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Seeing the World—and Colby—Through Mark Twain’s Eyes

By Paula Harrington

When I tell people I stayed in Mark Twain’s summer home, I never know what kind of response to expect. One person asked me if I’d gone swimming in the Mississippi; others assumed I was referring to the mansion he built in Hartford. But, every now and then, someone gives me a spellbound look and sighs, “Oh, Quarry Farm!”

That’s the same feeling that comes over me whenever I go there—a sense of fascination, almost disbelief, that this place still exists and remains open to visiting Twain scholars like me, thanks to the Elmira College Center for Mark Twain Studies. Twain himself called Quarry Farm “still, & reposeful & bewitching.” No wonder it is where he wrote, among other works, most of the book that would change American literature forever: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

For 20 years, Twain lived at Quarry Farm during the summer, making the journey from Hartford to upstate New York with his wife and daughters. Every morning he would head out a kitchen door and climb a path to an octagonal wooden study. In the evenings, he would return with his day’s work and read aloud to his family on the terrace.

To sit on that same terrace and look out across a vista of mountains receding over the Chemung River valley is a haunting and daunting experience. Daunting in the way it always is to feel a master’s presence: what could I write that would be worthy of Twain’s wit or humanity? And haunting because it is a place of ghostly reminders—old photographs, private rooms, children’s mementos—of the personal tragedies Twain suffered. Three of his four children died young: his son, Langdon, at 18 months; his daughter Susy from meningitis at 24; and his daughter Jean in an epileptic seizure in the bath at 29. After years of fragile health, his wife, Livy, also died. Only his daughter Clara survived him.

I have now stayed at Quarry Farm during all four seasons, and the experience becomes richer with each visit. My own writing project, about Twain’s dislike for France and his stereotypes of the French, may seem distant from my work as director of the Farnham Writers’ Center at Colby. Yet, sitting on Twain’s favorite hill as the sun goes down and the fireflies come out, I cannot imagine a better place to contemplate questions that concern higher education today. What does it mean to be “American”? How can we welcome and include those different from ourselves? What cultural stereotypes lay hidden within our perceptions, and how do they impede our discourse, our writing, our teaching?

Perhaps most important, as Colby begins its third century, is the question of how the liberal arts, especially the humanities, can open us to other cultures and help us work across them. Twain knew how powerful—and how dangerous—it can be to reach across a divide: why else write a book about an abused boy and a runaway slave surviving together? Or about a prince and a poor boy trading places? A techie thrown back into medieval life? Yet even Twain, world traveler and mold breaker, was susceptible to bias against the French and Native Americans.

As I welcome a new Colby class to the Farnham Writers’ Center, I think about our own “bewitching” spot on Mayflower Hill and the vistas it provides to reflect, study, and create. And I take a lesson from Twain, one of America’s greatest autodidacts, to keep learning and struggling with the paradoxes in the world and in ourselves.



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—Paula Harrington

Paula Harrington is director of the Farnham Writers’ Center at Colby. A former journalist, Harrington also teaches composition and English Language Learner courses. Prior to coming to Colby, she taught at Marymount College of Fordham University and the University of California, Davis.