

On Reading

Certainly one of the most frequent pieces of advice we writers receive is simply: “Read a Lot. It will make you a better writer.” And just as certainly, reading a lot has been an easy instruction for me to follow. I love to read and in recent years, I like to document my reactions with reviews that I post on Goodreads.com. The books I most often chose to read were detective novels and legal thrillers. I’m sure my writing has benefitted in part from these entertaining, well-paced, stories. But they were as satisfying as a muffin with my coffee, enjoyed but all too quickly gone and forgotten.

Lately, in hopes of improving my writing, I’ve begun reading 20th century classics, books that are about something, something important. For example, I read Nella Larsen’s novella *Passing*, an insightful, deeply personal, study of racism in America. After that, I finished Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*. I found the novel fascinating, filled with unforgettable characters and stories, but beyond that, it asked me to think about man’s struggle with good and evil. I doubt there is a more fundamental question to consider. We’ll see if that kind of depth touches my work, going forward. At present, I’m making my way through Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, a grim trip into colonial Africa.

At any rate, since I write book reviews, I thought I would share here my take on *East of Eden*.

East of Eden, by John Steinbeck

It is no surprise that this novel is considered an American classic. Pulitzer Prize-winning author John Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962, and *East of Eden*, which he called his magnum opus, proved he deserved it. Why? First of all the novel is a successful experiment. Before its publication, I don’t believe anyone had combined autobiography and pure fiction as successfully. Here, the two perspectives are interwoven seamlessly, and while surprising, when Steinbeck shifts to first person, it feels utterly natural.

The second superlative feature of this sprawling multi-generational, multi-family saga is the depth and uniqueness of the characters. One example is the magnificent Samuel Hamilton, patriarch of the Hamilton clan, who was Steinbeck’s actual maternal grandfather. Regardless, the man is rendered with exquisite perfection. An idealist, romantic and poetic, ineffectual at earning money, but with a practical inventor’s bent, the reader (and the other characters) cannot help but fall in love with this Irish philosopher and raconteur.

Another equally well-drawn character is Cathy Trask (nee Ames). Something of an antithesis to Sam Hamilton, she is truly the epitome of evil, Satanic even, someone without an ounce of human compassion, willing to kill for her own advantage. In fact, all the characters are complex and range across the spectrum from good to evil. Most have a conscience and some evolve, always believably, and always engagingly for the reader. One favorite is the ultra-wise Chinese

helpmate, Lee. This man has to confront the racism of his day, but rises above it to be a caring, perceptive, often brilliant beacon of wisdom and love in the story.

There are several themes explored, including a contemplation of man's place and purpose in the world, societal values versus personal wishes, and of course, wrestling with evil, which Steinbeck said is the central question of all human lives. The book utilizes Biblical themes, as indicated by its title. In addition to the Garden of Eden and dwelling in the land of Nod (east of Eden), you have the tale of Cain and Abel. This latter story is played out twice with two sets of brothers, a generation apart. In the later pair, does one kill his brother out of jealousy over their father's love? I think it is left for the reader to consider the possibility.

In summary, *East of Eden* is a special book, enjoyable to read and provocative to ponder, all wrapped in a group of stories with people whom you want to watch. It is impossible to regret reading this long novel, as applicable today as it was when it was published in 1952.