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## "THE BOOK THAT BROUGHT OPRAH'S BOOK CLUB BACK:" *EAST OF EDEN*

SUSAN SHILLINGLAW

**ON THE MORNING** of Wednesday, June 18, I got a call from Sam Pinkus, McIntosh and Otis: "Fantastic news. Oprah picked *East of Eden*." I'd had a hunch it might be Steinbeck, call it a fervent wish. A few days before, an AP news item reported that Oprah would choose "classics" like Hemingway or Faulkner for her new book club, back after a 14-month hiatus. She had wanted to call her new club, "Traveling with the Classics," but settled on "Oprah's Book Club," certainly a wiser choice: "great reads that have stood the test of time," announced her publicist. The sleuth in me figured that she wouldn't choose either Hemingway or Faulkner for a first "great read": Faulkner is too knotty, Hemingway too macho, at least by reputation. "It's got to be Steinbeck," I surmised, with the faith of one in total ignorance.

The blaze of excitement ran for over three months.

I was a bemused spectator, willing participant, researcher on occasion. And astonished witness to print runs I'd learn from Michael Millman, Executive Editor at Penguin. Three months' figures tell their own story about a book that had steadily sold 40,000–50,000 copies a year since 1970. Based on booksellers' pre-publication demand for the still-secret pick, Penguin printed an initial run of 600,000 copies. Booksellers, in turn, were basing orders on their previous experience with the 46 Oprah Book Club titles since 1996, when she launched her club with Jacquelyn Mitchard's *The Deep End of the Ocean*, released with a print run of 100,000. But initial sales estimates were far too low. In the first two days alone, sales tripled those of another Penguin author selected earlier by

Oprah’s contemporary book club. Within hours of the announcement on Oprah’s show, *East of Eden* jumped to number 14 on Amazon.com, and later in the day it was number 2, just below the forthcoming Harry Potter and above Hillary Rodham Clinton’s memoir, *Personal History*. “We’re pleased to be book-ended between Hillary and Harry,” commented Maureen Donnelly, vice president of the Penguin Trade Paperback imprint. “Think of the store traffic!” By July it was number one on the *New York Times* best-sellers list, nudging out *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* and remaining in the top spot for five weeks. Penguin responded by printing more and more books:

PRINTING	ORDERS DELIVERED
1 <sup>st</sup>	600,000 on June 3
2 <sup>nd</sup>	105,000 on July 1
3 <sup>rd</sup>	95,000 on July 1
4 <sup>th</sup>	250,000 on July 2
5 <sup>th</sup>	125,000 on July 7
6 <sup>th</sup>	35,000 on July 9
7 <sup>th</sup>	131,000 on July 11
8 <sup>th</sup>	100,000 on July 18
9 <sup>th</sup>	70,000 on July 28
10 <sup>th</sup>	50,000 on August 12
11 <sup>th</sup>	50,000 on August 8
12 <sup>th</sup>	100,000 on August 19
13 <sup>th</sup>	50,000 on September 26

Sales swelled amid some criticism, which Oprah had anticipated: “There are some who would argue that this is not really a ‘classic’...and I realized that this was a conversation that would come up over and over again.... I just want to read great books without it becoming controversial.” But since its 1952 publication, *East of Eden* has been controversial, skewered critically. It’s hardly surprising that in the summer of 2003 limp generalizations about Steinbeck’s work were printed once again, that critic Harold Bloom’s disdainful comments about the writer were once again quoted. In *Slate*, an on-line magazine, Washington bureau chief Chris Suellentrop wrote a piece entitled “John Steinbeck: Should he be afraid of Oprah?” His answer was a tentative yes. “Steinbeck’s selection by Oprah is likely to confirm the suspicions of those critics who look down their noses at him as a simplistic writer not worthy of inclusion in the American pantheon.” But, rehearsing the

charges against Steinbeck—simple, sentimental, ponderous—he concludes that the author is a great “literary gateway drug—something you pass out to people to get them interested in the hard stuff. Oprah wants to create some addicts. Good for her.” Aside from the questionable metaphor, I suppose that’s praise. In fact, neither Oprah nor her readers cared much about whether or not *East of Eden* is “the hard stuff.” It’s “reader friendly,” Oprah declared.

And what Oprah declares is messianic for thousands.

“I am on a mission,” she told her studio audience when announcing the revitalized book club in June. “My mission is to make this the biggest book club in the world and get people reading again; not just reading, but reading great books.” She achieved precisely what she set out to do. People read the book, and they formed scores of book clubs across the country. Unlike earlier reading choices over six years that had not been nurtured by on-line book clubs, this time the Oprah group decided to encourage the formation of both on-line and community book clubs through their *East of Eden* website. On that site a user-generated tool, “Find a book club,” was launched. After two weeks there were 370 on-line clubs, 150,000 signed up as members of the book club. One woman sent an email after the announcement of *East of Eden*, “I don’t know how to read a classic. Can you help?” And help they did, the staff reading thousands of emails, monitoring message boards, creating web content, selecting the five questions that *New York Times* writer Margo Jefferson answered each week. Each week they received “thousands of emails posing questions. People were really reading it and thinking about the book,” said the producer. On-line membership in the book club “grew all the time,” and when the show on *East of Eden* aired September 29, there were a quarter million on-line members and more than 2000 online and offline bookclubs created. The function “find a book club in your neighborhood,” generated 400–500 local clubs, some private, some public; public groups with message boards were monitored by the Oprah staff.

It’s an efficient, committed, knowledgeable, and professional organization. Enthusiasm runs high. As I noted to friends, working with the Oprah organization was like hobnobbing with the Seven Dwarfs, all singing as they marched to work.

With regret, I had to turn down the invitation to attend the show. The package arrived in the mail containing instructions for the day and two bright T-shirts, one grass green and the other flaming pink.

You are cordially invited to be a part of The Oprah Winfrey Show audience on Saturday, September 13, 2003 to view the discussion about *East of Eden*!

The Oprah's Book Club discussion about *East of Eden* will take place outside of the historical Steinbeck House in Salinas.

About 90 T-shirt clad fans were in the audience. Would-be participants applied online. "Are you a John Steinbeck Fanatic?... If you love John Steinbeck and 'East of Eden' we want to hear from you! Please write us and let us know why you love our latest selection." Diana Chung, whom I met at the Steinbeck Festival in August, wrote in about her 95-year-old father who was a lettuce farmer "all his working years." Her email passed the initial screening, being "among the best" and she was asked to send a photo and further information for "possible participation" in the show. A San Jose State University student, Kris Simmons, wrote to tell me that she had been selected. Her online application told about moving to Salinas her senior year of high school, feeling isolated, and later reading *East of Eden* "and the book opened my eyes to the history and beauty of the area as well as the power of choice within each of us." As Joe Livernois reported in the *Monterey Herald*, "the hard sell paid off for the women of OverReaders Anonymous. The 11 avid readers who form the Monterey County book club have earned a spot in the Oprah audience.... [they] produced a videotape featuring members of the book club at important local Steinbeck sites, sending the tape to Harpo, Inc."

Book sales swelled once more after the show aired, and then dropped gracefully. A few piles of *East of Eden* remain in my local Costco, which featured an article on the book in its September magazine. No doubt remaining copies will be bought for Christmas gifts, and the Steinbeck fever, running high during the Centennial Year of 2002, spiking in the summer of 2003, will again subside. But undoubtedly John Steinbeck, like the ghost of Tom Joad, will always be "there."