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Review of: Citizen Steinbeck: Giving Voice to the People

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Citizen Steinbeck: Giving Voice to the People

Robert McParland. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016.

Having previously examined the impact of Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald on 1920's America, Robert McParland now gives us *Citizen Steinbeck: Giving Voice to the People*. It begins with a well-crafted introduction laying out ideas which carry through the text. Chief concerns are illuminating the common figures, like Mexican immigrants and cannery workers, and their struggles to assimilate into the wider American society, which McParland sees as the engine driving Steinbeck's most enduring writing. Above all, he argues, Steinbeck's characters are what shield his writings from becoming merely "period pieces" (xvi).

Chapter 1, "The Life of John Steinbeck" presents a comprehensive biography, considering its brevity. It recalls his youth in then-rural Salinas, California, and his lifelong fascination with legends and mysticism, and how both heavily influenced his early works. His rise to prominence, tumultuous marriages, politics, and dealings with Hollywood, are also outlined. Chapter 2, "A Sense of Place: Steinbeck's Early Fiction" chronicles Steinbeck's initial struggles for recognition, and his experimentation. McParland relates how *Cup of Gold* and *To a God Unknown* brought almost no notice, while *The Pastures of Heaven* fared only slightly better but signaled a shift in Steinbeck's writing from mythology and mysticism to examining people and their situations. McParland credits Steinbeck's emerging friendship with scientist Ed Ricketts for the metamorphosis. The depth of analysis of *The Long Valley* is more uneven than the reader might prefer, with some stories, like "Flight," and "The Raid" receiving lengthily discussion, while others, particularly "Johnny Bear," and "The White Quail" come across almost as afterthoughts. "The Raid" receives increased consideration because McParland takes it as the

progenitor of *In Dubious Battle*, chapter 3's subject. In chapter 3 *In Dubious Battle* is portrayed as not only a prime example of protest literature, but also as a crucible out of which emerged the ideas expressed in *The Grapes of Wrath*, chapter 5's focus.

Chapter 4, "*Of Mice and Men*" contains a lengthily discussion of its place in Depression-era literature, and its afterlife as a school text. As with, *The Grapes of Wrath*, McParland argues passionately that these texts are not just time capsules or easy introductions to Steinbeck's work. Instead, they are reminders to us today of what difficult socioeconomic conditions can bring out of humanity.

Chapter 6 "*Sea of Cortez*," and chapter 7 "Steinbeck at War" showcase Steinbeck on the move. In chapter 6 we see the origins of his journals, and the scientific observations which Ed Ricketts encouraged. These led to a more clinical view of humanity's place on earth, not only in *Sea of Cortez*, but also in stories like *The Pearl*. Chapter 7 reveals Steinbeck's eagerness to be upfront with the troops hearing their stories, relating their troubles to the people back home. His work with the Office of Strategic Services, forerunner to the CIA, may surprise some readers, as may his immense enjoyment at writing wartime propaganda. Interestingly, he did not consider *The Moon Is Down* a propaganda piece despite its immense popularity among resistance groups in Nazi occupied Europe.

Through compelling analysis, chapter 8 "The Shorter Novels" leaves the reader satisfied. *Cannery Row*, and its sequel, *Sweet Thursday* are summarized and analyzed at length in order to emphasize Steinbeck's affection for the workers of Cannery Row, and the sense of community he found there. Likewise, *Tortilla Flat* is lavishly praised for the way Danny and his friends forge a sort of Arthurian brotherhood from their hardscrabble lives.

In chapter 9, *East of Eden*, McParland argues for the novel as the culmination of everything Steinbeck had learned about writing and humanity up to that point. He takes the Hamiltons and the Trasks to be embodiments of the common man versus aristocracy themes running through Steinbeck's work.

The closing chapter, "*America and Americans: Steinbeck in the 1960s*" deals almost exclusively with Steinbeck's political views in the 1950s and 1960s. *Travels with Charley*, and *The Winter of Our Discontent* serve as the backdrop for thoughtful discussion of Steinbeck's views on the increasing racism and conservatism he saw as he traveled across the country. His lifelong support of the Democratic Party is emphasized through analysis of his support of the presidential campaigns of Adlai Stevenson, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson.

Despite some minor shortcomings, *Citizen Steinbeck* is an engaging read well worth exploring. It will likely prove equally rewarding to Steinbeck scholars, students, and general fans of modern American Literature.

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