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Critical Companion to John Steinbeck: A Literary Reference
to His Life and Work (review)

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***CRITICAL COMPANION TO JOHN STEINBECK:
A LITERARY REFERENCE TO HIS LIFE AND WORK,*
BY JEFFEREY SCHULTZ & LUCHEN LI. NEW YORK:
CHECKMARK BOOKS, 2005. 406 PAGES.
HARDCOVER, \$65.00. PAPERBACK, \$19.95.**

REVIEWED BY JOSEPH ALLEGRETTI

JOHN STEINBECK IS BOTH ONE OF THE MOST ACCESSIBLE of great American authors (who has not read *The Pearl* or *Of Mice and Men* in high school?) and one of the most complex and experimental. His works delight ordinary readers yet often challenge and baffle the most academic of scholars. It is a difficult task to try to bridge this gap between the ordinary reader and the scholar, but Jeffrey Schultz and Luchen Li have made a valiant and largely successful effort to do just that in their *Critical Companion to John Steinbeck: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*.

The title is accurate—this is a guide both to Steinbeck the man and Steinbeck the author. The book is divided into four parts. It begins with a detailed biography of Steinbeck's life and development as a writer that provides a useful context to his writings. The second part, which makes up over half of the volume, is entitled simply "Works A-Z." There are entries for both Steinbeck's "major" and "minor" works (the authors' terms, not mine). Minor works receive short summaries; major works, which include most but not all of the novels, are given detailed synopses, summaries of the critical response, and lists of major characters. The entries cover not only Steinbeck's fiction but his nonfiction works such as *Travels with Charley in Search of America* and his lesser-known essays and occasional pieces. Part three, a bit of a hodgepodge, contains an alphabetical listing of important people, places, and topics in Steinbeck's life and works. Here we find entries on Steinbeck's wives and friends, on significant sites in California and elsewhere (from "Monterey, California" to "Sag Harbor, New York"), but also on topics and

themes in his work such as “communism,” “religion,” and “social justice.” The final part is an appendix that includes a variety of useful materials, including a detailed chronology of Steinbeck’s life, a listing of his awards and honors, and bibliographies of his works and important secondary sources.

To gauge the merits of this book, consider the entries for Steinbeck’s most famous novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and for one of his lesser-known works, *The Short Life of Pippin IV: A Fabrication*. The material on *The Grapes of Wrath* almost constitutes a short guidebook to the novel. It includes several pages of background on the sources of the novel and its publication history. This is followed by a “Critical Summary” that is part summary and part explication of major themes and motifs. Brief attention is given to important symbols such as the turtle crossing the road in Chapter Three. The authors describe the novel’s major theme concisely as “Manself,” the transformation of single individuals, who “hunger for joy and some security” into a vast aggregate of human beings with the same desires and goals. No longer do they identify themselves as “I,” but rather as “We, united by common suffering and mutual sharing” (95).

Next comes a review of the history of the scholarly criticism of the novel, divided into two parts—“early criticism” at the time of the novel’s publication and “contemporary criticism.” The latter includes short summaries (a sentence or two) of several major works of scholarship by important critics such as Richard Astro, Warren French, and Barbara Heavilin. Following is a chapter-by-chapter synopsis of the novel. Chapter One, as an example, is summarized in a sentence: “A drought settles across the Midwestern states, followed by savage winds that carry away the arable topsoil, wiping out the meager cotton crops and cutting visibility for hundreds of miles” (102). The chapter summaries are followed by a list of characters and places, a short summary of the 1940 film version, and excellent suggestions for further reading that include the major works of scholarship. All in all, the entry for *The Grapes of Wrath* takes up about twenty pages of this four-hundred-page volume.

As expected, *The Short Reign of Pippin IV* receives a much less detailed treatment of about three pages. There is a short introduction, a synopsis (but not a chapter-by-chapter summary), and a brief list of major characters. Even here, the authors give at least some indication of the critical reception of the novel, commenting that Steinbeck’s agent and editor “disliked the book

enormously” and “pleaded with the author to drop the project” (197). They also summarize (fairly) the response of critics: “The book, according to most critics, suffers largely because Steinbeck seemed to have no clear plan for it. According to critic Howard Levant, the book fails especially when it tries to move from a silly little diversion to a more serious work. Levant writes, “Pippin’s will to institute the good life is a more serious matter than the bulk of the novel’s comic dance . . . can sustain. The work has remained a minor one” (197).

These two entries illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of *The Critical Companion*. Its strengths are many. It provides a guide to Steinbeck that is sophisticated yet accessible to first-time readers, such as students (college and even high school students will benefit from the clearly written entries). At the same time, the book does not ignore the wider world of Steinbeck scholarship. As the *Grapes of Wrath* entry demonstrates, the authors provide students with ample critical leads to pursue. The *Critical Companion* gives readers who would like to delve deeper into Steinbeck scholarship the tools to do so. There is nothing else like it on the market today.

These strengths might also be considered its weakness. One problem is that many of the entries must be so short that there is hardly room for nuance. Witness the effort to boil down the primary theme of *The Grapes of Wrath* into a few sentences. Likewise, in the entry for *The Short Reign of Pippin IV*, I would have liked some mention of recent scholarship calling for a critical reassessment of the novel.¹ As another example, the entry for “phalanx” consists of only a few sentences and a reference to *The Grapes of Wrath*—but no mention of *In Dubious Battle*. And although the one-sentence summary of Chapter One of *The Grapes of Wrath* is accurate as far as it goes, it does not go very far. The summary must leave out all the imagery, poetry, and rhythm that make the novel’s opening so magical.

These criticisms are minor and should not detract from this book’s very real virtues. *The Critical Companion* is intended primarily to whet the appetite of those who know little or nothing about Steinbeck—perhaps a reader curious about a particular writing, a student looking for a place to begin his or her research, or a high-school teacher seeking help when preparing to teach a Steinbeck text. This book is admirably suited for such readers. It packs a great deal of information into a relatively small space. It should be very attractive, and rightly so, to high school and college

libraries. And even Steinbeck aficionados will find unexpected pleasures in idly leafing through the pages. I never knew that *The Smoker's Companion* paid Steinbeck his first royalties—a princely \$7 for his short story, “The Gifts of Iban.” (And yes, “The Gifts of Iban” gets its own entry). I had forgotten or never knew that Steinbeck sent his Pulitzer Prize check—in the amount of \$1000, by the way—to his friend Ritchie Lovejoy, who was working on a novel at the time. I suspect that my own copy will become increasingly dog-eared over time—Quick now, do you recall who played Johnny (that’s Johnny, not Juan) Chicoy in the eminently forgettable 1957 film of *The Wayward Bus*?²

NOTES

¹ FOR EXAMPLE, CHRISTINE RUCKLIN, “BEYOND FRANCE: STEINBECK’S *The Short Reign of Pippin IV*,” in *Beyond Boundaries: Rereading John Steinbeck*, ed. Susan Shillinglaw and Kevin Hearle (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002), 162-170.

² Answer: Rick Jason.