



“Your great grandmother probably teared up when told the story of an Indian princess jumping to her death over a disappointment in love, but Mark Twain laughed,” observed Crystal Payton, co-author with husband Leland of a new book *Lover’s Leap Legends: From Sappho of Lesbos to Wah-Wah-Tee of Waco*,” February, 2020. The couple believes the godfather of American realism was right about excessive sentimentality. “Twain satirized romantic popular culture, but he was not an elitist snob,” added Leland. “He found these Lover’s Leap fables fake but funny.”

Lovers leap worldwide. Stories about these tragedies extend back to a myth that the ancient Greek poet, Sappho of Lesbos, jumped from a cliff when spurned by her lover, Phaon.

In America the leaping was usually done by a love-shattered Indian woman. There are hundreds of dramatic cliffs where a “dusky maiden” is said to have plunged to her death after her father, the chief, objected to her boyfriend from an enemy tribe.

Thousands of poems, stories, and newspaper accounts chronicle these dolorous events. Millions of postcards and souvenirs have been manufactured picturing the often-spectacular bluffs where “many moons ago” these tragedies took place. Folklorists have largely ignored these legends. Understandably so—they are “fakelore” and do not resemble Indian traditions.

This 352-page book with more than five hundred color illustrations is the first comprehensive study of Lover’s Leaps. Twain found these saccharine sagas perversely amusing, and so will contemporary readers.

Corny cultural products have not vanished however, as the Paytons acknowledge in the book’s dedication: “For Mark Twain—Who diagnosed American’s sentimental romantic infection. Alas, his injection of realism was not a cure.”



Leland and Crystal Payton channel their fellow Missourian, Mark Twain. They do not hold such saccharin stories to high art standards either. A commercial literature crafted for a naïve audience deserves some forgiveness—but not a lot. Sentimental tales of “dusky maidens” whose only recourse to disappointment in love is to jump off a cliff engender laughter, not scorn. The writers hope these hyper-romantic fables amuse readers as well. Not all our ancestors bit on these ridiculous narratives, but like us, they found the legendary sites worth visiting for the view.

Leland and Crystal Payton have collaborated on a dozen books on pop culture or the Ozarks. They have two sons—Strader, a Foreign Service Officer with the State Department, and Ross, a writer and podcaster.

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LOVER’S LEAP LEGENDS: From Sappho of Lesbos to Wah-Wah-Tee of Waco

Leland & Crystal Payton
ISBN: 978-0-9673925-9-2

352 pages 7.5x10 511 color illustrations
\$35.00 **February 2020**