

BEN'S NOTES

**EAST
OF EDEN**

BY JOHN STEINBECK



**Ben
Shapiro's**
Book Club

JOHN STEINBECK'S *EAST OF EDEN*

John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*¹ is a story about what it means to be an American. But it's about much more than that: it's about the eternal battle between good and evil within the human soul, the question of fate and free will, and the difficulty of sloughing off the bad decisions of the past in favor of better decisions today. It is about guilt and forgiveness and faith and redemption. *East of Eden* takes as its source text the stories of Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel, but it transfers them to the American West, where new transplants attempt to build their own Edens – even as they learn that life is never Eden and that we all dwell in the land east of Eden, where we must till the earth and give birth in pain and raise children who have to face the same dilemmas we do. The story of *East of Eden* is eternal.

JOHN STEINBECK: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

John Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902, in Salinas, California – the setting of *East of Eden*. The book itself makes reference to his ancestors, from Samuel Hamilton to his own mother. Like many of the characters in his books, Steinbeck spent his youth working the land; he worked a series of ranches and alongside migrant workers. Many of those experiences would find their way into Steinbeck's fiction. Like Aron, Steinbeck attended Stanford University but left without a degree.

He published his first work, *Cup of Gold* (1929), shortly before marrying Carol Henning in 1930. The couple lived in a cottage given to them by Steinbeck's family, where he wrote continuously. He never again took a regular job and got by with local fishing and even government support. He began publishing short works like *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *The Red Pony* (1933), but his first real commercial success came with *Tortilla Flat* (1935), an adaptation of Arthurian legends in a Western setting. In 1937, Steinbeck published the classic *Of Mice and Men*, which immediately became a staple in the theater repertoire.

Then, in 1939, Steinbeck published *The Grapes of Wrath*. The book became the American literary statement of the Great Depression, following the travails of the Joad family, forced

from their dying land in Oklahoma into itinerant migratory labor across the country. The book is a searing indictment of poverty and was praised by the Roosevelt administration, which correctly saw it as a political statement on behalf of the New Deal. Steinbeck himself met with FDR twice in 1940. Eleanor Roosevelt wrote a column after its publication in which she gushed over the book: “The book is coarse in spots, but life is coarse in spots, and [the] story is very beautiful in spots just as life is.”²

Around this time, Steinbeck divorced Carol; one year later, he married Gwyn Conger. The couple had two sons together, but their relationship was toxic and ended in divorce; Gwyn would arguably serve as a model for *East of Eden*'s Cathy in Steinbeck's own mind.³ But Steinbeck's productivity didn't wane. He quickly published *The Moon Is Down* (1942), *Cannery Row* (1945), and *The Pearl* (1947). In 1948, he began an affair with Elaine Scott, who was then married to actor Zachary Scott; in 1950, they married, and remained married until Steinbeck's death.

In 1952, Steinbeck released *East of Eden*. He considered the book his magnum opus, even more so than *The Grapes of Wrath*. His dedication to the book gives the complete picture:

*Well, here's your box. Nearly everything I have is in it, and it is not full. Pain and excitement are in it, and feeling good or bad and evil thoughts and good thoughts – the pleasure of design and some despair and the indescribable joy of creation.*⁴

As Steinbeck wrote to a friend, “Much the longest and surely the most difficult work I have ever done ... I have put all the things I have wanted to write all my life. This is ‘the book.’ If it is not good I have fooled myself all the time. I don't mean I will stop but this is a definite milestone and I feel released. Having done this I can do anything I want. Always I had this book waiting to be written.”⁵

After *East of Eden*, Steinbeck continued to write; in 1962, he won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), a book that took to task the rising generation for its abandonment of decent values. Politically, Steinbeck was extraordinarily heterodox: he was a quasi-fellow traveler for the communists early in his career but became more conservative over the course of his life. He served in World War II as a war correspondent and was wounded. He opposed the McCarthy hearings but volunteered to do work on behalf of the

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