



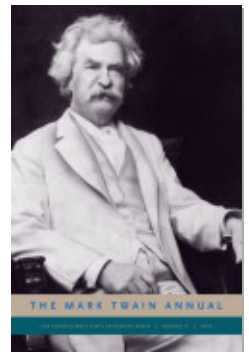
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Twain's Brand: Humor in Contemporary American Culture by
Judith Yaross Lee (review)

Ann M. Ryan

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Dear Mark Twain makes an obviously significant contribution to Twain studies. Kent Rasmussen enlarges what we know of Mark Twain from his correspondence as it provides the most substantive understanding yet of the people who were buying his books and reading him in newspapers and magazines at the turn of the century. As such, this collection will be of interest to Mark Twain specialists, students of American literary and culture studies, and general readers alike.

Twain's Brand: Humor in Contemporary American Culture

Judith Yaross Lee. U of Mississippi P, 2012. 240 pp. \$44.80, hardcover.

Reviewed by Ann M. Ryan

Interdisciplinarity is a lot like fusion cooking; it seems like a good idea until you actually have to consume some of it. Cultural studies can occasionally result in watered-down history, and intertextual analysis can feel a just a bit breezy. However, in *Twain's Brand: Humor in Contemporary American Culture*, Judith Yaross Lee manages to produce a cultural critique that's as deep as it is broad. While she draws on dozens of different sources ranging from the stand-up comedy of Margaret Cho to the philosophy of Mikhail Bakhtin to the literary criticism of Walter Blair and the cartoons of Aaron McGruder, her focus remains steady on the history, economics, and aesthetics of America's comedy culture, and the extent to which that culture begins with Mark Twain. Lee's reading of these various texts is both insightful and informed; this is no cursory or casual sampling of the histories she's negotiating. If *Twain's Brand* traffics in the media, technologies, and personalities of twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture, it begins with a profound analysis of the dynamic political, literary, and economic landscapes of nineteenth-century America. Lee's reading of Twain—as icon, as artist, as entrepreneur, and as commodity—reveals the way in which he anticipates our current cultural moment, a moment when, according to Lee:

the language of the ludicrous inflects contemporary American culture from entertainment to business and politics as a result, because the postindustrial, information economy of today trades in ideas, attitudes, and audiences—the stuff of humor—instead of goods. As manner becomes matter, humor becomes the ideal commodity to be marketed and sold as a brand (6).

Lee's persuasive reading of Twain imagines him less as the Lincoln of our literature, than its Henry Ford.

Throughout *Twain's Brand*, Lee demonstrates her command of Twain scholarship; she draws on the work of critics such as Larry Berkove, James Caron, James Cox, Kerry Driscoll, Randall Knopper, Bruce Michelson, and Tom Quirk in order to position her own examination of Twain's comic identity, its sources, and its meanings. Building on Lou Budd's insights in *Our Mark Twain*, she goes beyond simply illustrating how Twain marketed himself and manipulated his image. Lee traces both the origins of Twain's brand—in an emerging capitalist, industrial, American economy—and its effects—in a world marketplace that continues, even today, to be a stage for Twain's comic products. Lee moves from the early Frederick Waddy caricature of Twain riding a jumping frog to Twain's posthumous marketability, in the form of still-profitable copyrights owned by the Mark Twain Foundation, as well as the Kennedy Center Mark Twain Prize for American Humor, which continues to brand generations of comic performers. Lee carefully demonstrates how Twain's savvy for public relations, learned from his years as a newspaperman, dovetails with the rise of mass media in the nineteenth century. The ability to mass produce images and photographs in an increasingly fluid and pervasive print economy makes it possible to commodify, illustrate, and advertise the performer and the performance.

This latter insight inspires Lee's analysis of stand-up comedy as the epitome of postmodern, performative identity. And in this, she also places Twain at the vanguard:

By replacing an essential self with a performed one whose reality derives mainly from its persuasiveness in experiences shared by performer and audience, [William] James and his intellectual heirs point to the modernity of Twain's oral humor. Links between the comic relativism of his persona and principles of modern thought likewise identify Twain's comic performances as precursors of contemporary stand-up comedy (45).

In her subsequent exploration of the careers of Margaret Cho, Jerry Seinfeld, and Garrison Keillor, Lee discovers aspects of Twain's comic persona: it's unstable (a shifting performance of an artificial "self"), biographical (yet fictional and imaginative), and narrative (blurring the lines between life and art). While much of *Twain's Brand* is original, I found this section to be particularly provocative. Nowhere does Twain seem more contemporary than in the stand-up culture that Lee presents, and nowhere does modern identity

seem more thoroughly embodied—or better yet, decentered, fragmented, and reconstructed—than in the world of stand-up. The stage on which these performers work looks increasingly like the virtual world in which most of us currently project some version of ourselves. How many Facebook “profiles” are posed, artificial, ironic, and performative, while also claiming to be biographical, revelatory, and “real”?

Yet Lee does not suggest that Twain’s genius lay solely in the performance of his persona; she makes specific claims for the content of his performance as well. Twain, she argues, creates himself as an international brand by also cultivating an American voice that simultaneously celebrates the marginalized and the inferior—at least, by traditional European standards of decorum—while also undermining notions of American superiority. Twain’s complex response to American imperialism—at once its most severe critic and its leading cultural export—is best represented, according to Lee, by his cultivation of the American vernacular. In this case, *vernacular* may describe more than simply his speech, but also Twain’s pose and politics. In Twain’s hero Hank Morgan, Lee finds echoes of Twain’s acquaintance Henry Morton Stanley, whose shifting nationality mirrored his divided politics: both American explorer and British imperialist. Hank Morgan’s vernacular similarly exposes the ugliness of European monarchy, while it also indirectly reveals the practical ambitions of a fledgling American empire. The vernacular of Mark Twain, according to Lee, seems to double back on itself: it affirms the marginality of the speaker while also redeploying many of the ideals it claims to critique (in this regard, Huck’s use of racial epithets anticipates Hank’s “Sir Boss,” his “man factory” and his “white Indians”). Lee finds a clear line of influence between Huck’s voice, Hank’s politics, and the fiction of Philip Roth, whose characters, particularly in *The Great American Novel*, similarly speak from the margins, while also revealing the tyranny of their own worldview.

Beyond these literary legacies, Lee discovers Twain’s vernacular in the visual art of comic strips, graphic novelists, and animated series. Huck’s naive language, his unschooled aesthetic, is embraced and reimagined in everything from *The Katzenjammer Kids* (1897), *Peanuts*, and even *Calvin and Hobbes*. Yet Lee finds the true siblings of Huck in Matt Groening’s *The Simpsons*, in Lynda Barry’s autobiographical graphic narrative *One! Hundred! Demons!* and in Aaron McGruder’s comic strip *The Boondocks*. If Lee sees these works as unleashing a more disruptive politics, more in line with the subversive possibilities of Huck Finn, she never fails to admit that each of these artistic productions also become merchandise, part of a global economy of humor.

Some readers may find the scope of *Twain's Brand* to be overwhelming. After all, in any given chapter Judith Yaross Lee could move from Freud to Leo Marx to Lenny Bruce to Artemus Ward to Bart Simpson and then close it all with a reference to Judith Butler. It's dizzying and at times daunting, but it's impressive and productive as well. What anchors this analysis is Lee's erudite, compelling reading of philosophy, literature, politics, and culture. And what emerges from her seemingly three-dimensional reading of Twain's comic legacy is a vision of American comedy that's as commercial as it is radical, as breathtakingly disruptive as it is mainstream and marketable. This work is truly a fine example of what interdisciplinarity is meant to be and do, yielding a portrait not simply of Mark Twain or his fiction, but also of his complex status, as it shifts and evolves, in an equally changeable American culture.