

Legacy Scholars:
Laura Skandera Trombley
Susan K. Harris

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Both Laura Skandera Twombly and Susan K. Harris have contributed mightily to Mark Twain studies, though in different ways. Laura divides or maybe subdivides, her time between her scholarly interest in Twain and important administrative work, as the President of Pitzer College and, later, the director of the Huntington Museum and Library. Still, she made time to organize conferences or mini-conferences, such as the one I participated in at the Idaho Humanities Council. In her books, she promoted the now widely held idea that Twain's relation to women was both more pervasive and more complicated than most had supposed, and as a result deepened the mystery we call Mark Twain. Laura's special interest was with the vexing question of Isabel Lyons' place in Twain's life.

Sue Harris, on the other hand, emphasized the important influence Olivia Clemens had on Twain. Olivia's reputation as something more than the "wife of Mark Twain" has been corrected and enhanced by Harris's work. But one should add that Sue Harris's published interest in nineteenth-century women authors, as well as the controversial subject of America's susceptibility to interest in the war in the Philippines, provides a wider context to judge and appreciate Twain's commitments to and seriousness about American expansionism. Together, these two scholars are, by their contributions and commitments to Twain studies, certainly deserving of the *Mark Twain Joint* Legacy Scholar award.



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A bunch of us are seated around a crude slab table in Cancun or Puerto Vallarta or Cabo San Lucas feeling about as much like characters in a Hemingway novel as it's likely we ever will. Laura Skandera and Michael Kiskis have brought us here—not just to this bodega but to Mexico and to, of all things, a literary conference—so that each of us can stand, one after another, before the rest of us in a small library classroom and read a twenty-minute academic paper against the backdrop, just outside, of the blazing tropical sun. It's hard to imagine that the essential absurdity of these circumstances is lost on any of us. It certainly isn't lost on Laura and Michael, our hosts and ringleaders, and after a day or two of papers, sunshine and tequila a person might be forgiven for suspecting that witnessing this absurdity, doing our part to create it, is finally what we're here for.

There's a moment like this, although surely lacking the tequila, in "The Divinity School Address," where Emerson remembers listening to a mediocre minister's sermon. The backdrop this time is a snow storm, not streaming sunshine, but the effect is the same. "The snow-storm was real," Emerson says, "the

preacher merely spectral; and the eye felt the sad contrast looking at him, and then out of the window behind him, into the beautiful meteor of the snow.”

Good scholarship is always looking out that window, always checking itself against the big, bright, living world in which human absurdities, including the absurdity of scholarship itself, transpire. And so it has been, especially, with Laura's scholarship. I'm pretty sure that when we met she was still a grad student, having come to Quarry Farm, where we shared a six-pack at the kitchen table, to work up background on what is often called the “trove” of documents she had discovered—letters, mostly—that promised to shed new light in particular on Sam Clemens's complicated relationship with Isabel Lyon.

Laura might have done the likely thing with those documents—dived deep into them and produced a careful, dutiful, scholarly exegesis and commentary. But instead she looked out the window, like Emerson, and, like him, bore witness to a wider world. Instead of asking narrow questions only about a particular stash of letters or only about Clemens's interactions with Lyon, she placed those letters in a context that raised broader, more ambitious issues, issues that eventually involved Clemens's regard for women altogether, and for Olivia Langdon Clemens in particular. What results, in much of Laura's work, and especially in *Mark Twain in the Company of Women*, are a series of challenges regarding what many of us thought we knew about many of the most important people in Clemens's life.

Any committed reader of Mark Twain develops an ear for the writer, as any of his many biographers develop a sense of how and when to listen to him, especially in his voluminous, extraordinary correspondence. Laura Skandera Trombley's particular gift has been to know to take him seriously when he acknowledges Olivia Clemens's essential participation in his work—and to go behind that testimony to pursue evidence of the depth and breadth of that participation, thereby freeing her readers not only from many of Clemens's obscuring conventionalities but also from their own. The Clemenses who come alive in Laura's work—Samuel and Olivia both—are fully realized, complex figures negotiating an interdependent partnership that she manages to make as real for us as Emerson's snow storm or the bright Mexican sun. For the daring and the example of such scholarship, then, cheers!

—Jeff Steinbrink, FRANKLIN & MARSHALL COLLEGE

In his 1891 collection of essays, *Criticism and Fiction*, William Dean Howells settles—after a good bit of wrestling with the brahmins of American culture—on three qualities that transform the written word into literature, qualities that turn a mere scribe into an artist: “the simple, the natural, the honest.” Without these virtues, according to Howells, a novel may be entertaining or profitable, but it can never be a work of art. Howells writes, “I am not afraid to say now that the greatest classics are sometimes not at all great, and that we profit by them only when we hold them . . . to a strict accounting.”

Howells dismisses the purple prose that celebrates gods and goddesses, the so-called great books that no one reads, the stories that make us—the reader—feel small and unimportant. If a “strict accounting” inspires the work of literary realists—from Twain and Chesnut, to James and Wharton—it ought also to inspire the work of critics who study the lives of these authors. In other words, all biographers should be realists, not romantics.

When I was asked to reflect upon the career of my friend and fellow Twain scholar, Laura Skandera Trombley, I thought first, not of Twain, but of this passage from the literary criticism of William Dean Howells. As a scholar, Laura has never been interested in hagiography, nor is she interested in building monuments to saints or heroes. Unfortunately, this lack of romance puts Laura at a bit of a disadvantage in the world of Mark Twain studies. Why? For everyone from high school students to casual readers to museum curators, Mark Twain is an emblem of what’s best in America, a white clad hero who affirms the better angels of our nature. Even among Twain scholars, most of whom are—and the heavens be praised for it—as cynical as they are savvy, there are those who worship at the altar of “St. Mark.” According to such a reading, Twain never uttered a racist word, never felt avarice or desire, was inspired overwhelmingly by his values and never by his appetites. Such a “Twain” leans a little toward the “Jacob Blivens” end of the moral spectrum and far away from the “Duke and the King.” It’s a reading that purges all of the human feeling from Twain’s complicated life, which, as a consequence, makes it almost impossible for Twain to become a humorist, or for his humor to emerge as anything other than righteousness and sermonizing. What Laura has always been interested in producing is less a portrait of Mark Twain—posed and coiffed and sepia-tinted—than a photograph, a snapshot that captures all the grainy detail that made him unique. And in that photograph, Twain is not standing alone.

Other biographers focus on Twain as a singular product of his time and his own genius; Laura has placed Samuel Clemens “in the company of women,” in particular women who had been routinely either ignored, pilloried, or mythologized. While many critics have needed to believe that Olivia Langdon was Becky Thatcher or that Isabel Lyon was Morgan Le Fay, Laura’s research redeemed the specific humanity of these women from the misogynist readings of them. In the case of Lyon, this meant that Laura had to tell the truth about Twain’s own efforts—as well as those of Clara Clemens—to represent Isabel Lyon as corrupt and utterly self-interested, when the record seems to indicate that in those final years of Twain’s life, there were few who surrounded him—including his biographer and his immediate family members—who were not protecting their own investment in the business that had become Mark Twain.

What Laura has so clearly and so often demonstrated is that Samuel Clemens could never have become—or lived a life as—“Mark Twain,” without the support of his loving and insightful wife, Olivia Langdon, without his personal assistant, Isabel Lyon, or even without Katy Leary, the Irish housekeeper who lived with the family for decades, or without Mary Ann Cord, the freed slave who shared her story with Twain. Under Laura’s careful gaze and through her dedicated research, she has revealed a story about a great artist, an inspiring genius, that is also a story about family and about community

Given the cultural and professional pressure at work to tell some other story about Twain, it takes a particular brand of determination to insist that we relate the truth, not just about Mark Twain, but the truth about the people in his life, and the truth about the nation that continues to venerate him. In her major works on Mark Twain and his life, Laura Skandera Trombley insists that we take seriously Twain’s vulnerability and his failings, that we read Mark Twain in the context—not of his popularity but of his humanity. In the biographies and literary criticism she has written, and perhaps even more importantly in the classes she’s taught, Laura has revealed Mark Twain as a flawed, wounded, yearning man, struggling with and against the consciousness of these flaws, and in the midst of such struggles, producing art that speaks to our shared humanity. She’s given us what Mark Twain himself celebrates—the truth, in all its bruised and fragile beauty.

— *Ann M. Ryan*, LE MOYNE COLLEGE