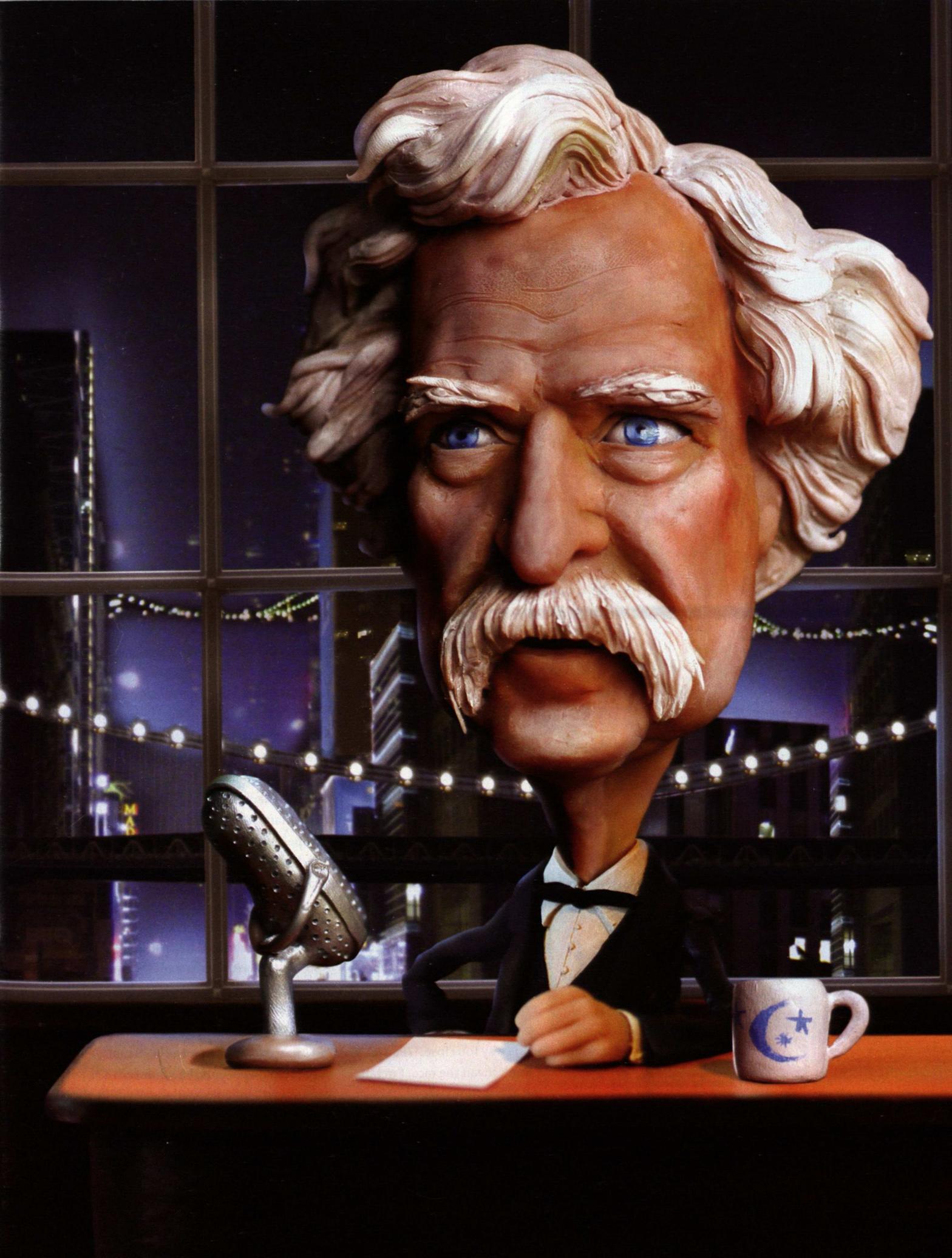


MARIE TWAINE

VS
THE

McWISSECRACK

A Pulitzer Prize-winning author examines the style and substance of America's favorite humorist. Essay by Ron Powers. Sculpted illustration by Liz Lomax.



Hey, did you hear what Jay Leno said the other night? “Not looking good for President Bush’s popularity. He’s now at 35 percent. If he drops just three more points, he becomes a Democrat.”

No, wait — was that Jay or Dave? Or was it Conan? Jon Stewart, maybe?

Or was it Mark Twain? Maybe. His ghost is still with us — barely. Traces of the Vandal (as he called himself on his piety-shattering lecture tour of 1868) flicker through the

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ever-burgeoning American humor industry nearly a century after his death. (If you just made a mental connection between “death” and “exaggerated,” the key words of a legendary Twainian quip, you know what I mean.) But how much of his hell-raising comic vision truly endures in our own times? What exactly was that comic vision, and what made it such a hot, often shocking force? Would Mark Twain recognize the faint echoes of his own pioneering voice in this age of humor as scatology; of humor as political bludgeon; of humor as mass-produced trivia — the Age of the McWisecrack?

There’s no avoiding the form of his greatest popular comic legacy. Samuel Langhorne Clemens, aka Mark Twain, was the architect of the All-American gag, or the one-liner, as we know it: the ruminating build-up, the pause, then what he called the “snapper,” the tacked-on thought that changes everything. Conan O’Brien is channeling Mark Twain when he remarks, “The election for governor of New Jersey is taking place today, and, as we speak, it is way too close.” (Pause) “I don’t mean the race, I’m talking about New Jersey.”

Ha-ha! OK, let’s be generous and say, ha-ha-ha! And yet ... and yet ... And yet, somewhere down

the corridors of time, we can hear a long-drawling voice observe, “It is the foreign element that commits our crimes.” (Pause) “There is no native criminal class except Congress.”

Which snapper snaps? And which one is quickly digested and forgotten — the humor equivalent of a Happy Meal?

A quick survey of his principal comic descendants suggests that Samuel Langhorne Clemens remains, today, exactly as his great friend William Dean Howells described him in 1910, the year of his death: sole, incomparable.

Will Rogers is generally thought of (when he’s thought of at all) as Mark Twain’s closest heir. He arose as a kind of National Humorist in the 1920s and 1930s on the Twainian ballast of a heartland drawl (Oklahoma), a genius for homespun aphorisms, and his status as public spokesman via radio, the movies and his syndicated newspaper column. But unlike the Vandal, Rogers never said anything that made anyone nervous; he never challenged piety or mainstream opinion. More to the point, he left behind no work of enduring literature. Since his early death in 1935, he has been largely forgotten: an endearing celebrity; a quaint figure of a quaint time.

After Rogers, the Twainian glow grows dim — even as “humor” spreads like Wal-Mart as an American commodity. Bob Hope? Johnny Carson? Legendary quipsters, each one. Carson even had a mild political bite. But both had writers, as do their industrialized successors: the Lenos and Lettermans and Conans and Bill Mahers and Jimmy Kimmels and the rest. Maher and Stewart? More sophisticated; more demanding of their viewers to be sure; but neither has yet written the next *Huckleberry Finn*. And so it goes. Lightning bugs, but no lightning.

So what, exactly, was it about Mark Twain that remains beyond the reach of today’s funny men and funny women? Well, how much time do you have?

Start with breadth and scale. The brief witticism was only one item in Mark Twain’s



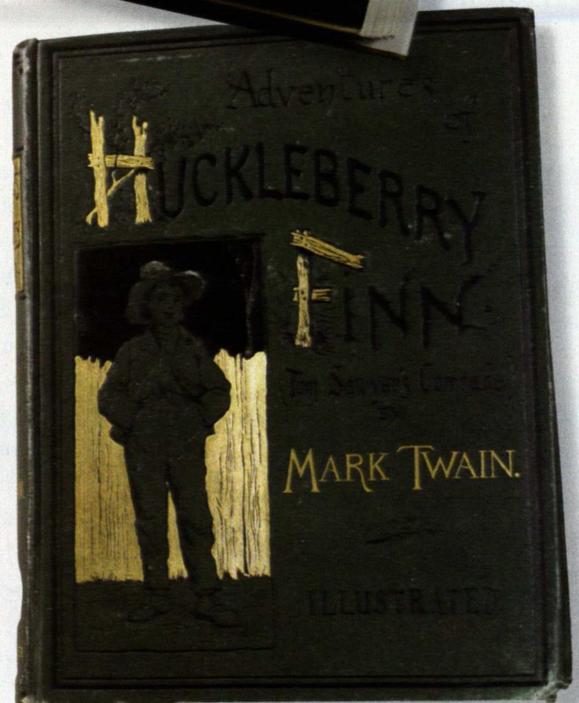
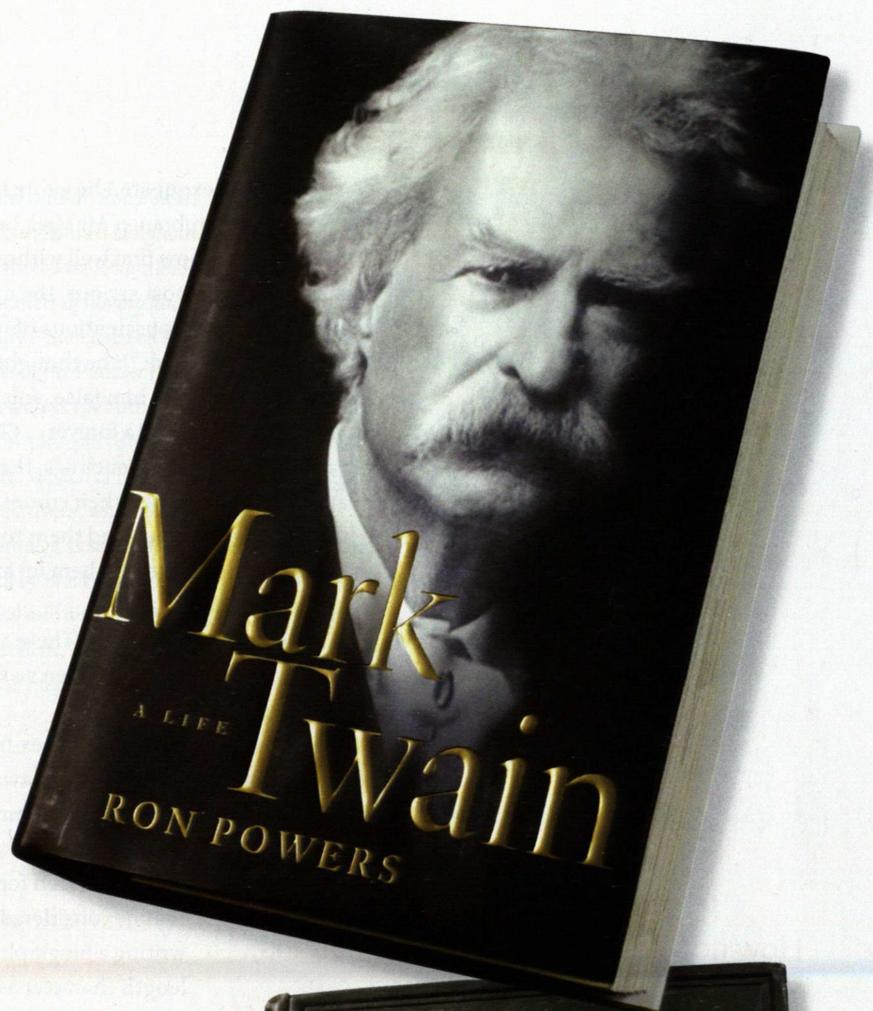
comic arsenal. (Author's favorite: "Heaven for climate — Hell for society." Runner-up: his response to a complaint that a rich man's wealth was tainted: "Yes, twice tainted. T'aint yours, and t'aint mine.") Parody is another example: His casual readers today may not fully appreciate his devilish gift for mimicking bad art, bad poetry, bad decoration, bad journalism. Here is Sam Clemens as a young newspaperman in San Francisco in 1863, spoofing the flowery prose of "society" writers covering a fancy ball: Miss B., he writes, showed up "in an elegant goffered flounce ... with a frontispiece formed of a single magnificent cauliflower imbedded in mashed potatoes. Thus attired Ms. B. looked good enough to eat." Woody Allen, among the few legitimate claimants to Mark Twain's legacy, would have been at home in that riff.

Or how about Clemens' gift for pure silly wordplay? Not many mid-19th century writers dared expose their silly sides — most of them had no silly sides — but Clemens saw no problem with it. He once claimed to his newspaper readers that he'd come upon a valentine from a "sentimental law student" to his sweetheart: "Such sights and scenes as this ever remind me, the party of the second part, of you, my Mary, the peerless party of the first part ..." Garrison Keillor, another plausible child of Mark Twain and a shrewd student of him, may have spent some time browsing through this sketch.

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If you're into stronger stuff than "silly," try his anger. Here we draw close to the dark essence of his comic muse.

William Dean Howells witnessed the Twainian anger at close range — though he escaped it himself over a touching 41-year friendship — and analyzed it brilliantly. The mild-mannered editor and critic (unlike many of today's disdainful psychobiographers) perceived the Vandal's wrath as a literary asset, not a liability, and saw it as a foundation of Mark Twain's unshakable moral code. "I should say that Clemens' central and final personality



Powers' 2005 biography of Mark Twain, top, was a finalist for a National Book Critics Circle Award. This first edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is part of the State Historical Society of Missouri's collection housed in the Ellis Library building.

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as stated in the abstract: Mark Twain
as an eat-your-beans moralizer.

was something exquisite,” he wrote in his loving 1910 remembrance, *My Mark Twain*. “One could not know him well without realizing him the most serious, the most humane, the most conscientious of men.”

But Howells added: “If he thought you had in any way played him false, you were anathema and marantha forever ... Clemens did not forgive his dead enemies; their death seemed to deepen their crimes, like a base evasion ... he pursued them to the grave; he would like to dig them up and take vengeance on their clay.”

Clemens ruefully agreed. “There are times,” he admitted once, “when swearing cannot meet the emergency.”

One “pursued” target was his ex-friend, the great newspaper editor Whitelaw Reid. Bruised by Reid’s refusal to run a complimentary review of one of his books, Clemens worked up such a hatred for Reid

that he considered writing a biography-length character assassination. “I do not begin with his boyhood,” Clemens scribbled in his notes for the project,

“which is of no consequence — nor with his manhood, which has never existed.”

And then a conversion happened, as it so often did in these cases: re-reading this and similar notations, Clemens grew diverted by the humor shining through the wrath. Using an instinct fundamental to his literary genius, he shifted his raw anger into creative delight — turned the screed into art:

“As my labors grew, so also grew my fascination. Malice & malignity faded out of me — or maybe I drove them out of me ... I got thoroughly in love with this work; for I saw that I was going to write a book which the very devils & angels themselves would delight to read.” And he would have done it, too, had not his wife, Livy, made him quit.

Here, then, is a central

difference between today’s comedy and the figure at its fountainhead: anger, linked to a moral vision. Howells saw that Mark Twain’s “indignant sense of right and wrong,” his “ardent hate of meanness and injustice,” was what separated him from his “merely facetious” peers and enabled a social criticism utterly distinctive among humor writers of his day. And, for that matter, of our day as well.

Howells: “American humorists formerly chose the wrong in public matters; they were on the side of slavery, of drunkenness, and of irreligion; the friends of civilization were their prey; their spirit was thoroughly vulgar and base ... [Mark Twain] has not to accuse himself, so far as I can remember, of having written anything to make one morally ashamed of liking him.”

How outdated — uncool — how hopelessly vanilla that all sounds, as stated in the abstract: Mark Twain as an eat-your-beans moralizer?

Only in its actual execution does this formula reveal its full truth-telling bite and put all of our Comedy Showcase strutters to shame.

For example, Huck Finn fibbing to Aunt Sally about a fictitious steamboat trip:

“We blewed out a cylinder-head.”

“Good gracious! anybody hurt?”

“No’m. Killed a nigger.”

“Well, it’s lucky, because sometimes people do get hurt ...”

Funny? Sure. But not merely funny as in: “I’m talking about New Jersey.” The volumes of corrosive, uncompromising irony compressed into that brief passage icily indict a 400-year-old tradition of dehumanizing proprietorship over a subjugated race, a tradition whose assumptions were quite dangerously alive and well

when *Huckleberry Finn* was published in 1884.

Breadth, scale, silly wordplay, a “bottom of fury” that empowered a fearless truth-telling and unprecedented social criticism — these are among the



integers in Mark Twain's founding comic vision. They are also the integers that are easiest to explain. But even these do not get us to the heart of it.

The heart of it is to be found in Mark Twain's inexhaustible surrendering love for the language he spoke: not the English language, the American language; the language of common people, like himself, yielding unconscious poetry, and inadvertent delight, in its limitless capacity for renewal, for fresh ideas formed by the mere reversal of a few words in a sentence — for play.

Words as revivifying play: This may be the most recondite of all the Twainian attributes, given a culture that seems to have grown indifferent to its language. America, which has long since given its heart to visual images and electronic sounds, seems perfectly content to recycle the industrialized mots and wisecracks of others, to express its profoundest passions and fears and certitudes with cheap factory-made language slapped onto bumpers and printed on the backs of T-shirts. The near-universal deployment of the word that is an anagram of this, in and of itself, has probably reduced the consumer demand for homegrown sentences by about 60 percent.

Words as revivifying play; play leading to laughter. Laughter leading ultimately to liberty. No one in Mark Twain's time, and precious few since, have grasped this divine process as clearly as the old Vandal himself. It's a process well worth retracing in our own fraught time. And why? Young Satan, one of Mark Twain's late-life characters, explains it best:

"For your race, in its poverty, has unquestionably one really effective weapon — laughter. Power, Money, Persuasion, Supplication, Persecution — these can lift at a colossal humbug, push it a little — crowd it a little — weaken it a little, century by century: but only Laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of Laughter nothing can stand." ■■

About the author: Ron Powers, BJ '63, below, shares with Samuel Langhorne Clemens the boyhood hometown of Hannibal, Mo., although he denies rumors of having known the great author personally ("Sam lived on the other side of town"). A winner of the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 1973, Powers is the author, most recently, of Mark Twain: A Life, published by the Free Press. The cinematic version of the No. 1 best-selling Flags of Our Fathers, which Powers co-wrote with James Bradley, is scheduled for release in fall 2006, produced by Steven Spielberg, directed by Clint Eastwood and with a screenplay by Paul Haggis. During college, Powers contributed to Missouri Showme magazine (see story on Page 16).

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Photo by Jordan Silverman