

Who Was Mark Twain

Mark Twain Prize for American Humor

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The Mark Twain Prize for American Humor is an American award presented by the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. annually since 1998 (except 2020–2021). Named after the 19th-century humorist Mark Twain, it is presented to individuals who have "had an impact on American society in ways similar to" Twain. The Kennedy Center chose Twain in recognition of his role as a controversial social commentator and his "uncompromising perspective of social injustice and personal folly." A copy of Karl Gerhardt's 1884 bust of Twain is presented in a ceremony usually in the Kennedy Center Concert Hall, during which the recipient is celebrated by his or her peers. The event is a significant fundraiser to benefit the Kennedy Center, which sells tickets as well as access to dinners and after-parties featuring the celebrities.

As of 2025, 26 individuals have been awarded the award: 20 men and 6 women (Bill Cosby's award was rescinded by the Kennedy Center in 2018). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were no awards in 2020 or 2021.

Mark Twain

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Samuel Langhorne Clemens (November 30, 1835 – April 21, 1910), known by the pen name Mark Twain, was an American writer, humorist, and essayist. He was praised as the "greatest humorist the United States has produced", with William Faulkner calling him "the father of American literature". Twain's novels include *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and its sequel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), with the latter often called the "Great American Novel". He also wrote *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) and cowrote *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873) with Charles Dudley Warner. The novelist Ernest Hemingway claimed that "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*."

Twain was raised in Hannibal, Missouri, which later provided the setting for both *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. He served an apprenticeship with a printer early in his career, and then worked as a typesetter, contributing articles to his older brother Orion Clemens' newspaper. Twain then became a riverboat pilot on the Mississippi River, which provided him the material for *Life on the Mississippi* (1883). Soon after, Twain headed west to join Orion in Nevada. He referred humorously to his lack of success at mining, turning to journalism for the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise*.

Twain first achieved success as a writer with the humorous story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," which was published in 1865; it was based on a story that he heard at the Angels Hotel in Angels Camp, California, where Twain had spent some time while he was working as a miner. The short story brought Twain international attention. He wrote both fiction and non-fiction. As his fame grew, Twain became a much sought-after speaker. His wit and satire, both in prose and in speech, earned praise from critics and peers, and Twain was a friend to presidents, artists, industrialists, and European royalty.

Although Twain initially spoke out in favor of American interests in the Hawaiian Islands, he later reversed his position, going on to become vice president of the American Anti-Imperialist League from 1901 until his death in 1910, coming out strongly against the Philippine–American War and American colonialism. Twain

published a satirical pamphlet, "King Leopold's Soliloquy", in 1905 about Belgian atrocities in the Congo Free State.

Twain earned a great deal of money from his writing and lectures, but invested in ventures that lost most of it, such as the Paige Compositor, a mechanical typesetter that failed because of its complexity and imprecision. He filed for bankruptcy after these financial setbacks, but in time overcame his financial troubles with the help of Standard Oil executive Henry Huttleston Rogers, who helped Twain manage his finances and copyrights. Twain eventually paid all his creditors in full, even though his declaration of bankruptcy meant he was not required to do so. One hundred years after his death, the first volume of his autobiography was published.

Twain was born shortly after an appearance of Halley's Comet and predicted that his death would accompany it as well, writing in 1909: "I came in with Halley's Comet in 1835; it's coming again next year, and I expect to go out with it. It would be a great disappointment in my life if I don't. The Almighty has said, no doubt: 'Now here are these two unaccountable freaks; they came in together, they must go out together.'" He died of a heart attack the day after the comet was at its closest to the Sun.

Hal Holbrook

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Harold Rowe Holbrook Jr. (February 17, 1925 – January 23, 2021) was an American actor. He first received critical acclaim in 1954 for a one-man stage show that he developed called Mark Twain Tonight! while studying at Denison University. He won the Tony Award for Best Actor in a Play in 1966 for his portrayal of Twain. He continued to perform his signature role for more than 60 years, retiring the show in 2017 due to his failing health. Throughout his career, he also won five Primetime Emmy Awards for his work on television and was nominated for an Academy Award for his work in film.

Holbrook made his film debut in Sidney Lumet's *The Group* (1966). He later gained international fame for his performance as Deep Throat in the 1976 film *All the President's Men*. He played Abraham Lincoln in the 1974 miniseries *Lincoln* and 1985 miniseries *North and South*. He also appeared in films such as *Magnum Force* (1973), *Julia* (1977), *Capricorn One* (1977), *The Fog* (1980), *Creepshow* (1982), *Wall Street* (1987), *The Firm* (1993), *Hercules* (1997) and *Men of Honor* (2000).

Holbrook's role as Ron Franz in Sean Penn's *Into the Wild* (2007) earned both an Academy Award and a Screen Actors Guild Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor. In 2009, he received critical acclaim for his performance as recently retired farmer Abner Meecham in the independent film *That Evening Sun*. He also portrayed Francis Preston Blair in Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012).

In 2003, Holbrook was honored with the National Humanities Medal by President George W. Bush.

Mark Twain Lake

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Mark Twain Lake is a reservoir located in Ralls and Monroe Counties in the U.S. state of Missouri. It was created by the Clarence Cannon Dam (formerly called Joanna Dam) impounding the Salt River and is located about 20 miles (32 km) southwest of Hannibal. The lake was named for Missouri author Mark Twain and part of the area around it is Mark Twain State Park. The village of Florida, the birthplace of Mark Twain, is mostly surrounded by the lake.

Mark Twain Tonight!

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Mark Twain Cave

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Mark Twain Cave — originally McDowell's Cave — is a show cave located near Hannibal, Missouri. It was named for author Mark Twain whose real name was Samuel Langhorne Clemens. Clemens lived in Hannibal from 1839 to 1853, age 4 to 17. It is the oldest operating show cave in the state, giving tours continuously since 1886. Along with nearby Cameron Cave, it became a registered National Natural Landmark in 1972, with a citation reading "Exceptionally good examples of the maze type of cavern development." The cave — as "McDougal's Cave" — plays an important role in Twain's 1876 novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and was renamed in honor of the author in 1880.

The Adventures of Mark Twain (1985 film)

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The Adventures of Mark Twain (released as *Comet Quest* in the United Kingdom) is a 1985 American independent stop-motion claymation fantasy film directed by Will Vinton and starring James Whitmore. It received a limited theatrical release in May 1985 and was released on DVD in January 2006 and again as a collector's edition in 2012 on DVD and Blu-ray.

The film features a series of vignettes extracted from several of Mark Twain's works, woven together by a plot that follows Twain's attempts to keep his "appointment" with Halley's Comet. Twain and three children, Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, and Becky Thatcher, travel on an airship to various adventures, encountering characters from Twain's stories along the way.

1601 (Mark Twain)

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[Date: 1601.] *Conversation, as it was by the Social Fireside, in the Time of the Tudors. or simply 1601* is the title of a short risqué squib by Mark Twain, first published anonymously in 1880, and finally acknowledged by the author in 1906.

Written as an extract from the diary of an "old man", Queen Elizabeth I's "cup-bearer", the pamphlet purports to record a conversation between Elizabeth and several famous writers of the day. The topics discussed are scatological, notably flatulence, flatulence humor, and sex.

1601 was, according to Edward Wagenknecht, "the most famous piece of pornography in American literature." However, it was more ribaldry than pornography; its content was more in the nature of irreverent and vulgar comedic shock than obscenity for sexual arousal.

Before the court decisions in the United States in 1959–1966 that legalized the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer*, and *Fanny Hill*, the piece continued to be considered unprintable. It was circulated clandestinely in privately printed limited editions.

Mark Twain House

The Mark Twain House and Museum in Hartford, Connecticut, was the home of Samuel Langhorne Clemens (Mark Twain) and his family from 1874 to 1891. The Clemens

The Mark Twain House and Museum in Hartford, Connecticut, was the home of Samuel Langhorne Clemens (Mark Twain) and his family from 1874 to 1891. The Clemens family had it designed by Edward Tuckerman Potter and built in the America High Gothic style. Clemens biographer Justin Kaplan has called it "part steamboat, part medieval fortress and part cuckoo clock."

Clemens wrote many of his best-known works while living there, including *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, *Life on the Mississippi*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *A Tramp Abroad*, and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.

Poor financial investments prompted the Clemens family to move to Europe in 1891. The Panic of 1893 further threatened their financial stability, and Clemens, his wife Olivia, and their middle daughter, Clara, spent the year 1895–96 traveling so that he could lecture and earn the money to pay off their debts. He recounted the trip in *Following the Equator* (1897). Their other two daughters, Susy and Jean, had stayed behind during this time, and Susy died at home on August 18, 1896, of spinal meningitis before the family could be reunited. They could not bring themselves to reside in the house after this tragedy and spent most of their remaining years living abroad. They sold the house in 1903.

The building later functioned as a school, an apartment building, and a public library branch. In 1929, it was rescued from possible demolition and put under the care of the newly formed non-profit group Mark Twain Memorial. The building was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1962. A restoration effort led to its being opened as a house museum in 1974. In 2003, a multimillion-dollar, LEED-certified visitors' center was built that included a museum dedicated to showcasing Twain's life and work.

The house faced serious financial trouble in 2008 due partly to construction cost overruns related to the new visitors' center, but the museum was helped through publicity about their plight, quick reaction from the state of Connecticut, corporations, and other donors, and a benefit performance organized by writers. Since that time, the museum has reported improved financial conditions, though the recovery was marred by the 2010 discovery of a million-dollar embezzlement by the museum's comptroller, who pleaded guilty and served a jail term.

The museum claimed record-setting attendance levels in 2012. It has featured events such as celebrity appearances by Stephen King, Judy Blume, John Grisham, and others; it has also sponsored writing programs and awards. Also in 2012, the Mark Twain House was named one of the Ten Best Historic Homes in the world in *The Ten Best of Everything*, a National Geographic Books publication.

Conan O'Brien: The Kennedy Center Mark Twain Prize for American Humor

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Conan O'Brien: The Kennedy Center Mark Twain Prize for American Humor is a filmed television special honoring comedian, writer, and talk show host Conan O'Brien who was the 26th recipient of the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor. O'Brien is known for his extensive career as a comedy writer on shows such as the Fox animated sitcom *The Simpsons* and the NBC sketch comedy series *Saturday Night Live* as well as hosting several late night programs such as *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* (1993–2009), *The Tonight Show with Conan O'Brien* (2009–2010), and *Conan* (2010–2021).

The ceremony was pre-taped and filmed on March 24, 2025, at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts where he was honored by his fellow comedian friends and collaborators such as John

Mulaney, Will Ferrell, Nikki Glaser, Bill Burr, Sarah Silverman, Stephen Colbert, Adam Sandler, and David Letterman. The special was then aired on Netflix on May 4, 2025.

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