



## The Singular Mark Twain: A Biography

By Fred Kaplan

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**The Singular Mark Twain: A Biography** By Fred Kaplan

**One of our most distinguished biographers offers a bold, revisionist view of the inimitable Mark Twain.**

Mark Twain invented American literature. His humor, his fearless evocation of how ordinary people live and speak, his ferocious social criticism, all make him the progenitor of a truly national literature. And his extraordinary books—including *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Gilded Age*, *Innocents Abroad*, *Life on the Mississippi*—were drawn from his extraordinary life. Based on original research, including access to previously unpublished correspondence, *The Singular Mark Twain* presents the first fully integrated portrait of this great American icon.

Few Americans, let alone American writers, lived such a large and eventful life. From his idyllic Hannibal, Missouri, childhood to his days as a riverboat pilot on the Mississippi, from his wildcat-mining life in the Nevada territory to his reporting job in wide-open Barbary Coast San Francisco, Twain's early life was one of restless adventure. He traveled the world, and his dispatches to the United States made him famous, and wealthy.

With maturity and success, Twain grew tremendously as an artist and as a social critic. Fred Kaplan shows definitively that Twain's ferociously progressive ideas about race informed all his later works and absolve him from absurd charges of racism laid in recent years. Kaplan also details the darker side of Twain's story—the illnesses and death that plagued his family and darkened his vision, his almost comically terrible business sense that lost him his great fortune, and his paranoid sensitivity to slights and betrayals.

No American writer is more appealing, funnier, or more universally admired than Mark Twain. *The Singular Mark Twain* brings him to life as never before. Like the bestselling books of H.W. Brands, David McCullough, and Edmund Morris, *The Singular Mark Twain* is a masterful blend of history and biography, at once erudite, eye-opening, and highly entertaining.

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### Editorial Review

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Kaplan begins his biographical assault on received wisdom about America's most famous novelist with the wordplay implicit in his title: Mark Twain was not only a singular writer (uniquely gifted and unsurpassed in his influence), but he was also a singular personality (not multiple or divided), his pen name signifying no deep psychic split of the sort critics have posited. Real contradictions do emerge in the life of a man who could, for instance, ridicule religion as foolish superstition and yet jump at the chance to publish the pope's authorized biography. But in these contradictions, Kaplan sees no more than the inconsistencies typical of a sophisticated mind, not deep fissures separating the artist Twain from the commercialist Clemens. Kaplan does limn a remarkably complex evolution in Twain's metamorphosis from a lightweight humorist with a flair for travel journalism into the probing author of a landmark novel on race relations, *Huckleberry Finn*. Yet Kaplan also highlights personal weaknesses that stubbornly resisted change: Twain's self-lacerating sense of guilt after every family tragedy; his foolish penchant for investing in unproven technologies; his vulnerability to personal and literary criticism. Never obtrusive, Kaplan's aesthetic and psychological insights inhere naturally in a lucid narrative. Like Kaplan's acclaimed biographies of Carlyle, Dickens, and James, this book will enlighten specialists and delight general readers. *Bryce Christensen*

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Review

### PRAISE FOR GORE VIDAL: A BIOGRAPHY

“Kaplan must be commended....a splendid job.”

--*San Francisco Chronicle*

“Intimate, rewarding....[Fred Kaplan] leads us back, with insight, to the works of this audacious American master.”

--*Los Angeles Times*

“It is in Kaplan that all the pieces of the puzzle are at last assembled....It is Kaplan who lets us see the seeds and the shoots, the leaves and the flowers—and alas, the weeds.”

--*The Nation*

### PRAISE FOR DICKENS: A BIOGRAPHY

“Kaplan has spent ten years preparing and writing this book; his achievement is as rare, as wonderful, as the Dickens he brings to life. We are all the beneficiaries of this exceptional biography.”

--*Los Angeles Times*

“Anyone who has not read a life of Dickens is going to prefer Fred Kaplan's long, solid, and illuminating biography furnished with new facts and theories, to any previous one they might encounter. The novelist who emerges from his study—dynamic, mercurial, self-deluding, with a big heart for the masses and a small one for his ego, makes fascinating reading.”

--*Newsday*

### PRAISE FOR THOMAS CARLYLE: A BIOGRAPHY

“Mr. Kaplan illuminates the Victorian era by bringing us into what we feel is the very presence of one of its idols.”

--*The New Yorker*

“Fred Kaplan has performed a labor of love and a commendatory service. His *Thomas Carlyle*, which draws on unpublished letters, gives us our most complete picture of Carlyle in the context of his age...An achievement of much merit and a gift to students of the word.”

--*Washington Post Book World*

#### From the Inside Flap

In this magisterial full-scale biography of America's greatest storyteller and satirist, Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award finalist Fred Kaplan refashions our image of Mark Twain and etches a vibrant portrait of a singular personality who created some of the most memorable literary characters of our culture. He coined the phrase "the Gilded Age," spoke out vigorously against racism and imperialism, and in his multifaceted singularity as writer, businessman, polemicist, investor, inventor, and self-promoter became the most widely extolled and most dominant icon of American literature. As Kaplan writes, "There has been no one like him since."

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##### Cari Sexton:

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