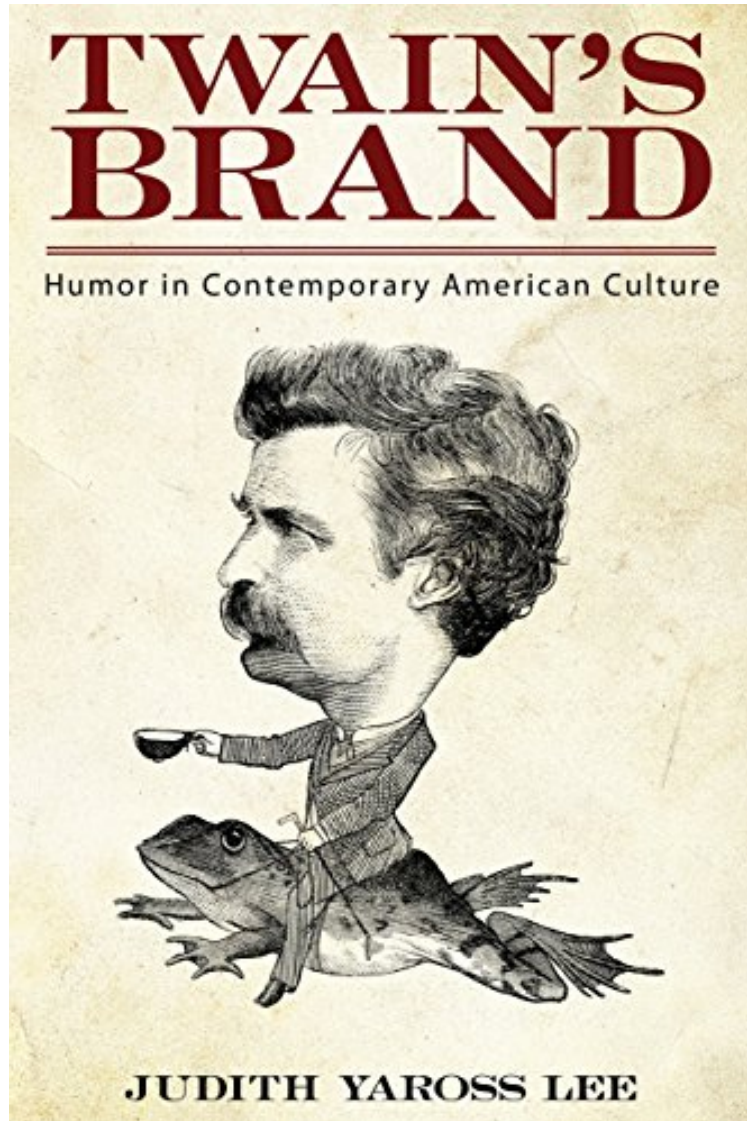


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## Twain's Brand: Humor in Contemporary American Culture

*Judith Yaross Lee*

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**Judith Yaross Lee : Twain's Brand: Humor in Contemporary American Culture** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Twain's Brand: Humor in Contemporary American Culture:

Samuel L. Clemens lost the 1882 lawsuit declaring his exclusive right to use "Mark Twain" as a commercial trademark, but he succeeded in the marketplace, where synergy among his comic journalism, live performances,

authorship, and entrepreneurship made “Mark Twain” the premier national and international brand of American humor in his day. And so it remains in ours, because Mark Twain’s humor not only expressed views of self and society well ahead of its time, but also anticipated ways in which humor and culture coalesce in today’s postindustrial information economy—the global trade in media, performances, and other forms of intellectual property that began after the Civil War. In *Twain’s Brand: Humor in Contemporary American Culture*, Judith Yaross Lee traces four hallmarks of Twain’s humor that are especially significant today. Mark Twain’s invention of a stage persona comically conflated with his biographical self lives on in contemporary performances by Garrison Keillor, Margaret Cho, Jerry Seinfeld, and Jon Stewart. The postcolonial critique of Britain that underlies America’s nationalist tall tale tradition not only self-destructs in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* but also drives the critique of American Exceptionalism in Philip Roth’s literary satires. The semi-literate writing that gives *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* its “vernacular vision”—wrapping cultural critique in ostensibly innocent transgressions and misunderstandings—has a counterpart in the apparently untutored drawing style and social critique seen in *The Simpsons*, Lynda Barry’s comics, and *The Boondocks*. And the humor business of recent decades depends on the same brand-name promotion, cross-media synergy, and copyright practices that Clemens pioneered and fought for a century ago. *Twain’s Brand* highlights the modern relationship among humor, commerce, and culture that were first exploited by Mark Twain.

“In this lively, lucid and engaging book, Lee gives us an insightful reading of what was innovative about Mark Twain’s brand of humor and how its legacies shape the cultural landscape in America today. Her deep knowledge of Mark Twain’s work and the history of various forms of humor, combined with her astute observations on contemporary society, allow her to take us on a fascinating journey linking commerce and comedy, artifice and authenticity, stand-up, sitcoms, performance art and parody from the nineteenth century through today. An instructive and enjoyable book.”—Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Joseph S. Atha Professor of Humanities, professor of English, and director of the American studies program at Stanford University  
About the Author  
Judith Yaross Lee is a professor and director of honors tutorials in the School of Communication Studies at Ohio University. She is the author of *Defining ‘New Yorker’ Humor* and *Garrison Keillor: A Voice of America*, both available from University Press of Mississippi.