

# *The Ghost at the Table*

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A Short Note from the Author

Readers' Group Questions and Topics for Discussion

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# What I Don't Know about Mark Twain

A SHORT NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

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WHEN I WAS about ten, I discovered in my father's study a shelf of handsome, red, limp-leather volumes, their covers embossed with a man's bewhiskered, scowling profile. It was a full set of Mark Twain's books, given to my father as a boy not long after his mother died. He'd read them over and over, he told me, adding that Mark Twain had just about saved his life during those sad years. My father's motherless boyhood was almost unthinkable to me—how could I survive without my own mother?—but I was impressed that his life had been saved by a writer, so I read the books as I found them, starting with *Roughing It* and ending with *Joan of Arc*. At times, I hardly understood what I was reading, but I carried on anyway, wanting to oblige my father and mesmerized by the voice of Mark Twain, that intimate, keen, wisecracking, impatient, thunderous, all-knowing voice. It sounded to me then like the voice of God.

Twenty years later on a cold November afternoon, I arrived in the driveway of Mark Twain's house in Hartford, where a tour was already underway. A young guide was telling a small crowd that visitors often believe that Mark Twain designed his house to look like a steamboat. I stepped back to look up at the house—which is large and rambling and built of bricks, and yet seems somehow

buoyant, with a prowlike veranda and cheerful little balconies and three smokestack chimneys—and sure enough, it *did* look like a steamboat. But then the tour guide added that Twain did not intend for his house to look like a steamboat and that a host of other misconceptions were really wishful thinking on the part of his admirers.

She went on to tell us that Mark Twain had fathered three daughters, the oldest of whom was called Susy. This was also my childhood name, spelled slightly differently. Susy and her sisters used to put on plays in their schoolroom, in which they wore their mother's gowns and impersonated English queens and ordered each other's beheadings. I recalled similar dramatics with my own two younger sisters—we were likewise drawn to blood-thirsty themes. Our tour guide described how Twain had entertained his little girls by the living room fire, making up thrilling stories about the bric-a-brac on the living room mantle. My father, too, had been an inventive storyteller. He used to sit us next to him on the piano bench and tell wild, funny stories about ogres and witches based on the notes he played, ending always with a reverberant glissando.

A dangerous but absorbing confusion began forming in my mind as I wandered through Mark Twain's house, peering at his wallpaper and admiring his carved Venetian four-poster bed. The more I discovered about Mark Twain's daughters, the more I felt I already knew. Their father had been hot-tempered and humorous; so had mine. They had lived in a big beautiful house, which was later lost to them; so had I. It hardly mattered that the differences between our families were far more numerous than the similarities; that there were similarities at all between my family and Mark Twain's seemed heady enough.

Ten years after visiting his house, I began a novel about Mark Twain's daughters. It would be a historical novel, I decided, set in Hartford during the Gilded Age. I could already visualize the Merchant Ivory movie that would follow—three decorative little Victorian girls in white pinafores bowling hoops on a green lawn while their fierce-looking father smoked his corn cob pipe in the background. But after three years of trying, I found that I could not do it.

I sat down and listed various theories to account for my failure: Mark Twain would have resented such an intrusion into his family life. I had done too much research and become musclebound with facts. I identified too much with the daughters. No plot that I could devise did justice to the girls' complexity, plus my motives for writing about them were murky and contaminated by self-regard. All true.

Yet it was at this painful moment that the book I was eventually to write came into being. What really interested me, I finally understood, were the ways in which we claim to understand other people's lives based on our own. Misconceptions and wishful thinking are as much a part of what we know about other people as any "truthful" details about them. As the narrator of my book says about her father, whose version of her childhood does not agree with her own: "That was the story he put together from all those details, a story that, like most stories people tell themselves about other people, was mostly about him."

This character, who writes historical novels for girls and happens to be writing about Mark Twain's daughters, has finally figured it all out. Then again, the minute you think you've got the last word on someone—well, that's exactly when he gets away from you, isn't it?

## Readers' Group Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. In the first few pages, Cynthia freely admits that she and Frances have a strained relationship, though she also says that “of all the people in the world I probably love Frances best” (page 1). Now, however, after many years of refusing Frances’s invitations to come visit during the holidays, Cynthia decides to fly back east for Thanksgiving. What do you think changes her mind? Why is it so important to Frances to have Cynthia come to her house for the holiday?
2. In addition to Frances’s family, Arlen, Wen-Yi, the Fareeds, and Frances’s assistant, Mary Ellen, come to Frances’s house for Thanksgiving. With such a guest list, Jane goes so far as to call it “Thanksgiving at the UN” (page 30). How have all these outsiders to the family come to the table, and what impact do they have on shaping the events of the evening?
3. At the Thanksgiving table, Frances’s daughter Sarah proposes that they take turns describing what they are most proud of having done for someone else (pages 207–11). Compare the answers of each sister. Why does Cynthia find Frances’s answer so difficult to hear?
4. *The Ghost at the Table* opens with a quotation from *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, “a person’s memory has no more sense than his conscience.” How does this statement pertain to each sister? To what degree does it explain Cynthia’s and Frances’s different recollections of the past?
5. Both Cynthia and Frances have very different views of their childhood. More specifically, they have opposing accounts of what happened to their mother. Whose version is more cred-

- ible, and why? Discuss the possibility that *both* sisters' recollections are accurate.
6. Frances is an interior decorator; Cynthia writes inspiring history books for girls about domestic life. Why do you think they've chosen those professions? How do their jobs provide a comment on who they are or aren't?
  7. What role do you think Mrs. Jordan plays in the story?
  8. At one point, Cynthia remembers her sister Helen asking their mother what the mother looked like when she was a girl. Instead of listening to her mother's answer, Cynthia is struck "by an appalling, fascinating thought: What if you looked into the future and didn't recognize yourself? What if you saw someone else looking back at you instead?" (page 131–32). Do you think Cynthia the child would recognize Cynthia the adult? Would your childhood self be able to identify the adult you've become?
  9. In Cynthia's mind, Frances's daughters, Sarah and Jane, roughly correspond with Frances and herself when they were younger. Is Cynthia simply projecting? In what ways does the past continue to influence the characters' perceptions of the present?
  10. Soon after her mother's death, Cynthia implies that her father played a hand in it. She then goes on to tell Frances that Frances unknowingly helped him (pages 155–57). A few days later, though, she retracts the accusation. Do you think she was being honest or dishonest in either case?
  11. The day after Thanksgiving, Frances insists that she and Cynthia visit Mark Twain's house in Hartford, with their fa-

ther in tow. When they discover that the Mark Twain House is closed, they proceed to visit the house they grew up in. What do they find at these houses? What are they hoping to find?

12. Who, or what, does the ghost of the title refer to, and why?
13. Who are Sarah and Arlen really discussing when Cynthia overhears them on the baby monitor (page 240)? How do your feelings about Cynthia begin to shift at this point?
14. When Cynthia wakes up after falling asleep alone in the living room, she sees a pillar candle overflowing with wax. As the organ catches fire, she sits silently watching (page 242). Why, at first, does she do nothing to stop it?
15. Although Cynthia and Frances's father is unable to speak, he makes his presence known in the house. Discuss each sister's behavior toward him and his reaction to both.
16. What motivates Cynthia to check in on her father when everyone is asleep (pages 287–91)? Do you think she should have called Frances when she discovered he was having trouble breathing? Why didn't she? In the end, how would you describe what happens between Cynthia and her father?
17. Cynthia says, "It has been mostly for Jane's benefit that I have set down this record of what happened over Thanksgiving" so that "my version of those few days in November will stand as an argument for the unreliability of memory" (page 293). How do you think Jane would respond to this record? Although this is Cynthia's story, did you find yourself identifying with one sister over the other? Who in the story did you have the most empathy for, and why?