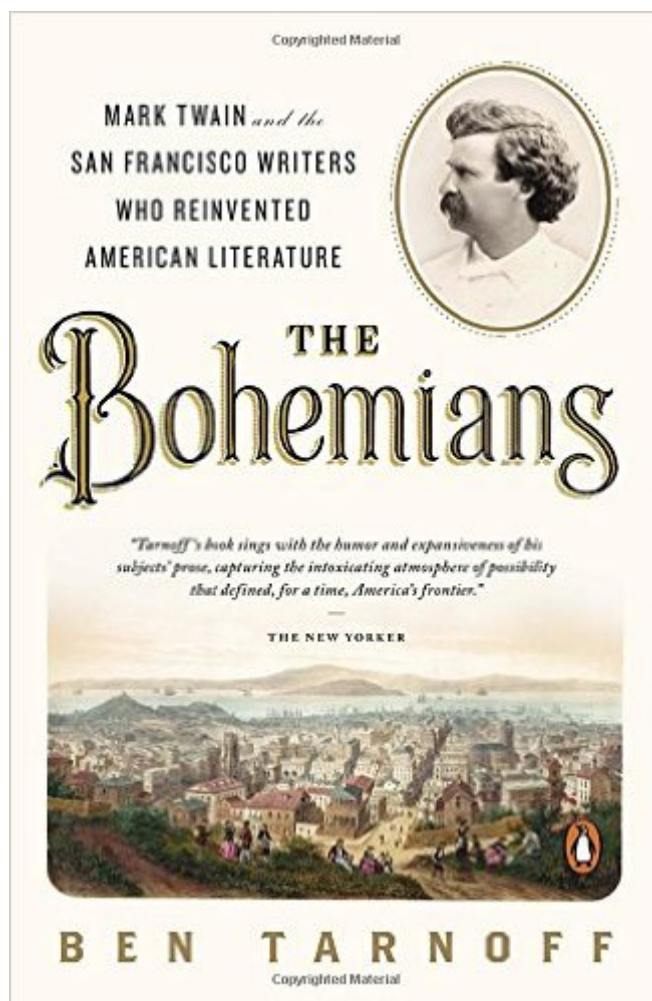


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# The Bohemians: Mark Twain And The San Francisco Writers Who Reinvented American Literature



## Synopsis

An extraordinary portrait of a fast-changing America and the Western writers who gave voice to its emerging identity. At once an intimate portrait of an unforgettable group of writers and a history of a cultural revolution in America, *The Bohemians* reveals how a brief moment on the far western frontier changed our culture forever. Beginning with Mark Twain's arrival in San Francisco in 1863, this group biography introduces readers to the other young eccentric writers seeking to create a new American voice at the country's edge: literary golden boy Bret Harte; struggling gay poet Charles Warren Stoddard; and beautiful, haunted Ina Coolbrith, poet and protector of the group. Ben Tarnoff's elegant, atmospheric history reveals how these four pioneering writers helped spread the Bohemian movement throughout the world, transforming American literature along the way.

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## Customer Reviews

Ben Tarnoff's "The Bohemians" is a fascinating and highly readable book covering an important chapter of American literary history: the "Bohemian" movement in San Francisco in the 1860s, and the four most important authors to arise from it. Of course the most important of the four was Mark Twain, and Twain's meteoric rise after years of uncertainty and poverty is the chief engine of Tarnoff's story. But Tarnoff also has compelling tales to tell of Twain's fellow Bohemians: Bret Harte, dapper and sardonic, initial star and mentor of the group until alcoholism and writer's block put an end to his literary career; Ina Coolbrith, eventually Poet Laureate of California, who fought bravely against poverty and family tragedy; and Charles Warren Stoddard, a kindhearted, impractical

dreamer at war with society and his own sexuality. Tarnoff paints a vivid picture of the young San Francisco, rough and violent, yet hungry for the printed word and eager to establish itself as a distinctive society, free from the imitation (and judgment) of European and New England models. At 256 pages (minus index, notes and acknowledgments), "The Bohemians" provides only brief portraits of its subjects, but they are sharp and memorable portraits. The saddest pages are at the end, portraying the explosive collapse of Twain and Harte's friendship. (Tarnoff tells us that Twain had every reason to be furious at Harte, but Twain's actions against his former friend were inexcusable.) Just as sad was the co-opting of the Bohemian literary movement by wealthy businessmen who transformed it into the Bohemian Club, the infamous haven for right-wing politicians. The emblematic story here is the fate of Thomas Starr King, a Unitarian minister and abolitionist who served as mentor to all four of the original Bohemians. In 1931, the California legislature chose to honor King with a statue in the U.S. Capitol. In 1989, King's statue was replaced with a statue of Ronald Reagan. The California congressman who sponsored the change said he had no idea who King even was.

It is an enjoyable read. It's not just about the four founding writers of the San Francisco Bohemian movement that began in 1863, it's also about how the Far West developed into an economic powerhouse, with a character unlike that of New York City that still needed to be accepted as an identity of its own, independent of the East Coast. Author Ben Tarnoff gives the readers an overview of the four writers: Mark Twain, Bret Harte, Ina Coolbrith and Charles Warren Stoddard. The three men were not college educated and Ina barely made it through standard schooling. Tarnoff profiles how all four met in San Francisco as writers for *The Californian*, all with unique styles that were the vanguard to a new Western voice that only decades later became an acceptable regional voice of Americana. A lot of pages are devoted to Twain and his days in both Nevada City, NV and in San Francisco. It's not always a pleasant picture, but then again, Twain was not an easy man. He was pompous and rude and never did apologize for his errors. He was unforgiving to anyone who belittled his wife Livy. Like Harte, he often lived beyond his means. He relished the limelight and was a born performer who could master the contemporary vernacular. Twain invented himself to be a likable chap, yet when alone his demons brought back his insecurities. But this is more than just a biography of these four writers. It's also a profile of a city, region and country that was struggling after the Civil War. The quick riches that brought San Francisco to the front line also was its downfall in the great Panic of 1873, the same time the four Bohemians had lost their great influence and moved on. Only Twain survived the fame and learned how to market himself as the great

American voice, by moving back East and traveling to London where the English adored him. His professional relationship with Harte ended when Harte wrote unkind words about Twain's wife. Twain's relationship with Stoddard ended more because Stoddard could no longer provide Twain with engaging ideas. Tarnoff's writing style is easy to follow. He adds 49 pages of notes to his research, making sure that he gives credit to publishers and preachers of the time who were recruiting fresh voices to the American literary scene. This is an enjoyable read that may take up a rainy day. It's not overburdened in detail, and it's enough of a profile of the post-war United States. The main focus is on the ten years the Bohemians reigned the literary scene, and shows how that era shaped Twain to be the writer he has become to be known,.

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