

# Mark Twain, Volume 1

Question: What do George W. Bush, Cleopatra, and Mark Twain all have in common?  
 Answer: They all currently have books in the *New York Times* Top 20 Best-Selling Non-Fiction book list.

All of the books are memoirs, biographies or autobiographies. None of them has a particularly original title. Bush's memoir, which is at the top of the list, is called *Decision Points*. Cleopatra's biography is called *Cleopatra* while the new Mark Twain autobiography is simply called *Autobiography of Mark Twain, Volume 1*.

How can Mark Twain be publishing a new autobiography now when he's been dead for so many years? Well, curiously, it was Mark Twain's wish that his autobiography wouldn't be published until 100 years after his death. Twain was born 175 years ago on 30 November 1835 and died 100 years ago on 21 April 1910. So this year is the first time that his autobiography can be published.

Twain is often called one of the greatest American writers in much the same way as Charles Dickens is called one of the greatest English writers. During his lifetime he wrote countless articles, essays, poems, short stories and novels. His most famous novels are *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Both books were based on the years he spent growing up by the Mississippi River. In fact, he based the character of Tom Sawyer on himself while Huckleberry Finn was based on one of his childhood friends.

Twain loved the Mississippi River so much he worked as a steamboat pilot for a while. In fact, it was while he was working on the steamboats that he found his new name. Until 1863 he used his real name: Samuel Langhorne Clemens. But from that date he started using a pen name: Mark Twain. The words 'mark twain' were used on a line that steamboats used to measure the depth of the water in the river.

On many occasions, Twain attempted to write his autobiography but without success. He was a great speaker and eventually decided to dictate the story of his life to a stenographer. The publishers of his new autobiography have collected all this work together and published detailed notes and comments to accompany Twain's words. In fact, of the book's 760 pages, nearly 200 are dedicated to these notes.

Originally, the publishers, the University of California Press, expected to sell a few thousand copies but the book was an instant success and the printers are now producing 30,000 copies a week. Maybe today's politicians and celebrities should take note and wait a hundred years before publishing their autobiographies.

**1** Read the article and complete the names and titles.

- 1 *Decision* \_\_\_\_\_
- 2 *Autobiography of* \_\_\_\_\_
- 3 Charles \_\_\_\_\_
- 4 *The* \_\_\_\_\_ *of Tom Sawyer*
- 5 The \_\_\_\_\_ River
- 6 Samuel Langhorne \_\_\_\_\_
- 7 University of \_\_\_\_\_ Press

**2** Explain in your own words what each name and title refers to in exercise 1.

- |         |         |
|---------|---------|
| 1 _____ | 5 _____ |
| 2 _____ | 6 _____ |
| 3 _____ | 7 _____ |
| 4 _____ |         |

### 3 Use the words in the box to complete the definitions.

autobiography	biography	diary	journal	memoir
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- 1 A \_\_\_\_\_ is a book that someone writes about someone else's life.
- 2 An \_\_\_\_\_ is a book about your life that you write yourself.
- 3 A \_\_\_\_\_ is an account of someone's experiences written by that person.
- 4 A \_\_\_\_\_ is a written record of your experiences in which you write about what happens every day.
- 5 A \_\_\_\_\_ is a book that has spaces for each day of the year, where you can write down things that you have to do. Some people use this to write their private thoughts every day.

### 4 Decide if the sentences are true (T) or false (F). Correct the false sentences.

- |   |       |
|---|-------|
| 1 The writer thinks some of the top 20 titles are quite original. | T / F |
| 2 2010 is the centenary of Mark Twain's birth.                    | T / F |
| 3 He was mostly a writer of novels.                               | T / F |
| 4 The character of Huckleberry Finn was based on Twain.           | T / F |
| 5 Twain found it difficult to write his autobiography.            | T / F |
| 6 The publishers thought the book would be a bestseller.          | T / F |

### 5 Join the sentence halves.

- 1 Well, curiously, ...
  - 2 During his lifetime ...
  - 3 Until 1863 ...
  - 4 On many occasions, ...
  - 5 Originally, ...
  - 6 Maybe ...
- a ... he used his real name.  
 b ... he wrote countless articles.  
 c ... it was his wish that his autobiography wouldn't be published until long after his death.  
 d ... the publishers expected to sell a few thousand copies.  
 e ... today's politicians and celebrities should take note.  
 f ... Twain attempted to write his autobiography.

### 6 Answer the questions in your own words.

- 1 Do you enjoy reading biographies or autobiographies?
- 2 Which of the books mentioned in the article would you most like to read?
- 3 Do you know the titles of any other books by Mark Twain?
- 4 Which authors are usually associated with your country?
- 5 Do you agree with the last sentence?

### Glossary

- attempt** (*verb*) – to try to do something  
**base on** (*phrasal verb*) – to use something or someone as a model for a piece of writing  
**countless** (*adjective*) – very many  
**depth** (*noun*) – the distance from the top to the bottom of something  
**pen name** (*noun*) – a name a writer uses instead of their real name  
**steamboat** (*noun*) – a large boat that moves by steam power  
**stenographer** (*noun*) – someone whose job is to write notes using shorthand typing, a system of writing in note form that allows the typist to type very quickly  
**take note** (*phrase*) – to notice something and try to remember it because you think it is important  
**wish** (*noun*) – something that you want to do