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John Steinbeck, 1957.

A LETTER FROM JOHN STEINBECK

WHEN THE MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. LIBRARY opened at San Jose State in August, 2003, a long-time Steinbeck society subscriber came to the grand opening and told me about writing to John Steinbeck forty years ago. Here is her letter and Steinbeck's reply.

821 Plaza Drive
San Jose, California

March 7, 1963

Mr. John Steinbeck
Sag Harbor
Long Island, New York

Dear Mr. Steinbeck:

There are several things I felt I had to write to you about in order to understand your latest novel, "The Winter of Our Discontent."

First I should like you to know the exuberant joy I experienced when I learned of your recent Nobel award. I have long known you were one of the greatest contemporary American writers, and I was pleased to discover the Swedish Academy members shared my opinion.

But there is one thing I don't understand and that is why so much emphasis was placed on "Winter of Our Discontent"; so I had to write you for an interpretation.

I have always believed that "East of Eden" was the finest novel I have ever read. I was in my sophomore year at San Jose State College when I first read this book and was in the process of changing from a vain, shallow teenager to an individual with an awakening and responsive soul. I cannot convey to you the enlightenment I received from your book. I do not mean to sound like a gushy, young romanticist, but I want you to be cognizant of the depth and understanding I obtained from this book. All your characters were so complex yet were somehow completely understandable and credible. The book as a whole seemed to be a chronicle of all lives ever lived. Your interjected thoughts and philosophical meanderings on all aspects of life and mankind were so full of substance and meaning that I was lead [sic] into contemplations that I previously could not have comprehended let alone even materialize. For these reasons I have never been able to understand why so little literary furor was created by this novel, and why it was not even mentioned in connection with the Nobel Award.

From all reports of the Award that I have read, the Nobel Prize was awarded you primarily for your latest novel, "The Winter of Our Discontent" which I could not identify with or understand. I have talked this over with several of my friends, and you would be amazed at the different interpretations we all had of the same book. None of us agreed on its message or meaning.

Is the reason I cannot see anything in this book because it is too close to our lives and way of living today? Or did you intentionally make shallow, colorless characters because you felt all society had evolved to a mass of apathetic, shallow people?

What was the symbolism of the talisman?

Why was it so vital that it be left for Ethan's daughter?

Was it symbolic of the Soul?

Is one of my friend's interpretations correct that there is a correlation between this novel and the life of John the Baptist?

Have you given more of yourself and of your beliefs in this novel than in "East of Eden"?

I sincerely hope you have time to answer just a few of these questions because the answers are so vital to me.

Thank you for being such a sensitive, perceptive writer and for teaching me so much about humanity—its weakness, strength and sweetness. I shall always remember the quotation of one of my philosophy teachers once used: "When the Pupil is ready, the Teacher will come." Thank you for "Coming."

Respectfully yours,
Mrs. Norvelle Tranchina

John Steinbeck
206 East Seventy-second Street
New York 21, N.Y.

March 14, 1963

Mrs. Norvelle Tranchina
821 Plaza Drive
San Jose, California

Dear Mrs. Tranchina:

Thank you ever so much for your letter of March 7th. It was ever so nice of you to send your congratulations on my being awarded the Nobel Prize. Anyone who says he doesn't like a pat on the back is either untruthful or a fool.

Insofar as your questions regarding "THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT," as was stated in the book, these things are personal. I can only suggest that you work out the answers to them yourself, since my interpretation would not be the same as yours.

Thank you again for your very nice letter.

Yours very sincerely,