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John Steinbeck

"STEINBECK'S NEW MOOD:
'I AM SCARED, BOASTFUL,
BUT ALSO HUMBLE'"

HERBERT KRETZMER
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SIX-FOOT TALL, ROCK SOLID, he seemed to fill the room. There is a kind of giantness about him. He radiates a sense of vastness.

He lit a cheroot, poured a shot of whisky, crinkled his Pacific-blue eyes. John Steinbeck, toughest and most durable of American writers, had come to London.

Public curiosity about Steinbeck has been strong and consistent ever since he won the Pulitzer Prize with his mammoth best-seller, "The Grapes of Wrath," in 1940. But elusive John Steinbeck has done little or nothing to satisfy the inquisitive.

"It is not that I abhor publicity," he said in a voice that seemed to rumble up from some deep, echo-haunted catacomb. "I see no point in it.

"The business of being a celebrity has no reference to the thing I am interested in. And that is my work.

"I know no sadder people than those who believe their own publicity. I still have my own vanities, but they have changed their face."

Steinbeck punctuated his comments with a smile that was sudden and charming. "Also," he went on, "it's nobody's damn business how I live."

Too long

John Steinbeck is 63 and the winner of the 1962 Nobel Prize for Literature. But he insisted: "I do not believe that age produces either knowledge or wisdom.

"I wish to God I knew as much about writing as I did when I was 19. I was absolutely certain about most things then. Also, I suspect, more accurate.

"I have lived too long," Steinbeck decided.

"Preferably a writer should die at about 28. Then he has a chance of being discovered. If he lives much longer he can only be revalued. I prefer discovery."

John Steinbeck the writer has been revalued all his life. Many literary critics regard him as somehow unfashionable, insist that nothing he has written since has attained the hard excellence of "The Grapes of Wrath," "Tortilla Flat," or "Cannery Row."

Steinbeck, however, is not unduly fretsome. He said: "Literary critics really write about themselves. A critic is interested in his own work, his own career, and properly so.

"I don't care what is SAID about my books. I do care, however, what is THOUGHT about them."

He smiled again. The smile became a burst of craggy, infectious laughter.

"I am an ordinary man," he said, "scared and boastful and humble about my books. I love compliments, but I am not thrown by insults.

Solitary

"Like everyone else in the world I want to be good and strong and virtuous and wise and loved.

"I am a solitary man. Unless a writer is capable of solitude he should leave books alone and go into the theatre.

"What some people find in religion a writer may find in his craft...a kind of breaking through to glory."

John Steinbeck held up his glass of whisky. "This," he said, "proves I'm on vacation."

He chuckled and rubbed his trimmed, graying beard. His beard is the only small thing about him.

"I write because I like to write," he said. "I find joy in the texture and tone and rhythm of words. It is a satisfaction like that which follows good and shared love.

Wind-swept

"When I finish a book I have a sense of death. Something that has been alive no longer exists. I feel the same sense of loss when a friend dies.

"I never re-read my books with any satisfaction. That thing between hard covers is a tomb."

Steinbeck stood up. Again he looked like a wind-swept giant. "Actually I am an inch shorter than I was," he said. "You get older, you get shorter. You dip deeper, I guess, into the grave."

He laughed again. Humour bubbled endlessly inside this austere, attractive man.

"Call me up in New York sometime," he suggested. "I'm the only Steinbeck in the book."

Born in South Africa, HERBERT KRETZMER settled in London in the mid-fifties to pursue twin careers as a newspaperman and lyricist (Les Misérables). He sent this piece to be reprinted in Steinbeck Studies after mentioning the above interview to the editor at the 2002 Hemingway conference in Stresa, Italy.

John Steinbeck