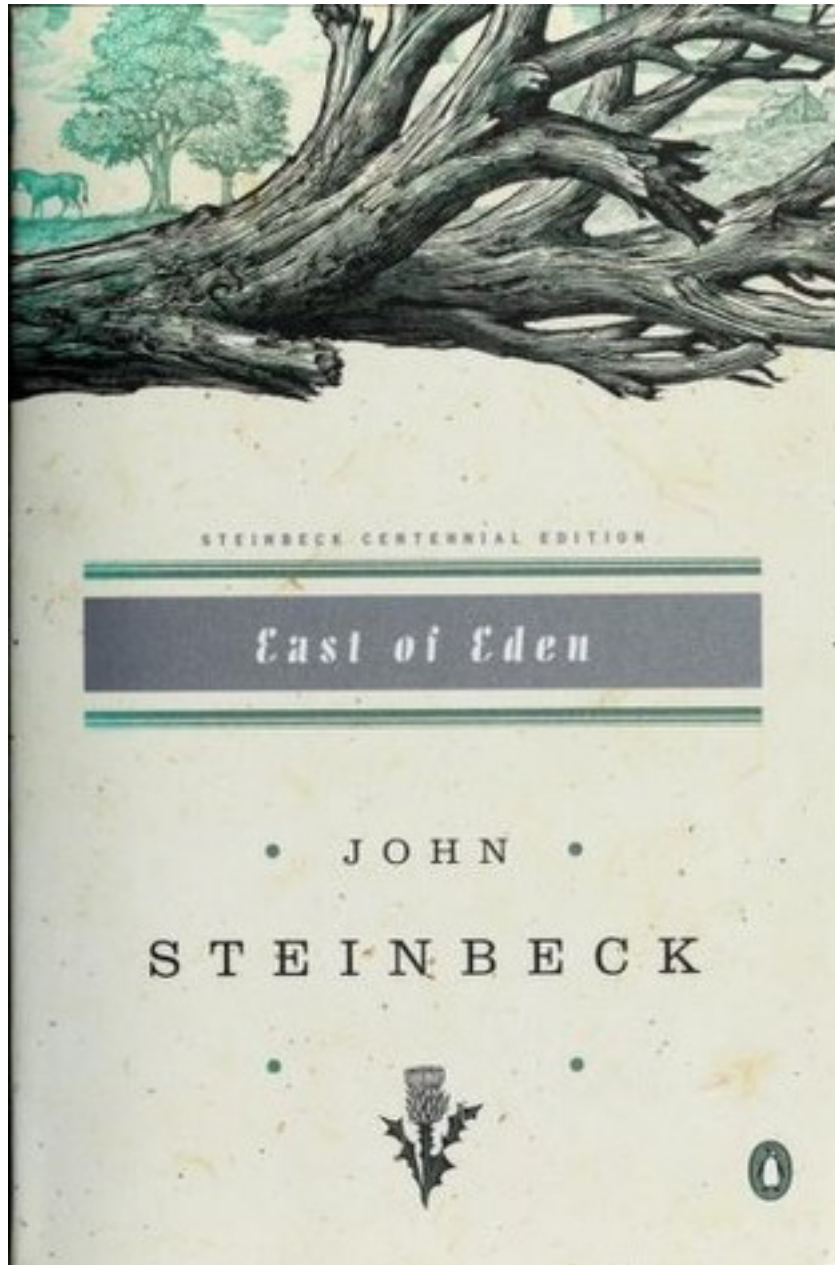


#94: East of Eden

#books/date/2019/06

#books/type/fiction

#books/rating/★★★★★



Overview

My favorite Steinbeck book to date—the epic scale of the story, California setting, and timelessness of the message, all but ensures that I'll read this one again at some point.

The story revolves around Adam Trask, a former soldier who eventually finds his way to the Salinas Valley, where he buys land and starts a family. But beyond Adam, the people who

enter his orbit—his father, brother (Charles), wife (Cathy), children (twins Aron and Caleb), neighbors (the Hamiltons), and live-in servant (Lee)—truly make the book memorable. Without spoiling the story, it is a tale of good and evil—what it means to be an angel or a devil, and whether we are doomed to be one or the other, or have the volition to choose our own path.

"I believe that there is one story in the world, and only one, that has frightened and inspired us, so that we live in a Pearl White serial of continuing thought and wonder. Humans are caught—in their lives, in their thoughts, in their hungers and ambitions, in their avarice and cruelty, and in their kindness and generosity too—in a net of good and evil. I think this is the only story we have and that it occurs on all levels of feeling and intelligence. Virtue and vice were warp and woof of our first consciousness, and they will be the fabric of our last, and this despite any changes we may impose on field and river and mountain, on economy and manners. There is no other story. A man, after he has brushed off the dust and chips of his life, will have left only the hard, clean questions: Was it good or was it evil? Have I done well—or ill?

Book Notes

- "It has always seemed strange to me that it is usually men like Adam who have to do the soldiering. He did not like fighting to start with, and far from learning to love it, as some men do, he felt an increasing revulsion for violence." (pg. 34)
- Samuel developed, "a very bad patent habit, a disease many men suffer from"; the startups of the late 1800's? (pg. 40)
- "Such men are rare now, but in the nineties there were many of them, wandering men, lonely men, who wanted it that way. Some of them ran from responsibilities and some felt driven out of society by injustice. They worked a little, but not for long. They stole a little, but only food and occasionally needed garments from a wash line. They were all kinds of men—literate men and ignorant men, clean men and dirty men—but all of them had restlessness in common." (pg. 55)
- "In all such local tragedies time works like a damp brush on water color. The sharp edges blue, the ache goes out of it, the colors melt together, and from the many separated lines a solid gray emerges." (pg. 88)
- "And this I believe: that the free, exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world. And this I would fight for: the freedom of the mind to take any direction is wishes, undirected. And this I must fight against: any idea, religion, or government which limits or destroys the individual. This is what I am and what I am about." (pg. 131)
- "Maybe we all have in us a secret pond where evil and ugly things germinate and grow

strong. But this culture is fenced, and the swimming brood climbs up only to fall back. Might it not be that in the dark pools of some men the evil grows strong enough to wriggle over the fence and swim free? Would not such a man be our monster, and are we not related to him in our hidden water? It would be absurd if we did not understand both angels and devils, since we invented them." (pg. 132)

- "If I slip, just remember that I'm a comical genius. It's hard to split a man down the middle and always reach for the same half." (pg. 163)
- "And here I make a rule—a great and lasting story is about everyone or it will not last. The strange and foreign is not interesting—only the deeply personal and familiar." (pg. 268)
- The Trask boys: Caleb and Aaron!
- **"The ladder to climb to the stars"** - the great story about *timshel* and "thou mayest" (pgs. 299-302)
 - "There are millions who feel predestination in 'Thou shalt.' Nothing they may do can interfere with what will be. But 'Thou mayest'! Why, that makes a man great, and 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."
- "Aron was content to be a part of his world, but Cal must change it." (pg. 345)
- Lee, preparing to tell the story of his mother's death:
 - "There's more beauty in the truth even if it's dreadful beauty. The storytellers at the city gate twist life so that it looks sweet to the lazy and the stupid and the weak, and this only strengthens their infirmities and teaches nothing, cures nothing, nor does it let the heart soar." (pg. 356)
 - "Get on with it," Adam said irritably.
- "Poor Tom did not know that dissembling successfully is one of the creative joys of a businessman. To indicate enthusiasm was idiotic." (pg. 401)
- **The one story in the world** (pg. 411)

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- The story of Croesus and Solon (411)
 - Croesus: "Do you not consider me lucky?"
 - Solon: "How can I tell? You aren't dead yet."
- "When a man comes to die, no matter what his talents and influence and genius, if he dies unloved his life must be a failure to him and his dying a cold horror. It seems to me that if you or I must choose between two courses of thought or action, we should remember our dying and try so to live that our death brings no pleasure to the world." (413)
- Lee: "They say a clean cut heals the soonest. There's nothing sadder to me than associations held together by nothing but the glue of postage stamps. If you can't see or hear or touch a man, it's best to let him go." (pg. 415)
- Lee: "Perhaps the best conversationalist in the world is the man who helps others to talk." (pg. 431)
- Lee to Cal...
 - "Don't you dare take the lazy way. It's too easy to excuse yourself because your ancestry. Don't let me catch you doing it! Now—look close at me so you will remember. Whatever you do, it will be you who do it—not your mother." (pg. 445)
- Daly City reference on page 506 :)

The split second has been growing more and more important to us. And as human activities become more and more intermeshed and integrated, the split tenth of a second will emerge, and then a new name must be made for the split hundredth...But it isn't silly, this preoccupation with small time units. One thing late or early can disrupt everything around it, and the disturbance runs outward in bands like the waves from a dropped stone in a quiet pool. (530)

- "I know my father loves Aron. It's because he looks like her. My father never got over her. He may not know it, but it's true. I wonder if he does know it. That makes me jealous of her too." (536)
- Great dialogue between Adam and Lee (538)
 - Adam: "Old Sam Hamilton saw this coming. He said there couldn't be any more universal philosophers. The weight of knowledge is too great for one mind to absorb. He saw a time when one man would know only one little fragment, but he would know it well."
 - Lee: "Maybe the knowledge is too great and maybe men are growing too small. Maybe, kneeling down to atoms, they're becoming atom-sized in their souls. Maybe a specialist is only a coward, afraid to look out of his little cage. And think what any specialist misses—the whole world over his fence."
 - Lee: "Money's easy to make if it's money you want. But with a few exceptions people

don't want money. They want luxury and they want love and they want admiration."

- Lee reads from, and quotes, *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* (563)
- Abra on Aron: "He was going to have it come out his way if he had to tear the world up by the roots." (576)
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