



## Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters

*John Steinbeck*

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### Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters John Steinbeck

Each working day from January 29 to November 1, 1951, John Steinbeck warmed up to the work of writing *East of Eden* and a letter to the late Pascal Covici, his friend and editor of the Viking Press. It was his way, he said, of "getting my mental arm in shape to pitch a good game."

Steinbeck's letters were written on the left-handed pages of a notebook in which the facing pages would be filled with the text of *East of Eden*. They touched on many subjects - story arguments, trial flights of workmanship, concern for his sons.

Part autobiography, part writer's workshop, these letters offer an illuminating perspective on Steinbeck's creative process, and a fascinating glimpse of Steinbeck, the private man.

### Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters Details

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## From Reader Review Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters for online ebook

### M. Sarki says

Such a great journal. I enjoyed every word. Steinbeck was certainly an interesting man. This book gives us an inside look at how he worked. Myself, not so much a plot-driven devotee, but Steinbeck clearly had a plan and he carried it out to perfection. I admire him for that and respect his process.

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### J.Aleksandr Wootton says

Won't leave you breathless, but interesting if you are interested in Steinbeck's personal life, if you are studying *East of Eden* academically, or if you want to see how writers coax their creativity and manage their personal lives into an unequal yoke whereby, for a brief time most days, they can get work done on lengthy writing projects.

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### A.E. Reiff says

"I feel that sometimes when I am writing I am very near to a kind of unconsciousness. Then time does change its manner and minutes disappear into the cloud of time...having only one duration...all history and all pre-history might indeed be one durationless flash like an exploding star, eternal and without duration...oh she is lovely, this idea. (February 14)

Steinbeck says he's going to remove all the adjectives from the typed version. Thoughtless things, along with definite articles, participles. And here he has "the secret writing which will be burned but that deals with matters I have no wish for anyone to see... (February 13) creative juices rushing toward an outlet as semen gathers from the four quarters of a man and fights its way into the vesicle...there is no explaining this. The joy thing in me has two outlets: one a fine charge of love toward the incredibly desirable body and sweetness of woman, and second--mostly both--the paper and pencil or pen. And it is interesting to think what paper and pencil and the wriggling words are. They are nothing but the trigger into joy--the shout of beauty--the cacajada of the pure bliss of creation."

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### Pierre Rooyen says

Well, Mr Steinbeck. I go down on my knees before you, Sir. It was you who taught me how to tell a story. You, who are so darn good, yet so vulnerable and humble.

What writer would have the guts to admit, 'Although sometimes I have felt I held fire in my hands and spread a page with shining, I have never lost the weight of clumsiness, of ignorance, of aching inability.'

And this just after he has put East of Eden together? The writer who doesn't use adjectives or adverbs, but seeks the appropriate noun and verb. Who writes tightly, but gives the appearance his work is casual.

Oh Sir, I have learnt much from you. And I pass your wisdom on to any writer who will listen. One told me she received a publisher's contract because she adopted your wisdom.

I have read Journal of a Novel twice now, Grapes of Wrath, twice. East of Eden, three times, plus Cannery Row, Tortilla Flat, Of Mice and Men, The Pearl, at least once.

Good story-telling.

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### **Amanda says**

There were a couple of nuggets of gold here that made me wonder if Steinbeck thinks as beautifully as he writes. The behind the scenes info on EOE was mostly very vague, but sometimes insightful. It was fascinating seeing how an author at his prime has plotted out his novel and executes it. I'd recommend this to hard core Steinbeck or EOE lovers, but the casual reader won't get much from it.

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### **Steffie says**

This book was not full of the in depth, inner-workings of John Steinbeck's beautiful brain as I was hoping for. Instead of being a gold mine for dissecting East of Eden, it was simply a rather unromanced view of Steinbeck's quite normal life as he wrote and edited the novel. Although it didn't live up to my glorious expectations, I still loved the book. I found it very inspiring to read what a great novelist writes about writing.

"In utter loneliness a writer tries to explain the inexplicable."

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### **Shane says**

Only someone of the stature of John Steinbeck, flying in the fame of his seminal, Pulitzer Prize winning novel, Grapes of Wrath, could have pulled off publishing a diary maintained through the months he wrote his longest and (in his eyes) best book, East of Eden.

The diary was written to his editor Pascal Covici and has an entry for each working day on the novel. Steinbeck followed a Mon-Fri routine and only broke it to write a short story on one weekend. The daily diary entry was a warm-up to the day's writing, and we get a sense of his mood on that particular day. Here was a writer immersed, excited and engaged with his work, a multi-generational fictional history based on his family who lived in the Salinas Valley, California. On some days he procrastinated, on other days he was depressed, at other times he was joyous and blowing his own horn that this was the greatest book he had ever

written and that everything before had been merely practice—I would disagree with that.

During the writing of *East of Eden*, he moves with his family from New York to Nantucket, Massachusetts for a summer vacation, working all the while, as his third wife, Elaine, organizes the family logistics, giving him the time and freedom to work uninterrupted. Covici comes by weekly to retrieve the master's pencil-written pages to have them typed, and when the Steinbecks are in Nantucket, the handwritten pages are mailed to the publisher's offices. Steinbeck is the quintessential craftsman, and when he is not crafting his blockbuster of a novel, he is making furniture around the house and redesigning his kitchen. And Steinbeck sharpens his pencils daily and runs through dozens of them before the book is finished.

Steinbeck comes across as a needy, manic-depressive, constantly in need of validation, given to sudden bouts of binge drinking and worrying about his equally troubled son, Tom. His health could also have been compromised due to wounds suffered when he was a correspondent during WWII. He is constantly selling the merits of the book as if he is worried that it will be rejected or severely edited. Midway through the novel his health starts to suffer, with sleepless nights, eye trouble, nervous fits, depression and an overwhelming desire to play hooky at the first opportunity. On the social side, however, he is well connected to the literati and artists of the day who drop in on him regularly.

Given that this diary is published in its entirety, there is a great deal of repetition and we feel that we are standing in one place, while the novel grows at a fast clip.

At the end of the book, Steinbeck includes a long dedication/prologue/epilogue/epitaph that is by far the most lively. In it, he features a conversation between the publisher, editor, proof-reader, reader and writer, and we see the different viewpoints held by these stakeholders that make a book priceless in its attempt to synthesize such diverse expectations.

Although this book may be considered self-absorbed and dull by the average reader, to a writer of fiction, this is a great primer on the thinking, motivation, and actions of a journeyman writer who through his "all or nothing" efforts, and a bit of luck, won the Nobel Prize for Literature, much to his own surprise and that of the prevailing literary establishment.

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## Victoria Mixon says

Although Steinbeck has never been one of my favorite novelists--he should NOT have inflicted the end of *The Grapes of Wrath* on us--I do love *Tortilla Flats*. What a wonderful, Don Quixote piece of work.

So I was willing to give this one a try.

And, wow, was I ever glad I did. Too many beautiful, fascinating insights on the craft of fiction to even pick one to quote. I dog-eared the pages of my favorites. Now my copy's twice as thick as it's supposed to be.

I will trot out only this one, my favorite of all favorites (and for obvious reasons to anyone who knows anything about me at all):

"I know it is rough [to read:] and will need a lot of rewriting but I am never shy about it when a professional is doing the reading. But God save me from amateurs. They don't know what they are reading but it is much more serious than that. They immediately start rewriting. I never knew this to fail. It is invariable. They have

the authority of ignorance and that is something you simply cannot combat."

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## Kim says

On every working day between 29 January and 1 November 1951, John Steinbeck wrote a letter to his close friend and editor at Viking Press, Pat Covici, before he began his work for the day on the manuscript of *East of Eden*. The letters were written on the left-hand pages of the large notebook in which Steinbeck wrote - by hand, in pencil - the novel which meant most to him. Steinbeck told Covici that writing the letters was his way of "getting [his] mental arm in shape to pitch a good game".

Steinbeck's daily letters to Covici touch on a range of subjects. They describe what he intended to achieve on the day in question. They refer to his personal circumstances, in particular to his love for his third wife Elaine and his concerns regarding his young sons. The letters also describe Steinbeck's other projects: the gadgets he liked to invent, his woodwork projects (in particular a carved box he was making for Covici and in which he would ultimately give Covici the manuscript of the novel). However, the most significant aspect of the work is the light that the letters throw on the process through which *East of Eden* was written, on Steinbeck's passionate devotion to the writing of the novel and on his own psychological make-up. As is fitting for a writer who was skilled at describing people and their environment, Steinbeck had insight into his thought processes and emotions. He unflinchingly described his bouts of depression and self-doubt, his periods of manic activity, the days when everything went well and the days when he had difficulty motivating himself to work.

While there is some repetition in the letters - there were days which were a lot like other days - the work is also full of insights into how Steinbeck felt, not just about the book, but about writing. For example, on 3 September 1951 he wrote:

Writing is a very silly business at best. There is a certain ridiculousness about putting down a picture of life. And to add to the joke - one must withdraw from life in order to set down that picture. And third one must distort one's own way of life in order in some sense to simulate the normal in other lives. Having gone through all this nonsense, what emerges may well be the palest of reflections.... And the greatest foolishness of all lies in the fact that to do it at all, the writer must believe that what he is doing is the most important thing in the world. And he must hold to this illusion even when he knows it is not true. If he does not, the work is not worth even what it might otherwise have been.

Steinbeck was not fond of professional literary critics, but he was aware that he could not control how readers would react to *East of Eden*, the novel which meant more to him than anything else he had written. On 10 October 1951, three weeks before he finished the manuscript, he wrote:

In a short time [it] will be done and it will not be mine any more. Other people will take it over and own it and it will drift away from me as though I had never been a part of it. I dread that time because one can never pull back. [It's] like shouting good-bye to someone going off on a bus and no one can hear because of the roar of the motor.

I wish I had read this book around the same time as I listened to the audiobook of *East of Eden* last year, so that the details of the novel were clearer in my head. As I read, I occasionally re-read particular chapters of

the novel in order to refresh my memory. However, I know that reading the novel and this book in conjunction with each other would have enriched my experience of both works. That said, I very much enjoyed the book. It is highly recommended for admirers of Steinbeck's writing in general and *East of Eden* in particular.

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### **Simon A. says**

I love Steinbeck most of all for his ability to be double-brained (is that a word/concept?) What I mean is that he is not only the consummate artist in his writing but he can also build you a cabinet, fix your car and whittle you a duck from birch wood.

Here you have a glimpse into the wonderful world of a brilliant writer. Between laments on the progress of his book, we get letters to friends about parties, doubts, side-projects, precious vacations, fears, failures and wild successes. It's an honest portrayal of what it takes to complete a masterpiece. Oh, what it must have been like to be his wife...

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### **Rusty says**

Just completed John Steinbeck's Journal of a Novel, which he wrote while he developed *East of Eden*. I can't decide if one should read this interesting book in conjunction with *East of Eden*, after one has read *Eden* or follow it with *Eden*. At any rate, Journal gives one an in depth look into Steinbeck's life. He discusses his health; his sons and his wife, Elaine; his critics; his books; his fears and joys; and the development of *East of Eden* and with many of its characters and their experiences. I truly enjoyed this glimpse into the life and heart of this sensitive author because I have read many of his novels. Journal was written in the form of letters to his friend and editor of The Viking Press, Pascal Covici, and were written on the left-hand pages of the notebook in which he wrote *East of Eden*. The editor received the letters after the book was completed. It's a most interesting book and an enlightening look into the life of an author who struggles and struggles in his writing. What pains Steinbeck went to make his characters lifelike and their experiences true to their personalities!

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### **Theryn Fleming says**

Steinbeck wrote the journal on the left-hand pages of a notebook and the novel (*East of Eden*) on the right-hand pages. The journal, written as a letter to his editor, was his warm-up for the day. He was a huge procrastinator. For example, he wrote in pencil (crazy!) and he was completely anal-retentive about his pencils. They had to be a certain kind, he spent time sharpening them at the beginning of the day so he wouldn't have to stop while writing, gave them to his kids when they got too short, etc. And his journals were filled with same crap that goes through my head before I start writing. Which, honestly, is really comforting.

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## Chris Blocker says

As a fan of East of Eden and the work of John Steinbeck in general, I loved this book. There is so much insight into what I consider the most brilliant work of fiction ever crafted. With all the cuts that were made to the final product of East of Eden, it's sometimes difficult to tell whether Steinbeck was really dabbling in Postmodernism or not. Journal of Novel makes it clear that he was. And for that, I love this man.

For the writer, there are some wonderful bits of advice in Journal, but it's probably not worth reading the entire work. Essentially, Steinbeck's philosophy could be summed up as "do what you feel is right and don't give a damn what anyone says."

For the layman, there isn't much here. After all, Journal of a Novel is a series of letters written to a friend (and editor). Steinbeck repeatedly says things like "I have to go use the toilet now." Now, for me, I care. 'Cause I want to know about every bowel movement John Steinbeck had. But you, you probably don't care.

I'd only recommend this book for those who have a passion for East of Eden. It'll add some color to an already wonderful story.

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## Jenny (Reading Envy) says

John Steinbeck often used letters to friends to get his writing juices flowing, and during the writing of East of Eden, wrote every day to Pascal Covici, his editor and friend. Most entries are written prior and post to the work of the day, ranging from tidbits from his life, commentary on how the novel is going and what he is trying to do, and a revealing obsession with newly sharpened pencils.

This is for people interested in the writing process or people who have enjoyed East of Eden; I'm not sure I'd pick it up otherwise!

ETA: I saved these two little quotes

"A great and beautiful storm today - such lightning and rain - and this always stimulates me like a drug. I must have great violence in me because I react to violence in nature with great joy." (7/17/51)

"My sweet Elaine sat many hours with me last night while I put out a thundering silence." (8/1/51)

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## Kathy Stone says

This is the diary John Steinbeck kept while writing East of Eden. It is interesting to read what Steinbeck's concerns were while writing this novel of his home town. He interweaves family history in with the fictional Trasks to create a counterpoint in the novel, especially concerning the evilness of Cathy. This was something he worried about from a critical standpoint as no one is pure evil and he created a purely evil female. The parts of his family history also concerned him in the novel, but he let them stand as this offered contrast and slowed the story down so his readers could savor the story.

While writing the novel and keeping the diary he kept track of concerns for his sons, what his stepdaughter,

Waverly, was doing and the entertainments which he and his third wife, Elaine went to. What was playing on Broadway, the Giants-Yankees World Series, and a vacation to Nantucket, MA.

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