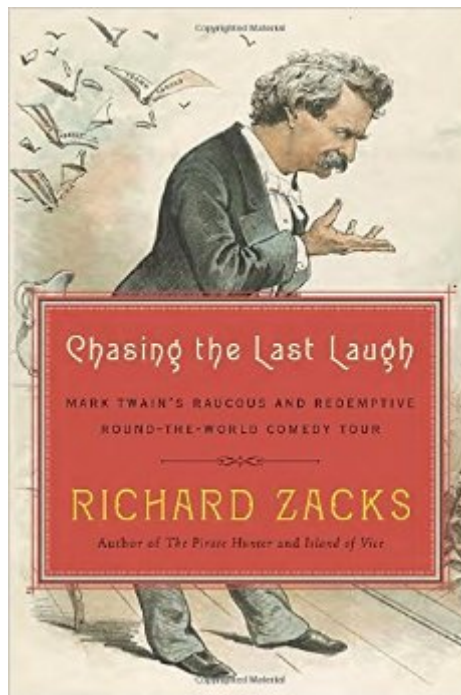


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Chasing The Last Laugh: Mark Twain's Raucous And Redemptive Round-the-World Comedy Tour



Synopsis

From Richard Zacks, bestselling author of *Island of Vice* and *The Pirate Hunter*, a rich and lively account of how Mark Twain's late-life adventures abroad helped him recover from financial disaster and family tragedy and revived his world-class sense of humor. Mark Twain, the highest-paid writer in America in 1894, was also one of the nation's worst investors. "There are two times in a man's life when he should not speculate," he wrote. "When he can't afford it and when he can." The publishing company Twain owned was failing; his investment in a typesetting device was bleeding red ink. After losing hundreds of thousands of dollars back when a beer cost a nickel, he found himself neck-deep in debt. His heiress wife, Livy, took the setback hard. "I have a perfect horror and heart-sickness over it," she wrote. "I cannot get away from the feeling that business failure means disgrace." But Twain vowed to Livy he would pay back every penny. And so, just when the fifty-nine-year-old, bushy-browed icon imagined that he would be settling into literary lionhood, telling jokes at gilded dinners, he forced himself to mount the "platform" again, embarking on a round-the-world stand-up comedy tour. No author had ever done that. He cherry-picked his best stories—such as stealing his first watermelon and buying a bucking bronco—and spun them into a ninety-minute performance. Twain trekked across the American West and onward by ship to the faraway lands of Australia, New Zealand, Tasmania, India, Ceylon, and South Africa. He rode an elephant twice and visited the Taj Mahal. He saw Zulus dancing and helped sort diamonds at the Kimberley mines. (He failed to slip away with a sparkly souvenir.) He played shuffleboard on cruise ships and battled captains for the right to smoke in peace. He complained that his wife and daughter made him shave and change his shirt every day. The great American writer fought off numerous illnesses and travel nuisances to circle the globe and earn a huge payday and a tidal wave of applause. Word of his success, however, traveled slowly enough that one American newspaper reported that he had died penniless in London. That's when he famously quipped: "The report of my death was an exaggeration." Throughout his quest, Twain was aided by cutthroat Standard Oil tycoon H.H. Rogers, with whom he had struck a deep friendship, and he was hindered by his own lawyer (and future secretary of state) Bainbridge Colby, whom he deemed "head idiot of this century." In *Chasing the Last Laugh*, author Richard Zacks, drawing extensively on unpublished material in notebooks and letters from Berkeley's ongoing Mark Twain Project, chronicles a poignant chapter in the author's life—one that began in foolishness and bad choices but culminated in humor, hard-won wisdom, and ultimate triumph.

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Customer Reviews

In 1895 Mark Twain was bankrupt, legally declared so by the courts. But he promised his wife Livy that he would repay all of his debts and took Livy and daughter Clara on a round-the-world comedy tour to try to earn enough to fulfill that promise. In *Chasing the Last Laugh*, author Richard Zacks chronicles the events that led up to Twain's predicament as well as the tour and its aftermath. It mixes biography, history, and travelogue, leavened with plenty of quotes from Twain's writings, speeches, and letters. Mark Twain was a contradictory figure. Zacks describes him as a "wonderful hodgepodge of uplifting sentiments and bad habits." A genius with words and perceptive observations of his fellow man, Twain was hopeless at business. No doubt if he were alive today he would be good friends with Nigerian businessmen. He was bankrupt but stayed in the best hotels and spent over \$1000 per month on food (The author's detailed research is impressive.). On a personal level, he was comfortable addressing audiences of thousands of people but confessed to being ill at ease talking one on one. Other authors have described the less attractive aspects of Twain's personality, but Zacks treats more sympathetically the man of whom Thomas Edison once said, "An average American loves his family; if he has any love left over, he generally selects Mark Twain." The description of the rigors of the trip makes the reader a bit sympathetic to Twain's desire to pamper himself despite his financial circumstances. Both he and his family suffered a number of painful and debilitating illnesses enroute; most notably Twain had some serious respiratory illnesses and recurring carbuncles that would probably have convinced a lesser man (or one with a less determined wife) to abandon the tour.

Clearly well researched, this book tells the tale of a Samuel Clemens in the depths of financial ruin, and the speaking tour of Australia and Asia that he did not want to make. The tour, however, was the saving grace for his flagging success. Great writers are not always the best at investing, and this is definitely true here. From self-publishing to investing in an automatic typesetter his business instincts were awful. His legal dilemmas multiplied as he tries to maintain his lifestyle and that of his family through so many machinations. These same legal balancing acts are employed routinely today by families swallowed whole by college loan repayments and credit card debt. However, in the 19th century and for a famous writer, there is an element of familial disgrace in unsuccessful money management. And we meet his loyal friend and patron, H.H. Rogers, whose Standard Oil management had made him wealthy. Wealthy and generous to a fault, he lends his business acumen to helping Samuel Clemens, and we get to know his loyal life partner, Livy, as she tries to maintain the family pride in light of her husband's bungling. Clemens emerges as a complex character who hates the thought of taking the podium to raise money. He rants against it, but gives in and does what needs to be done, abandoning high-minded topics for the nitty gritty stories that audiences love. And, for all his disdain for the podium he enjoys a full house and an engaged audience. The tales of the Clemens family's travels are delightful, and this grumpy little man who smokes way too many cigars is seen as totally human and, in spite of his troubles, a funny, funny storyteller. But this book is hardly a light-hearted romp through his life. We also see him devastated by personal tragedy while still trying to entertain.

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