
House museums are the built intersections of the love citizens have for the histories of their places, the curiosity of travelers and tourists, and the devotion of admirers of these museums’ subjects. Historians also have a place in this intersection, and we often fall into one of the above three categories, yet the historian’s role in the formation of house museums remains a bit of a puzzle. Assuredly we must study, reveal, and interpret history, but when it comes to the necessary restoration inherent in a house museum’s mission, should we separate our historian selves from our citizen-traveler-devotee selves? As regards house museums, perhaps one of the most important jobs of the historian is to allow them to prod us to discussion.

This discussion is smart and insightful in Mark Twain’s Homes and Literary Tourism in which Hilary Iris Lowe carefully maps four house museum/historic sites devoted to the life and work of the iconic author. Lowe, an assistant professor in the Intellectual Heritage Program at Temple University, grapples with restoration as the ubiquitous lens house museums place between the object material and the visitor. The book reminds us that when we visit a literary shrine, we are never really all that near the figure who is the object of our seeking; rather, we stand at a forced remove put in place by time and the various motives of those whose interpretations we peer through. Mark Twain’s Homes and Literary Tourism tells the stories of these places in a way that ultimately reveals that history, even material history, is skewed by the often conflicting motivations and visions of its stakeholders.

The book is structured to be useful to people who think about house museums on both broad and focused scales. Lowe devotes a chapter apiece to four places that can be viewed as representing her stated aim: to understand how literary tourist sites come to be and what purpose they serve. She looks at the Mark Twain Birthplace State Historic Site in Florida, Missouri; the Mark Twain Boyhood Home and Museum in Hannibal; the Mark Twain House and Museum in Hartford, Connecticut; and Quarry Farm, in Elmira, New York. Each of these places speaks to a different Mark Twain. Lowe chronicles the stories of the individuals who founded, funded or otherwise guided these museums from their earliest beginnings in the twentieth century up to the present. By investigating the ways these individuals have affected each site’s representation of Mark Twain the icon and Sam Clemens the man, she also illuminates the cultural and social histories of the places that are home to these museums.

Each site approaches its historical narrative differently, and Lowe does a good job of looking critically at these narratives by offering her readers a detailed history of their origins and evolutions. The Mark Twain Birthplace State Historic Site encases its birthplace cabin in a modern visitors center, and does not acknowledge that it is a reconstruction. Particularly startling is the town of Hannibal’s conflation of Sam Clemens’s boyhood with the fictional
character, Tom Sawyer, a phenomenon that had its roots in the very early literary tourists who, even before the museum existed, came to Hannibal in search of the origins of Twain’s characters. The notion was so prevalent that it was eventually codified in the interpretation. Equally problematic was the way race was omitted in the site narrative, with Hannibal’s slave-holding past buried or ignored and with it the crucial understanding of Twain’s most important novel, Huckleberry Finn, as an antiracist work. That the history of slavery and antiracism has now been included in the museum’s narrative, Lowe tells us, is largely due to the work of historian Shelly Fisher Fishkin. By noting the importance of Fishkin’s work in this situation, as well as the work of other historians in the stories of the other museums, Lowe underscores the influential role that scholars, even those with no direct association with these museums, play in the construction of place-based narratives in museum contexts.

The other two sites in Lowe’s quartet are ones that Clemens and his family occupied in New England. Their home in Hartford, now known as the Mark Twain House and Museum, is the one Lowe acknowledges to have “most successfully pulled off the central trick of the historic house museum” (99), i.e., it looks the most like it did when Clemens lived there, having been diligently restored after its earlier post-Clemens incarnations as a school and library. In recounting the long and storied restoration, Lowe spotlights authenticity while demonstrating that public engagement is just as important. The author’s inclusion of Quarry Farm, which is not restored or open to the public, but rather is a repository and retreat for scholars of Mark Twain, seems a bit like comparing an orange to apples. Still, Lowe utilizes the site to make the point that all of these destinations of Mark Twain’s literary pilgrims had their beginnings as something other than museums, and Quarry Farm is a site whose story is just beginning.

Mark Twain’s Houses and Literary Tourism is a thought-provoking book that will be of use to any museum professional, historian or otherwise, who aims to find some truth embedded in a place and interpret it for the public. Lowe has researched deeply and well, and this book does a fine job of peeling back the surface of these sites to reveal that each is, in her words, “a careful, mediated piece” of Mark Twain.

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Heritage practitioners have long recognized a clash between the values of tourism and economic development and those of heritage preservation. The contributors to this volume examine this conflict in Petra, Jordan, not only due