If Bret Harte's reputation really "has roughly the same resonance among literary critics that the administration of Millard Fillmore inspires among presidential historians" (235), as Gary Scharnhorst has recently suggested, then the appearance within the last five years of two biographies, a collection of letters, a critical bibliography, and a handful of articles surely signals a reconsideration, if not a revival, of Harte and his work. In *Bret Harte: Prince and Pauper*, Axel Nissen argues that such attention is warranted not only by Harte's significance as an influential writer who "reinvented the American short story and laid the foundation for the Western" (xv) but also by his status as "the first American author-celebrity in the age of mass newspapers" (xvi)—an author-celebrity who, according to Nissen, kept his share of secrets beneath the genial façade familiar to all who knew him.

Unlike previous biographers, Nissen avoids both straight chronological narration and the customary emphasis on the California years; his focus is on Bret Harte as cosmopolitan littérateur, a man equally at ease with the literary world of New York and the titled upper classes of London. The "Bret Harte Mystery," as W. D. Howells called him, was at once a celebrity and a man whom nobody knew. A persistent theme in Nissen's account is the way in which Harte ingeniously, and, in Nissen's view, heroically protected his privacy and his art by eluding the claims of those who would pin him down: his creditors; literary giants such as James Russell Lowell, who sought but did not get the truth about Harte's Jewish ancestry in his eccentric quest to link artistic genius with Jewish heritage; his critics, who called the authenticity of his experiences into question; his publishers, who pressed him for manuscripts to pay off their advances to him; his superiors in the State Department, who sought to ensure that Harte stayed put and performed his duties as consul in Crefeld, Germany, and Glasgow; and his family, from whom he chose to be separated for twenty years.

What Harte did choose to tell were the tales that helped to confirm his persona as a Westerner. By all accounts a brilliant conversationalist, Harte held his audiences spellbound, explaining, for example, that his hair had turned grey after riding beside the driver on stagecoaches beset by robbers—although as Nissen scrupulously points out, the historical record shows that such robberies did not begin to occur until after Harte had given up "riding the box." Nissen excuses Harte for such tales, saying that the usually modest Harte "could not help but be implicated in the creation and re-creation of his own myth" (36), a seemingly paradoxical statement that sums up the something of the ungovernable power of literary celebrity. Inadvertent or not, Harte's mythmaking caught up with him when, as Nissen explains, he was trapped by his
own success into writing the Western stories that his public had come to expect. Nissen's sympathetic portrayal is an appealing feature of this book, one that offsets the well-known vitriolic attacks on Harte in Mark Twain's *Autobiography*. And Nissen is quick both to counter Twain's claims and to highlight Harte's more attractive characteristics, such as his faithful support of his family even when separated from them and his pleas for tolerance of Jewish and Chinese immigrants in poems such as "The Ebrew Jew" and "Plain Language from Truthful James."

Nissen renders the scenes of Harte's life through a fictionalizing process described in his introduction, translating first person letters and other primary source materials into a third person "free indirect" dramatized narrative. Although it occasionally devolves into a formulaic you-are-there device—"Had you been a resident in San Francisco in the mid-1860s you would probably have noticed..." (72) or "Had we been in the vicinity of Clay Street..." (87)—the technique is frequently effective, as when he introduces Harte at the height of his fame rather than following a strict chronology. Born in Albany, New York, Harte moved to San Francisco in 1854, where, as a writer for the *Golden Era* and then for the higher-toned *Californian*, he made a name for himself with his satiric poetry and his "condensed novels." By the time he left San Francisco in 1871 with his wife Anna and their children, he was the successful editor of the *Overland Monthly* and had already published in it such classic stories as "Tennessee's Partner" and "The Luck of Roaring Camp." Newly anointed with literary prestige and a $10,000 contract from the *Atlantic*, he had achieved a position that was the best the Eastern cultural establishment had to offer, and his social capital and literary prospects seemed limitless. But Harte rapidly squandered both social and monetary capital by living beyond his means, failing to "fulfill the role of a public poet" (120), and, in one case of disastrous misjudgment, dressing in "gaudy raiment and... green gloves" to deliver a previously published poem as his speech at a Harvard commencement.

At this point in chronicling Harte's career, literary historians usually describe the rest of his life as a slow descent into debt and obscurity. As Nissen shows in his chapter "The Lord of Romance," however, such an account is not true: Harte's critical reputation may have dimmed, but Bret Harte, Western author, was still a marketable commodity. In 1871, in fact, Harte had nearly thirty years of a writing career left to him and "forty-six volumes yet to write" (115); for example, works such as *Flip and Other Stories* (1882) and *A Waif of the Plains* (1890), virtually unknown today, sold 13,500 and 17,000 copies respectively in a day when most novels sold 2,000 at best (201). In contrast to the established picture of decline, Nissen demonstrates that Harte was in fact "earning more money in the 1880s and 1890s than he had ever earned before" (209), and his active social life among the members of the upper classes and his status as a
permanent house guest made these years “the happiest of Harte’s life” (213). Bret Harte: Prince and Pauper is at its best in these sections on Harte’s later writing career when Nissen draws on an impressive array of primary sources and weaves them skillfully into his narrative. Nissen also provides an interesting reading (previously published in Studies in Short Fiction) of “The Luck of Roaring Camp” as Harte’s revision of the cult of domesticity described in Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s The American Woman’s Home.

Less successful is a chapter called “The Scent of Heliotrope” in which Nissen speculates about Harte’s sexuality. The evidence he marshals for this conclusion is both tenuous and circumstantial; for example, Nissen emphasizes Harte’s contemporaries’ reactions to his dandyish ways, as when, in an 1899 social call on Harte, Hamlin Garland notes his lavender spats and yellow gloves and describes Harte’s appearance as that of “an elderly fop” (252). Other such evidence includes Harte’s carrying a heliotrope plant with him when he traveled; Nissen includes an epigraph establishing that the scent of heliotrope was a homoerotic code in the 1893 novel Teleny. Oddly enough, although he states that “there is no way of knowing” (241) whether Harte had homosexual relationships, Nissen dismisses out of hand the idea the idea of an affair between Harte and Madame Van de Velde, with whom Harte lived and traveled for many years. Harte biographer Richard O’Connor suggested in 1966 that this relationship was “ambiguous” (254) and Scharnhorst describes Harte as “[b]eyond a doubt . . . smitten” (165) with Madame, but Nissen rules out “the possibility of a romantic liaison” (232) because Harte’s son and his wife visited him at Madame’s house on occasion. Yet this flawed logic measures the evidence with a double standard: if there is “no way of knowing” about Harte’s relationships with men, surely there is equally “no way of knowing” about Harte’s relationship with Madame Van de Velde. Nissen also sees the well-known theme of male bonding in Harte’s works as evidence of homoerotic attachments, calling “In the Tules” a “blatantly homoerotic” (237) story written in response to the Oscar Wilde trials of 1895. But yellow gloves, the scent of a heliotrope, and a story of male bonding do not constitute a sexual identity, even in Oscar Wilde’s London, and Nissen’s conclusions here are provocative but unproven.

Although it appeared in dissertation form in 1996 and won the King of Norway’s Gold Medal in that year, Bret Harte: Prince and Pauper will inevitably be compared with the other biography appearing in 2000, Bret Harte: Opening the American Literary West by Gary Scharnhorst, editor of two collections of Harte’s letters and author of numerous works on him. Nissen’s thesis is different from Scharnhorst’s, however, and if Nissen’s approach provides somewhat less information about the works and their reception than does the later book, it is only because Nissen’s primary purpose has been to explain, to dramatize, and above all to present in a
sympathetic light the puzzling, contradictory, and sometimes self-destructive events in the life of this enigmatic author.