

## ANDREW HEM

*It Will Eventually Drift*, 2011  
Gouache, Oil, and Acrylic on Canvas, 45 x 55 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## SUSAN K. HARRIS

# Mother Ganga

Tales of Purity  
and Pollution

I'm a Mark Twain scholar. I've written three books about Twain, all researched in libraries and archives. Library research is my thing. It's what took me into academia—that and the fact that college teaching basically lets you set your own hours. But a couple of years ago I took a break from the library. I'd been working on Twain's last travelogue, *Following the Equator* (1897), a book about his lecture tour through the British Empire in 1895–96. The trip forced Twain to think about colonialism and its effects, and it revolutionized his attitudes towards race, religion, and cultural relativism. But *Following the Equator* was written for a popular audience, and Twain could only hint at the issues that fascinated him. I wanted to know what he really thought. So I happily plunked myself down in the relevant libraries, prepared to read my way through Twain's journals and letters. I didn't find much. Problem was, Twain undertook the trip to earn his way out of bankruptcy, and the records he left are mostly about his nightly programs and the profits they netted. There's not a lot about the places he visited and precious little introspection about what he saw. After two years of archival frustration, I decided I needed a more hands-on approach. I decided to follow Twain across the globe.

Twain, his wife Livy, and their daughter Clara (plus tour agents and servants) spent thirteen months on the lecture trail, setting out from Vancouver in a steamboat and trekking their way through Australia, New Zealand, India, and South Africa before heading up to England, where Twain passed the winter writing the book. I didn't have that kind of time—or an agent. So I did my traveling by plane, in three separate, one-month spurts. I went to Australasia alone, which was fine during daytime work hours but really lonely in the evenings. Even though Aussies and Kiwis are friendly, at the end of the day I wanted someone to chat with over dinner and a glass of wine. So my long-suffering husband, Billy—whose idea of a great night out is a hamburger and a movie within a half-mile radius from home—rolled his eyes, sighed, and reluctantly agreed to accompany me to India. Not surprisingly, he found it overwhelming. I didn't; I had spent my thirteenth summer in Nepal, so I expected the crowds, the noise, the dirt—the *difference*. Even though my reclusive, library-loving self cringed under the incessant importuning from cab drivers and street vendors to which, as foreigners, we were