Mark Twain had a healthy skepticism about all the organized belief systems that offer us pieces of Truth. He had a dislike for the way in which revealed religions carved up the territory and anyone who disagreed with them. His stories often revealed a cantankerous, anti-religious, anti-sentimental human spirit which, as he says, "felt more agony in an hour of living than he had in the millions of years of darkness before birth."

"Venice," he said, "would be a beautiful city if they would just drain it." He told a marvellous story about visiting the sea of Galilee and wanting to go out on the water — in a boat. The boatman, however, wanted $10 for the use of small boat. "Now I understand," said Twain, "why the Lord walked."

Ken Jon Booth presented his one-man show Mark Twain In Person recently as part of the Nanaimo Summer Arts Festival. It was the second time Dr. Booth had been in Nanaimo, but the first time I had seen the show. It is first rate. Booth gives us a complex, alive, and powerful Mark Twain... He blusters, lies, parades, charms, teases and finally gets into our hearts with his plain humanity. He cries, laughs, shouts, and wisecracks his way into corners of our condition that are suddenly revealed by his accurate and pointed thrusts of wit, sarcasm and common sense.

Timing is the key and Booth's timing is light on. He milked the lighting of his first cigar for every bit of laughter and surprise as he let that match burn down almost to his fingers once, twice, three times in a row before finally lighting his cigar. Sitting down, getting up, walking between chair and podium — all were perfectly timed bits of show business that added to the over-all effect.

As the evening progresses, Booth's Twain gets darker, his language rougher, more crude. The outline of the soul that sees the foolishness of the species and wants reform so badly. Twain saw clearly into the hypocrisy and idiocy of much that we do and he helped to show us how silly we can all be at times.

"The difference between a dog and a man," he said, "is that if you take a poor starving dog out of the gutter, feed it and treat it well, it will not bite you."

Mark Twain is at the very centre of American literature; his vision is great, his stories superb. Ken Jon Booth gives us a solid chunk of this giant of letters in a well-paced, funny, and touching one-man show.