

## Mark Twain

*An essay by Bill Lounsbury*

It's still intriguing that America's greatest humorist led a life filled with so much grief. Mark Twain was present when several of his closest friends expired -- including a beloved younger brother who died in his arms after a Mississippi riverboat's steam plant exploded -- and witnessed the deaths of all of his family (a wife, a son and two daughters) except one child. Their losses profoundly affected him, yet up until the moment of his death in 1910 he was known for his outgoing ebullience, comrade-like demeanor, pronounced courtesy, genuine kindness and child-like devotion to those closest to him. He jovially shrugged off situations that you or I might consider a knee in the groin. Without being sugary, he was loved by just about everyone he met.

Forsaking ownership of a large tract of land in eastern Tennessee, Marshall Clemens moved his family to the banks of the Mississippi in 1834. A year later Samuel Langhorne Clemens, the seventh of his eight children, was born in the flyspeck community of Florida, Missouri. When Sammy was four his parents moved to nearby Hannibal, a frontier town noted for its frequent knife fights and shootings. Twain's father was an avowed free thinker; his mother, a connoisseur of the occult. Their radically different views reflected the opposing ideas then raging throughout America, and later served as material for his books. When Sammy was six, his father lost their home to debt; when twelve, his father died. He left school to help his financially strapped family, then traveled about as a printer's apprentice and typesetter (while mastering the fundamentals of how the real world works). He became a riverboat pilot on the Mississippi, served briefly as a Confederate soldier, then headed west to assist an older brother who was Secretary of Nevada Territory. After prospecting in California, Sam became a reporter for the *Territorial Enterprise*, a Virginia City newspaper. At this time he assumed his *nom de plume* -- Mark Twain, the leadsman's call of two fathoms signifying that a riverboat had reached safe water. His own career was assured success when the monthly articles he'd contracted for with the *Atlantic Monthly* were gathered into the widely popular novel, *The Innocents Abroad*.

Twain gave animus to America's written tradition, providing the literary lift-off for a jump-to-Jesus nation previously dominated by New England brahmans. Single-handedly, he was responsible for an America-writ-large, making well-written, down-home literature an integral part of our heritage. His unpretentious stories have an authentic, radical voice that employ Twain's own style, timing, rhythm and dialect. With his unique brand of humor, he can take off on a flight of lyricism that's occasionally maddening. He found fame, not fortune. A shrewd observer of his era (he named it the 'Gilded Age'), he smoothly incorporated the dramatic events of the 19th century into his plots. Sometimes it's difficult to tell whether Twain was a cheerful pessimist or a melancholy optimist. Although noted for his lampooning in such classics as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, his later writings (e.g., *The Mysterious Stranger*) reflect a dark side -- small wonder, given his stressful childhood and sorrowful existence.

## Audiobook Technology at KRL (continued from Dec.)

by Mary-Margaret Cromarty

Okay. Last month I introduced the downloadable eBooks and audiobooks available at KRL. As a recap:

**Downloadable eBooks** come in three formats: Adobe EPUB eBook, Adobe PDF eBook and Kindle Books.

**Downloadable audiobooks** come in two formats (MP3 and WMA).

**Correction:** An iPod Shuffle shuffles the audio files as it plays them—great for music but it doesn't work for audiobooks. The iPod Nano will work for audio books, as well as music, etc. I got my mother an MP3 player for Christmas and it works great.

Last month I promised you a great audible book. Here is my review.

### **Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman**

by Robert K Massie, read by Mark Deakins.

At just under 24 hours, this is a long book. But what a book! Using letters, Catherine's autobiography and other contemporaneous documents, Massie brings Catherine to life, creating a fascinating, three-dimensional person.

It begins by introducing a minor German prince and his family, including his daughter who eventually became one of the most powerful and influential woman of 18<sup>th</sup> Century Europe. When, at 14, she left Germany for Russia to marry the Russian heir, she vowed to "enchant her husband, Empress Elizabeth and the people of Russia".

She may not have "enchanted" her husband but she had a tremendous impact on the Russian people and European's perception of Russia. She expanded the Empire from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, giving Russia access to the Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic Ocean. Her rocky marriage, lovers, political ambitions, idealistic hopes for her reign and the eventual reality of it are told with rich detail. Massie places the events in Catherine's life in context by skillfully weaving world events into his narrative.

This book so caught my interest that I now have five other books on Imperial Russia (thank you, Ruth!). I suggest checking out the *Atlas of Russian History* by Martin Gilbert when listening to **Catherine the Great** — the maps will really increase your enjoyment of the book.

### **Other Recommended Audiobooks:**

**The Help** by Kathryn Sockett. The book focuses on three women—two black maids and a 23 year old white woman. The sections are read by Octavia Spencer, Bahni Turpin, and Jenna Lamia. (Be careful or you'll find yourself sounding like you just returned from Mississippi.)

**The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull & the Battle of the Little Bighorn** by Nathaniel Philbrick (map at nps.gov site)

Enjoy yourselves!

– MM Cromarty