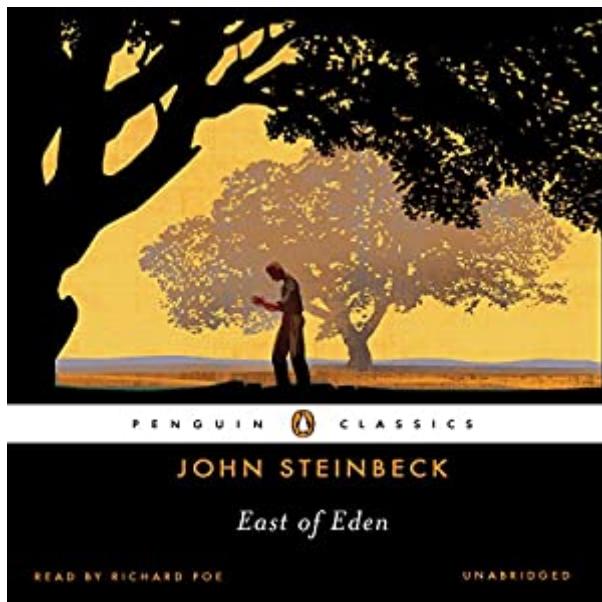


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East Of Eden



Synopsis

This sprawling and often brutal novel, set in the rich farmlands of California's Salinas Valley, follows the intertwined destinies of two families - the Trasks and the Hamiltons - whose generations helplessly reenact the fall of Adam and Eve and the poisonous rivalry of Cain and Abel.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is a story about the endurance of the human soul, about choosing to be who you would like to be rather than believing you were cut with a mold that can't be broken. But also it's a story about forgiveness, the freedom of choice and the long road one must walk between one's beginning and one's end, and all the causes and effects in-between. Steinbeck's masterpiece, for to call it anything less is impossible, has left me with a sense of loss. When I came to the end of this epic tale of family and humanity, I felt abandoned simply because I ran out of words to read. I wanted to carry on in his characters' lives, spying on their darkness, watching them evolve and bloom and outrun the forces haunting them. No book has made me feel quite so much sadness and excitement at once. Perhaps because I'm a writer, I relished the painterliness of Steinbeck's prose. I turned every single one of its six-hundred and one pages at a furious pace, and yet I indulged and languished and roamed the landscape he had painted for me, and me alone. The story is so personal, a reader might feel it is written for her. It is a story we must hear, a story we know, a story with which we can connect, as we do with all the ones passed down from civilization to civilization. We commune with

great stories, religious accounts, epic tales, because we see ourselves most readily in them, and as Lee (one of "Eden's" finest characters) says, that's why we keep telling, and retelling, them from one generation to the next. Steinbeck draws on the "Old Testament," turning over the story of Cain and Abel and making it his, for us anew. And because we see ourselves in it—"our good and evil—we devour his retelling as though it were medicine to save our soul, the cure for all our ails. But perhaps I exaggerate, indulging in the power of the writer a little too much. Or maybe I do feel my soul a little shaken by my experience, swept up in the writer's magic. Either way, I am satisfied to credit Steinbeck for my joy at venturing into his Eden. And it is the great landscape, the backdrop of his tale that speaks most readily to the reader.

Steinbeck's setting is in fact a large part of the whole. Like the characters he unearths, the soil on which they stand seems to reach for the sky, yearning to live too. You can't read "East of Eden" without experiencing the tan valleys of Northern California and the lush green dales of Connecticut. You see his East and his West, you practically smell the air of each, and you believe the world he creates to be the same one in which you live. The opening of the book sets you up for that, tells you, dear reader, you will feel every ounce of nature's beauty just as the narrator does; her dangerous flirtations, her permanency, her changeability, her gales, her forces, her perpetual and enduring spirit. We do not simply live in nature, but come from it. We embody it; all her forces. I think Steinbeck reminds us of this in such subtle and rare ways it seeps into the subconscious as we follow his narrator through the story of Adam Trask, Samuel Hamilton, and all the characters in-between and after. I remember my childhood names for the grasses and secret flowers. I remember where a toad may live and what time the birds awaken in the summer—and what trees and seasons smelled like—how people looked and walked and smelled even. The memory of odors is very rich. Effortlessly, Steinbeck strings you along with his prose, fooling you into not seeing the great and gargantuan task he is laying before you. Timshel, he teaches you. Thou mayest, the two words from "Genesis" that seem to speak most profoundly, for they admit to free will, and your ability to choose to rule over sin. John Milton's "Paradise Lost" also speaks of this freedom, one in which man has often stumbled, misunderstanding his disobedience, his choice between good and evil. Steinbeck examines this idea throughout the narrative, and shows you the outcomes of those who struggle with the same, and it is in their differences that choice becomes apparent. I have said little about the characters, the plot, the style and themes, and yet I have said everything I can about a work that has touched me so deeply. I will leave you with this short quote, said once again by Lee, the Chinese American who is the most philosophical, and enlightened of Steinbeck's family

of characters, the sage most inborn to the writer: "But Thou mayest!" Why, that makes a man great, that gives him stature with the gods, for in his weakness and his filth and his murder of his brother he has still the great choice. He can choose his course and fight it through and win.

Steinbeck's epic novel, 'East of Eden' is a depiction of his family's history in the Salinas Valley in California. Often the backdrop of many of his novels, '...Eden' is certainly more autobiographical than most of his works. The story branches off just like a family tree, and organically the characters blossom into full life. Beginning with Cyrus Trask during the late 1800's, we develop a Jacob and Esau rivalry between his boys Charles and Adam. Cyrus is a martinet, so overbearingly so, that Adam joins the army just to get out of his sight. Later, when he returns, the boys have become men and continue their conflict, except Cyrus has died and left a small fortune to both of them. Much of the novel focuses on the transition each one takes to acquire land and place their wealth in the right direction. From there Adam is the central focus of the story. He falls in love with a woman named Catherine (also Cathy or Kate) who is a local prostitute. Through him she bears a pair of twins, Caleb and Aron, who are destined to be as different as Adam and Charles were. Adam truly adores Kate despite her livelihood, but the relationship turns tempestuous. While he finds it easy to forgive her transgressions, he can't seem to tame her wily nature. The remainder of the novel follows the aspirations of Adam's family, including Kate, whose conniving ways provide a colorful backdrop as Adam attempts to keep their mother's identity a secret until they are old enough to process her place in their lives. Many subplots intertwine with Aron being an aspiring college bound preacher who falls in love with Abra, a preacher's daughter, while Caleb tries to win his father's affection as an entrepreneur at home. As a heartwarming touch, Lee, an Asian-American housekeeper, adds much to the drama as a second surrogate parent of sorts. Reading Steinbeck's classic is delightful. I found the 601 pages to be a trademark page-turner from one of my favorite American authors. While I'll always revere 'The Grapes of Wrath (Penguin Classics)' as his most powerful classic, I now understand why 'East of Eden' is considered among the upper echelon of his great works. 'The Winter of Our Discontent' and 'Of Mice and Men' have an emotional immediacy that are his trademark, but his expertise is no less apparent in this novel with his ability to weave such an intricate and absorbing tale from beginning to end. As poetic prose, Steinbeck's timeless work has been reaffirmed by becoming one of Oprah's prized "Book of the Month" selections. (On a personal note, I'd like to add that 'The Red Pony' was the only Steinbeck novel I ever read in school. Apparently my educators saw the wisdom of leaving his legacy to my free time when I could savor

his novels because I wanted to--and not because I had to. I read 'Of Mice and Men' during summer break during college, but I read the bulk of his famous works during the early nineties. Enjoy.)

I don't know what I can say about Steinbeck that hasn't already been said. I'm sad that it's taken me so long to discover his genius because he is certainly in the argument as one of the greatest writers of all time. East of Eden is a brilliant re-telling of Cain and Abel. Along the way it delves into so many areas such as murder, rape, prostitution and morality. But for me, the crux of the story is the whole nature versus nurture argument. East of Eden is such a complex story, I imagine everyone who reads it gleans something different.

I was stunned by the quality of this masterpiece. It explores the light and dark side of people with its variety of fascinating characters. There's the charming Irish father of numerous offspring who can truly spin a yarn. There's the philosophical Chinaman who is a source of stability for several of the characters. There's the beautiful, cunning woman who seems incapable of loving another person. It's lengthy but completely engaged me as I was fascinated by this multigenerational tale. If you've never read this book you probably need to give it a go. H Rubin, author of Look Backward Angel available through ..

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