separate fact from fiction. It is a thorough study of the humorist's formative period.

Scharnhorst utilizes a range of sources in his text, quoting extensively from Twain's writing, published interviews, letters, and news accounts to retell how Samuel Clemens grew up and began his career. He questions Twain's official accounts, by pointing out either errors in timelines or inconsistencies, and links formative experiences in the author's life to characters and events featured in his later work. At times, this work can drift into psychological supposition, but most of it ably fleshes out the life story of an important American.

Along with its scholarly evaluation of Twain's life, the book doubles as a well-researched retelling of his early years. It's eventful, colorful material, and Scharnhorst does a nice job of balancing the analysis and the underlying narrative. *The Life of Mark Twain* gives plenty of detail about the Clemens family's years in Missouri, Samuel's success as a riverboat pilot and his romantic views of the job, his brother Orion's career as a newspaper publisher and a government official, Samuel's attempts at silver mining after following his brother to Nevada, and plenty of other adventures.

While this is a gargantuan book that leaves Twain in his mid-thirties, it never feels overlong or too bogged down in detail. Scharnhorst has great material to work with, and he conveys it expertly.

JEFF FLEISCHER (March/April 2018)

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