

MIZZOU

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[Home](#) » [Summer 2010](#) » [Around the Columns](#) » Talking Twain

Around the Columns

Talking Twain

On the centennial of Mark Twain's death, Mizzou assembled some top Twainiacs and threw a posthumous party, school-fashion, with lectures, exhibits of period clothing and a panel discussion. At the end of his own lectures, Twain sometimes joked that, "It's a terrible death to be talked to death." For three days in March 2010, writers and scholars talked him back to life.

The centerpiece of the celebration was the Paul Anthony Brick Lecture Series — three lectures by Ron Powers, BJ '63, whose *Mark Twain: A Life* (Free Press, 2005) was a finalist for the 2006 National Book Critics Circle Award. Powers talked about Twain's role in shaping what he calls "our native truthtelling voice."

Powers says that Twain, like great American writers after him, "developed such skills as observation, a compressed writing style, a respect for fact and the courage necessary to venture off into unfamiliar territory to find out what was happening. I cannot underestimate the necessity of courage in a narrative writer of fiction or nonfiction: the courage to leave the comfortable world behind, to cross the frontier, to be where you don't belong, to ask questions of strangers who may not want to tell you the answers. This is the quality that makes us writers. If we don't have it, we're memoirists."

The passive way in which audiences receive radio, television and advertising have at times made them lethargic in their wish to be *told* the truth, Powers says. But he sees some hope in the wired world. "I'm optimistic about the Internet era, if only because it has equipped us with



In March 2010, Mizzou hosted lectures and exhibits on the centennial of Mark Twain's death. This scene from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, illustrated by Thomas Hart Benton, belongs to the State Historical Society of Missouri, which is housed at MU. Photo © MBI Inc. Reproduced with permission of Easton Press

keyboards, breaking 60 years of couch-potato passivity. As long as we have the means of making words at our fingertips, we have a fighting chance.”

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