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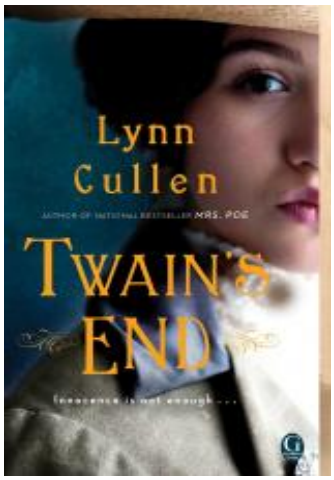
Twain's End

by Lynn Cullen



About the Book

In March of 1909, Mark Twain cheerfully blessed the wedding of his private secretary, Isabel V. Lyon and his business manager, Ralph Ashcroft. One month later, he fired both. He proceeded to write a ferocious 429-page rant about the pair, calling Isabel ?a liar, a forger, a thief, a hypocrite, a drunkard, a sneak, a humbug, a traitor, a conspirator, a filthy-minded & salacious slut pining for seduction.? Twain and his daughter, Clara Clemens, then slandered Isabel in the newspapers, erasing her nearly seven years of devoted service to the family. Isabel Lyon has gone down in history as the villainess who swindled Twain in his final decade. She never rebutted Twain?s claims, never spoke badly of the man she called ?The King.? She kept her silence until she died in a tiny Greenwich Village apartment in 1958, although the actor Hal Holbrook met with her often while developing his Mark Twain show, acknowledging that Isabel knew Twain better than anyone else in the world. How did Lyon go from being the beloved secretary who ran Twain?s life to a woman whom he was determined to destroy?

On January 11, 1909, Helen Keller, her teacher Anne Sullivan Macy, and Mrs. Macy?s husband, John, visit Mark Twain in the Connecticut mansion built for him by his secretary, Isabel Lyon. The trio, themselves in the middle of an intolerable love triangle, unknowingly walk into a crisis brewing between Twain and Isabel, and worsened by his business manager, Ralph Ashcroft. Then Clara Clemens enters, on a mission to fight for her paramour and accompanist on the piano, the very married Will Wark, setting off an explosion between all the lovers. Based on Isabel Lyon?s extant diary, Twain?s writings and letters, and events in Twain?s boyhood which may have altered his ability to love, TWAIN?S END explores this real-life tale of doomed love.

Discussion Guide

Introduction

Isabel Lyon worked as the private secretary to Mark Twain for nearly seven years, the devoted and tireless companion of

America?s most beloved author. In 1909, with Twain?s blessing, Isabel became engaged to Ralph Ashcroft, his business manager. Just one month later, both Isabel and Ashcroft were fired, their dismissal followed by a scathing 429-page rant penned by their former employer that called Isabel ?a liar, a forger, a thief, a hypocrite, a drunkard, a sneak, a humbug, a traitor, a conspirator, a filthy-minded and salacious slut pining for seduction.? Twain and his daughter, Clara Clemens took their tirade against Isabel to the newspapers, erasing her years of devoted service to the Clemens family. In TWAIN?S END, bestselling and highly acclaimed author Lynn Cullen reimagines Isabel?s dramatic shift from Twain?s indispensable secretary to a woman he set out to destroy. Based on Isabel?s diary and events in Twain?s boyhood that may have altered his ability to love, TWAIN?S END explores this real-life tale of tangled relationships and doomed love.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. Samuel Clemens often talks about his dual personalities --- Sam Clemens and Mark Twain --- occasionally saying he wishes to be rid of the latter or even that he hates him. How much do you believe an author?s life is caught up in their identity as a writer? Do you think Sam Clemens uses Mark Twain as an excuse for his behavior, or do you think his fame and renown as Twain fuel the behavior?

2. Samuel Clemens, Clara, and others tell Isabel that Sam is completely dependent on her. Do you believe his affection for her stems in large part from that dependency?

3. Do you think Sam?s attraction to women stems from their beauty and youth, or do you think that other factors, like their status of subservience to him, play a role? Consider the invalid Olivia, or Isabel, whose fortune was gone and financial need great. Do you suppose a need for power and status fueled his passions? How much of his childhood and background plays a role, if at all, in his psychology?

4. Do you think that Sam would have married Isabel on his return from England if the reporter?s question concerning marriage rumors had not been denied? Do you believe Sam ever had intentions of marrying Isabel, or was he too conscious of his reputation?

5. Why do you think Mrs. Clemens speaks so candidly with Isabel about Sam?s roving eye without admonishing Isabel for her flirtation? Why do you imagine she tells her about his propensity to break hearts and hurt people that are close to him? How much of this is said out of kindness, and how much of it is a warning? Do you think she spoke so openly with her husband?s previous interests?

6. How do you explain Isabel?s passion for Sam despite her knowledge of his philandering, his status as a married man and her role in his family? Do you think she ought to have left her role as his secretary? How soon should she have left her position for her life to have taken a different trajectory? How do you think it would have turned out differently?

7. Thinking of her daughter singing before a crowd with her husband in attendance, Olivia Clemens feels troubled, as she believes ?Clara hadn?t a chance. No one did, really, against Mark Twain. Not even Youth himself.? What do you think of Mrs. Clemens? attitude towards the power of her husband?s alter ego? Do you think she means to say that no one can compete with the popularity of Mark Twain, or is she getting at something more?

8. What do you make of Olivia Clemens? situation? How would you characterize her relationship with Sam? Is her husband truly the cause of her illness? If so, why has she persisted in living with him and tolerating his actions?

9. The story of the young Sam discovering Jennie and his father together sheds light on Sam?s sense of guilt, but in what other insights does it offer on his personality? On his understanding of himself?

10. What do you think is the largest draw for Isabel: Mr. Clemens? wit, charm, intellect, status or his unavailability? Do you think their closeness sealed her affection and she would have been equally as passionate had Sam been less famous or even not famous at all?

11. Why do you think the author chose to write the final chapter from the perspective of Mrs. Lyon instead of Isabel?

12. How much did you know about Samuel Clemens? life before reading this book? How has your reading of TWAIN?S END impacted your perception of the man? Of Mark Twain and his books?

Author Bio

Lynn Cullen?s bestselling novels, including THE WOMAN WITH THE CURE, THE SISTERS OF SUMMIT AVENUE, MRS. POE, TWAIN'S END, THE CREATION OF EVE and REIGN OF MADNESS, have been translated into 17 languages and are the recipients of various honors, including NPR Great Read, Oprah.com Book of the Week, *People* magazine Book of the Week, Indie Next List selection, and *Atlanta* magazine Best Books of the Year. She lives in Atlanta.

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