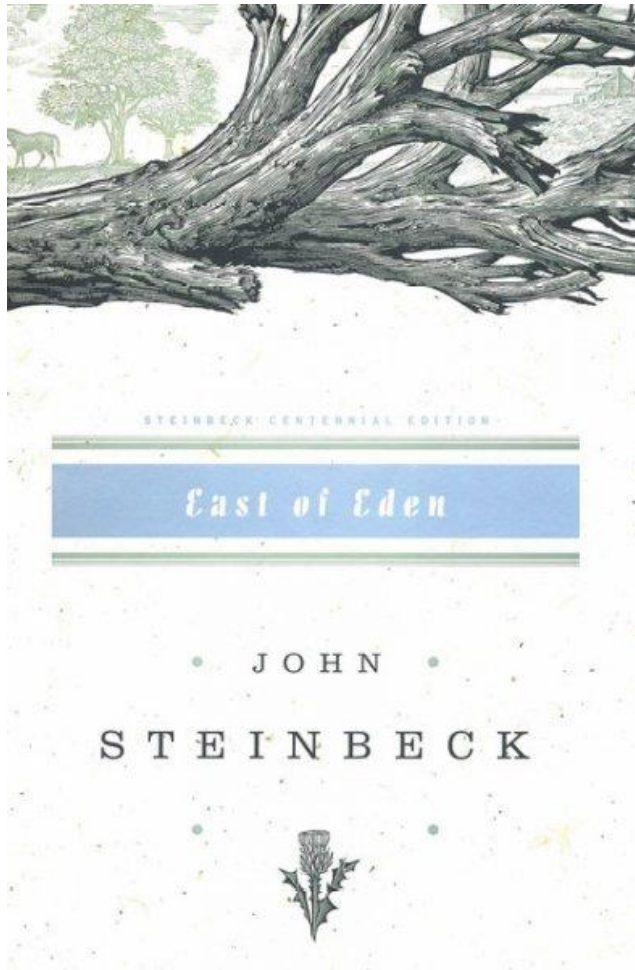


## About the book...



John Steinbeck's passionate and exhilarating epic, re-creates the seminal stories of Genesis through the intertwined lives of two American families. The result is a purely American saga set in Steinbeck's own childhood home, the Salinas Valley of northern California. The valley is a new world both idyllic and harsh, and Steinbeck sings to it with a personal nostalgia that is clouded by the knowledge that this valley-as all human dwellings-is the location for as much tragedy as triumph.

A brilliant novel of ideas, *East of Eden* is far-reaching in its effort to explicate the most fundamental trials of mankind. Brutally realistic-and sometimes fatalistic-about people's ability to harm themselves and those around them, it is also a celebration of perseverance, enduring love, and the noble yearning to better oneself. And it is a work of profound optimism about the capacity of humans to triumph over adversity and determine their own fates. In prose both evanescent and dignified, Steinbeck creates in these characters and for the reader "a new love for that glittering instrument, the human soul. It is a lovely and unique thing in the universe. It is always attacked and never destroyed." ([www.readinggroupguides.com](http://www.readinggroupguides.com))

## Author Biography (from *NoveList*)

Steinbeck was born into a German-Irish family in 1902 in Salinas, which was even then the center of American lettuce production. Steinbeck grew up and went to school in "America's salad bowl" before leaving to attend Stanford University in 1919. He attended classes in English and marine biology off and on for six years, but left for New York to become a reporter before completing a degree at Stanford in either subject. His career as an East Coast journalist was brief, and Steinbeck decided to head west, taking a variety of odd jobs, from surveying to fruit-picking, all of which put him in close contact with the farming communities and working poor he would later write about. From 1926 to 1928, Steinbeck worked as caretaker for a summer home in Lake Tahoe and wrote his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, a historical romance about the life of Captain Henry Morgan. The novel was published in 1929 without much fanfare or critical attention. His two subsequent novels, *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933), also went largely unnoticed by literary critics and

the reading public. In 1934, Steinbeck finally received national attention when his short story "*The Murder*" won the O. Henry Prize. With the success of his novel *Tortilla Flat* the following year, Steinbeck's writing career seemed finally to be taking off. With the subsequent publication of his trio of novels about the experiences of migrant farmers in the late 1930s, *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and his popular novella *The Red Pony* (1937), Steinbeck had reached the height of his powers.

The *Grapes of Wrath*, which described the plight of an Oklahoma farm family driven to California by drought and naive hope, became the best-selling book of 1939, the 1940 Pulitzer Prize winner, and was hailed by Dorothy Parker and others as the Great American Novel. The work generated interest in the plight of the migrant farmers, eventually leading to congressional hearings about labor laws and the deplorable conditions in migrant camps. Steinbeck's dark view of capitalism and focus on America's forgotten poor also brought the writer under FBI surveillance as a suspected Communist, although no evidence of Communist ties was ever found.

During World War II, Steinbeck served as a war correspondent in Europe and North Africa for the New York Herald Tribune, with many of his war dispatches collected and published later as *Once There Was a War* (1958). Steinbeck's collaboration with the newspaper continued after the war in a series of special assignments, including a tour of Russia in 1947 with photographer Robert Capa. At the same time he was involved in reporting and even commissioned works for the Army and Air Force, Steinbeck continued to produce fiction at a phenomenal rate, composing *Cannery Row* (1945), *The Wayward Bus* (1947), and *The Pearl* (1947) in the 1940s and numerous works of fiction and non-fiction in the 1950s and 1960s.

Steinbeck's most popular and influential work during the last decades of his life was *East of Eden*, published in 1952. The book spans the period of American history from the Civil War to World War I and tells the story of the Salinas Valley in California and by extension the entire nation through the experiences of two families, the Hamiltons and the Trasks. *East of Eden* is also a chronicle of Steinbeck's own family, written as a legacy for his two sons and to immortalize his mother Olive Hamilton Steinbeck's colorful Irish-American family. Steinbeck's parents appear in the novel, as do myriad Hamilton aunts and uncles,

and even the author himself. *East of Eden* was a bestseller and was soon adapted for film. Director Elia Kazan's 1955 film, starring James Dean as Cal, is now hailed as a classic American film. There were also later adaptations of the novel for television and stage, including a short-lived 1968 musical called "Here's Where I Belong." The journal Steinbeck kept as he wrote *East of Eden* was published after his death as *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters* (1969).

John Steinbeck died on December 20, 1968, still trying to expose injustices and inspire changes in American society. He remains one of America's best known and greatest writers, but more than that, John Steinbeck was for many years America's conscience, speaking for those without a voice and always believing that change was possible.

## **Discussion Questions** **([www.readinggroupguides.com](http://www.readinggroupguides.com))**

1. Steinbeck has a character refer to Americans as a "breed," and near the end of the book Lee says to a conflicted Cal that "We are all descended from the restless, the nervous, the criminals, the arguers and brawlers, but also

the brave and independent and generous. If our ancestors had not been that, they would have stayed in their home plots in the other world and starved over the squeezed-out soil." What makes this a quintessentially American book? Can you identify archetypically American qualities-perhaps some of those listed above-in the characters?

2. Sam Hamilton-called a "shining man"-and his children are an immigrant family in the classic American model. What comes with Sam and his wife Liza from the "old country"? How does living in America change them and their children? What opportunities does America provide for the clan, and what challenges?

3. Adam Trask struggles to overcome the actions of others-his father, brother, and wife-and make his own life. What is the lesson that he learns that frees him from Kate and allows him to love his sons? He says to Cal near the end that "if you want to give me a present-give me a good life. That would be something I could value." Does Adam have a good life? What hinders him? Would you characterize his life as successful in the end?

4. Lee is one of the most remarkable characters in American literature, a philosopher trapped by the racial expectations of his time. He is the essence of compassion, erudition, and calm, serving the Trasks while retaining a complex interior and emotional life. Do you understand why he speaks in pidgin, as he explains it to Sam Hamilton? How does his character change—in dress, speech, and action—over the course of the book? And why do you think Lee stays with the Trasks, instead of living on his own in San Francisco and pursuing his dream?

5. Women in the novel are not always as fully realized as the main male characters. The great exception is Adam Trask's wife, Cathy, later Kate the brothel owner. Clearly Kate's evil is meant to be of biblical proportions. Can you understand what motivates her? Is she truly evil or does Steinbeck allow some traces of humanity in his characterization of her? What does her final act, for Aron Trask, indicate about her (well-hidden) emotions?

6. Sibling rivalry is a crushing reoccurrence in East of Eden. First Adam and his brother Charles, then Adam's sons Cal and Aron, act out a drama of jealousy and competition that

seems fated: Lee calls the story of Cain and Abel the "symbol story of the human soul." Why do you think this is so, or do you disagree? Have you ever experienced or witnessed such a rivalry? Do all of the siblings in the book act out this drama or do some escape it? If so, how? If all of the "C" characters seem initially to embody evil and all the "A" characters good-in this novel that charts the course of good and evil in human experience-is it true that good and evil are truly separate? Are the C characters also good, the A characters capable of evil?

7. Abra, at first simply an object of sexual competition to Cal and Aron, becomes a more complex character in her relationships with the brothers but also with Lee and her own family. She rebels against Aron's insistence that she be a one-dimensional symbol of pure femininity. What is it that she's really looking for? Compare her to some of the other women in the book (Kate, Liza, Adam's stepmother) and try to identify some of the qualities that set her apart. Do you think she might embody the kind of "modern" woman that emerged in postwar America?



8. Some of Steinbeck's ethnic and racial characterizations are loaded with stereotype. Yet he also makes extremely prescient comments about the role that many races played in the building of America, and he takes the time to give dignity to all types of persons. Lee is one example of a character that constantly subverts expectations. Can you think of other scenes or characters that might have challenged conventional notions in Steinbeck's time? In ours? How unusual do you think it might have been to write about America as a multicultural haven in the 1950s? And do you agree that that is what Steinbeck does, or do you think he reveals a darker side to American diversity?

9. What constitutes true wealth in the book? The Hamiltons and the Trasks are most explicitly differentiated by their relationship to money: though Sam Hamilton works hard he accumulates little, while Adam Trask moons and mourns and lives off the money acquired by his father. Think of different times that money is sought after or rejected by characters (such as Will Hamilton and Cal Trask) and the role that it plays to help and

hinder them in realizing their dreams. Does the quest for money ever obscure deeper desires?

10. During the naming of the twins, Lee, Sam, and Adam have a long conversation about a sentence from Genesis, disagreeing over whether God has said an act is ordered or predetermined. Lee continues to think about this conversation and enlists the help of a group of Chinese philosophers to come to a conclusion: that God has given humans choice by saying that they may (the Hebrew word for "may," *timshel*, becomes a key trope in the novel), that people can choose for themselves. What is Steinbeck trying to say about guilt and forgiveness? About family inheritance versus free will? Think of instances where this distinction is important in the novel, and in your own life.

11. The end of the novel and the future of the Trasks seems to rest with Cal, the son least liked and least understood by his father and the town. What does Cal come to understand about his relationship to his past and to each member of his family? The last scene between Adam and Cal is momentous; what exactly happens between them, and how hopeful a note is this profound ending? Why is Lee trying

to force Cal to overturn the assumption that lives are "all inherited"? What do you think Cal's future will be?

12. *East of Eden* is a combination novel/memoir; Steinbeck writes himself in as a minor character in the book, a member of the Hamilton family. What do you think he gained by morphing genres in this fashion? What distinguishes this from a typical autobiography? What do you think Steinbeck's extremely personal relationship to the material contributes to the novel?

### **Read Alike** (from Amazon.com and NoveList)

*The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald

*As I Lay Dying*, by William Faulkner

*Plainsong*, by Ken Haruf

*Ironweed*, by William Kennedy

