



Mark Twain (Lives and Legacies Series)

Larzer Ziff

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Mark Twain towered above the American literary landscape. With a worldwide fame greater than that of statesmen, scientists, or entertainers, Twain was in his own words "the most conspicuous man on the planet." Now, in this wonderful recounting of his career, Larzer Ziff offers an incisive, illuminating look at one of the giants of American letters.

Mark Twain emerges in this book as something of a paradox. His humor made him rich and famous, but he was unhappy with the role of humorist. He satirized the rapacious economic practices of his society, yet was caught up in those very practices himself. He was a literary genius who revolutionized the national literature, yet was unable to resist whatever quirky notion or joke that crossed his mind, often straying from his plot or contradicting his theme. Ziff offers a lively account of Twain's early years, explores all his major fiction, and concludes with a consideration of his craftsmanship and his strength as a cultural critic. He offers particularly telling insight into Twain's travel writings, providing for example an insightful account of *Following the Equator*, perhaps Twain's most underrated work. Throughout the book, Ziff examines Twain's writings in light of the literary cultures of his day--from frontier humorists to Matthew Arnold--and of parallel literary works of his time--comparing, for example, *A Connecticut Yankee* with major utopian works of the same decade. Thus the book is both a work of literary criticism and of cultural history.

Compact and sparkling, here then is an invaluable introduction to Mark Twain, capturing the humor and the contradictions of America's most beloved writer.

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