

The Beauty of Jack London's Language Matters Most

By Jonah Raskin

Jack London's fans have loved him as much for what he promised to achieve as for what he actually delivered. No sensible fan holds him accountable for everything he said he would do. Hopes rusted and plans went awry. His first marriage ended in divorce, the journey of *The Snark* came to an abrupt end, Wolf House burned to the ground, and he didn't write a thousand words a day, though he boasted that he did. He was a hard taskmaster especially on himself.

There were days when he didn't write a single word. Weeks and months passed and he didn't begin an essay or finish a novel. But then a day dawned when he wrote 2,000 words in a single day, and, in 1902 while in London, England working on *The People of the Abyss*, he cranked out 63,000 words in 30 days.

Writing provided a sense of ecstasy, furnished money from publishers, connected him to causes, such as animal rights, and to readers around the world. By the end of his life, he had written 50 books and often published three and four in a single year.

To fault him, as some London aficionados have done, for not writing a thousand words a day, misses the point. Indeed, for two decades, his extraordinary font of creativity surpassed his penchant for a kind of self-destruction that took the form of hard drinking, chain smoking, a bad diet (raw duck for dinner) and a life style that left little time for genuine recreation and relaxation.

At Beauty Ranch, Jack played hard and worked hard. When he traveled, he often wrote without stopping. Sailing on the Sacramento River or across the South Pacific didn't offer an escape from writing, but rather a way to plunge deeper into the creative process. Pen, paper and a typewriter usually accompanied him on his adventures and journeys. He wrote *Martin Eden*, his novel about a sailor who turns into a famous author, while at sea.

As a teenager he kept a journal and later a diary while he prospected for gold in the Yukon. He took copious notes and wrote outlines for novels, revised his manuscripts and composed thousands of letters to family members, editors and friends. Moreover, he mostly wasn't a lonely author in an isolated tower. His mother Flora, his wives (Bessie and Charmian) his friends (George Sterling and Cloudesley Johns), and his editors (especially George Brett) helped him be productive.

London's early years taught him the value of discipline; as a boy he worked dutifully ten to twelve hours a day to help support the family. When he returned from the Yukon, he holed up in his chambers and wrote sixteen hours at a stretch. Call him driven, a workaholic, and a slave to his pen.

Still, for much of his life he was a willing slave, and, though he was a harsh taskmaster, writing brought him joy especially when he leaned the craft of fiction and discovered the wonders of self-expression. Later, he wrote to make money, buy land, build houses, raise horses and pigs and support his mother, daughters and Virginia

Prentiss who had helped to raise him. That too brought a kind of joy.

Writing gave him a sense of personal identity and a reason to go on living, even when he suffered from the “blues,” as he called them. His publications enabled him to rise above the anonymity of his early years, become world famous and show the world that a boy born to poverty could move beyond his lowly circumstances and make something of himself.

Not surprisingly, he inspired Upton Sinclair, Carl Sandburg and Jack Kerouac, all of whom were attracted to his life style, the books he wrote, and his identity as an American writer who broke boundaries and refused to be pigeon holed.

The author of *The Call of the Wild* has called to writers near and far ever since his death in 1916, at the age of 40 not because of the number of words he wrote or didn't write, but rather because of the majesty and the beauty of his poetic language. For Jack London, it's not the quantity but rather the quality that matters most.

Jonah Raskin is the editor of *The Radical Jack London: Writings on War and Revolution*. He will talk about Jack London at the Sonoma Valley Regional Library on November 9, 2016 at 6 p.m.