

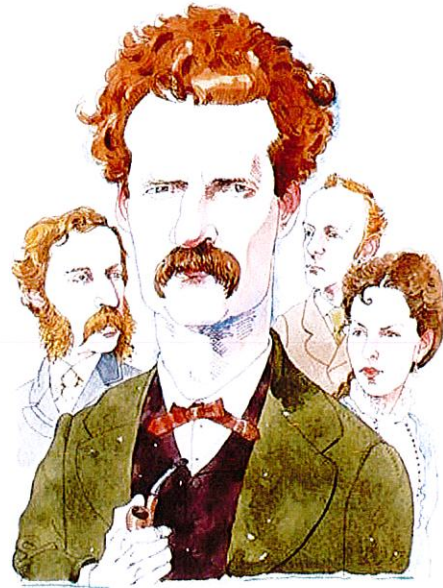
BOOK REVIEW

'The Bohemians' by Ben Tarnoff

By James Zug | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT | MARCH 29, 2014

In his late twenties, Mark Twain lived in a mining town in Nevada Territory. A freelance newspaper reporter, Twain was often penniless and full of doubt about his future as a writer. It was a crossroads: there was a particular moment when he was destined as much to be an embittered, failed journalist as he was to be the iconic American novelist, humorist and travel writer.

That moment is at the heart of Ben Tarnoff's delightful book, "The Bohemians." Twain left Nevada for San Francisco and Tarnoff focuses on a cohort that coalesced around him there for a couple of years in the mid-1860s — a group that included poet and short story writer Bret Harte, the travel writer Charles Warren Stoddard, and the poet Ina Coolbrith.



JOE CIARDIELLO

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It all happened in the most improbable way. Twain, still Sam Clemens, had been a typesetter, newspaper editor and river pilot in Missouri when the Civil War broke out. To avoid being drafted, Twain rushed west to the territory of Nevada

where his older brother lived. Like many other men at the time, he gave it a go as a silver miner and failed. He found work as a newspaper reporter in the boom town of Virginia City.

In May 1863, the twenty-seven year-old Twain took a stagecoach to San Francisco. The city was a thriving, exuberant town, more than 100,000 strong and yet still raw: it was only fourteen years removed from the time when it was a sleepy mission settlement of a thousand. Yes, there were saloons and prostitutes, gambling and gamboling, but also many newspapers and magazines. People read as much as they partied. One of the many insights Tarnoff elucidates is the high rate of literacy in the American West at the time, both in places like San Francisco and Virginia City and in the backcountry mining camps.

Twain wrote columns for San Francisco dailies and sent freelance reports back to Nevada papers. He got fired from one paper and then snagged a job at a new weekly, the *Californian*, which connected him to Harte, Stoddard, and Coolbirth. They formed an abiding friendship, getting together for tea or dinner and spending hours talking about literature. In that time-honored Bay Area way, they started their own venture, a monthly magazine called the *Overland*. The magazine became a launching pad for a new type of American fiction, as the friends crafted raw, humorous stories of pioneering life that could give them a foothold on the craggy mountain of American literary culture back east.

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Adeptly wrapping a wonderful story around these young writers, Tarnoff glides smoothly along, never dwelling too long and never claiming too much. He stacks fifty pages of endnotes at the back of the book but such archival sweat doesn't show in the prose. He deploys his cohorts' letters and memoirs to good effect, as these young writers battled their own insecurities and ambitions and still supported each other. They weren't really bohemians in the typical sense — they all loved the high life too much — but they fascinatingly served as partial arbiters

of a new kind of American fiction. Tarnoff doesn't try to make the case that Stoddard or Coolbrith or Harte should be particularly known today; unlike some books of this type, he doesn't argue for a rediscovery of neglected genius. But he wonderfully shows how they helped invent Mark Twain.

Struggling as much as succeeding, Twain was desperately in debt in San Francisco. He once had to flee town because he signed a \$500 bail bond when a friend was arrested after beating up a bartender; the friend disappeared rather than face charges and Twain did as well, holing up in the Sierra Nevadas for three months. At another point, Twain thought about committing suicide, even putting a pistol to his head.

Then in November 1865 he published a tale, "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog," in a New York paper that launched his career nationwide. Bret Harte became equally famous for a satirical poem that went viral in a 1860s way.

The brief, bohemian moment ended. Twain and Harte moved east to cash in on their newfound fame as chroniclers of the frontier. San Francisco evolved. The city suffered both a real earthquake in 1868 (thirty people died) and then a proverbial one a year later when the transcontinental railway was completed: it was no longer colorfully isolated at the back of beyond but an integral part of the nation's economy.

Back east, Harte shot up higher first but then bombed. He signed a one-year \$10,000 contract to write exclusively for the Atlantic Monthly, the country's leading magazine. But Harte was overconfident. His pieces were slow in coming and not very good; the Atlantic didn't renew his contract. Harte soon faded into oblivion.

Twain started out more slowly (a lesson in tempering pride with a healthy dose of doubt?). Living in Buffalo and then Hartford, he wrote his travel memoirs, "Innocents Abroad" and "Roughing It" and gave lectures. One of the vivid scenes that Tarnoff ably sketches is of Twain in England in the winter of 1873-74. He was now a minor celebrity but still hadn't found his niche. Stoddard happened to be passing through, and Twain employed his old colleague as a secretary. Every evening Twain gave a talk at a London theater. Afterwards, he stayed up late,

drinking and restlessly reminiscing to Stoddard about his childhood in Missouri. It was there, in the damp, pre-dawn hours in a London hotel with his friend from the old San Francisco days, that Twain began to conceive his novels about Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn.

Tarnoff closes with a coda about the last of the four to leave San Francisco. In the 1870s Ina Coolbrith moved across the Bay to Oakland. She worked as a librarian. Years went by. A restless ten-year-old boy came into her library. She plied him with books and conversation, serving as his first mentor and almost as a surrogate parent. The boy became a famous writer who brought back stories of the next American frontier. His name: Jack London.

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