

The Other Woman

Twain scholar and Pitzer President uncovers hidden stories

Surely it was a misunderstanding.

One hundred authentic, hand-written letters authored by Mark Twain? Can these be treasures in the possession of a stamp collector who purchased the entire lot for \$100 at a hobby shop only for their postage stamps?

Not possible, thought Laura Skandera Trombley, a graduate student at the time, and now Pitzer College's president and preeminent Mark Twain scholar.

But indeed, it was so, and this "biggest find ever," said Dr. Trombley, fell into her lap in 1986 through a circuitous string of events and connections, tamping down a solid path on which she has tread a fascinating journey ever since.

"I was 26 at the time, and this was very, very exciting," said Dr. Trombley.

The stamp hobbyist was not familiar with the letters' signatory, "Samuel Langhorne Clemens," and therefore unaware of the letters' value—they were later appraised at nearly \$500,000.

He showed them to a young woman on a bus, prompting her recommendation that he contact her professor at the University of Southern California, an individual who happened to be Dr.

Trombley's dissertation chairperson. Connection thus made, Dr. Trombley examined his treasure trove and, today, remains the only scholar who has studied the original letters.

With ever-expanding curiosity and intrigue, she has remained steeped in Twain's life and work ever since, believing him to be "one of our country's most compelling figures." In 1994, she published her first biography: **Mark Twain in the Company of Women**.

"He was a genius," she said. "He had an unbelievable energy level and intellectual curiosity. He was just always in forward motion and never stopped trying to figure out life. He was a writer of over 50,000 letters and 30 books; he crossed the Atlantic 25 times; and, by the end of his life, he had become first global celebrity. Everyone wanted to know him."

There was a time toward the end of his life in the U.S., Dr. Trombley shared, when letters simply addressed



COURIER photo/Steven Felschundneff
Pitzer College president Laura Trombley recently published her 5th book on Mark Twain.

"Mark Twain" would find him.

"Kind of like Santa Claus," said Dr. Trombley, who has read her favorite Twain book, the **Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**, more than 30 times.

Considering the impressive proliferation of the scholarly achievements, administrative and professorial accomplishments, keynote addresses, presentations and panels, radio and television interviews, publications, honors, grants, fellowships and travels that have comprised Dr. Trombley's life over the last 3 decades—Twain-related and otherwise—one may easily make comparisons between their high-energy, high-output lives and, she noted, their hair color.

"I think there are some commonalities. We're both redheads," she joked. "And, I come from a family where humor is highly valued and practiced by all family members. Certainly, a love of reading was inculcated in me at a very, very young age, and people who know me would describe me as having a fairly high-energy kind of personality."

A passion for reading and an intense stamina are precisely what were called upon for Dr. Trombley to complete her latest Twain book, a project that began almost 2 decades ago and culminated

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in a March 2010 publishing of **Mark Twain's Other Woman: The Hidden Story of His Final Years.**

"It's embarrassing, embarrassing, that it took such a long time, 16 years in total," said Dr. Trombley, who wrote most of the book between 5:30 and 6:30 a.m. every day, which, "Trust me," she said, "is not my favorite time of day to do anything."

Mark Twain's Other Woman unravels the mysterious last years of Twain's life, focusing on Isabel Van Kleek Lyon, Twain's personal secretary who controlled everything in his life, including his finances, his schedule, his unmanageable daughters, and even what he ate and wore everyday. He was utterly dependent on Isabel: physically, intellectually and emotionally.

"She was slavishly devoted to Twain," Dr. Trombley wrote in the preface.

"And then," the preface continues in the next paragraph, "something happened that led to a dramatic breakup."

Dr. Trombley's book is an exploration of this intimate relationship that turned ugly, so much so that Twain devoted the final chapter of his life to viciously and publicly disparaging Isabel and obsessively committing his vitriolic rants to paper for hours every day, penning hateful terms for his once-constant companion such as, "a liar, a forger, a thief, a hypocrite, a drunkard, a sneak, a humbug, a traitor, a conspirator, a filthy-minded and salacious slut pining for seduction."

Despite the vital role played by Isabel in Twain's last 6 years, until Dr. Trombley delved into her meticulous daily journals and private papers, even meeting with Isabel's family who gave her material unseen by researchers, most biographers omitted her.

"[They] either knew that the family was very opposed to any mention of Isabel, or they ignored her due to her working class status and gender," said Dr. Trombley in a Q&A with Amazon.com. "Also, Twain wrote a scandalous fictionalized document about her

that some biographers have mistakenly taken for truth."

Dr. Trombley asserts that the carefully constructed story Twain created was a grandiose attempt to preserve his legacy.

"This is a story that Twain never, ever wanted to be told, and he spent considerable time and effort constructing a fiction so that no one would ever know what actually happened in that time," she said.

The only Twain scholar to have ever read all of Isabel's writings, Dr. Trombley has discovered the truth of that short but dynamic era, "putting together a mosaic, bit by bit by bit by bit," she said. And, in doing so, she has provided the first-ever intricate rendering of the mystery woman so central to Twain yet so overlooked and forgotten.

"I think what this book represents first is how important it is for people, particularly women, to have their voices heard," she said. "It's a story about a woman who was silent for 100 years, and this is the first time for her to really speak and tell her side of the story."

With 16 years of research into never-before-read materials, Dr. Trombley brings forth a deeper understanding of Twain, an entirely different portrayal of this revered figure than previously proffered. Addi-

tionally, and what Dr. Trombley hopes readers will take away, is the re-humanizing of a Mark Twain who had become singularly-focused on cultivating and controlling future depictions of his life.

"He was so obsessed with creating his legacy, he almost transformed himself into a kind of white marble statue, and people lost that sense of him as a human being," she said. "I think we love his writing because it's so utterly descriptive of humanity and, this, in a way, helps return him to the fold."

—Brenda Bolinger

Upcoming book signing:

On Saturday, April 24, Dr. Trombley will participate in the *Los Angeles Times* Festival of books, staffing the Pepperdine University Alumni Author Booth at 10 a.m. and serving on a panel discussion, "Biography: Literary Masters," at 1:30 p.m.

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