

A WRITER'S QUEST: EXPLAINING THE INEXPLICABLE

By Fred Hobbs

A time-honored axiom declares that to be a good writer, one should write based on what he or she knows. The famed, controversial Pulitzer and Nobel Prize-winning author John Steinbeck certainly has followed that convention, and also has skillfully woven into his works what he learned from associations with real people who became compelling fictionalized characters in his novels.

Although he spent time in New York at the start of his career, made many trips to the Soviet Union, and served as a war correspondent in Europe in World War II, his principal focus was on his native California, particularly the Salinas-Monterey Bay area where he was born into a middle class Episcopal family of German ancestry. He spent his childhood living in a large Victorian home in Salinas. His father served as Monterey County treasurer. Some observers find it surprising that given his background, Steinbeck wrote so compellingly of the displaced, the homeless and the plight of Depression-era farm workers. His mother is credited with instilling in him that sensibility and for firing his passion for reading and writing. His liberal views and graphic depictions of brutality at the hands of operators of California's agricultural labor camps made him a controversial figure.

Among the 27 books including 16 novels and five short story collections written by Steinbeck, "The Grapes of Wrath" stands out as the most celebrated and memorable. The novel, set during the Great Depression, features the Joads, a poor family of tenant farmers driven from their Oklahoma home by Dust Bowl conditions and economic hardships, attempting to seek a new life in the fertile valleys of California. Along with thousands of other "Okies" they sought jobs, land, dignity and a future.

Steinbeck employed a very unusual, but effective, format for his novel. Every-other chapter of the book was devoted to advancing the plot and developing the characters including Ma Joad, Pa Joad and the principal protagonist, their son Tom, recently paroled from prison where he was serving time for what might be considered a justifiable homicide.

The alternate chapters contained vivid descriptions, first of the flat, dusty, wind-blown, worn-out Oklahoma soil and the family's share-cropper shack, then the country side as they journeyed in an old, nearly broken down truck through New Mexico and Arizona and finally saw the hoped-for promised land of greenery and orchards of California. The reader could choose to follow the traditional arrangement of chapters or divide the experience into the separate parts to advance the plot more quickly or first to absorb Steinbeck's vivid descriptive passages and then read the story.

The film version of "The Grapes of Wrath" starring Henry Fonda and directed by John Ford has drawn many accolades over the years and is still shown on Classic movie channels.

Three other Steinbeck works are certainly worthy of note in any salute to the author's place in American literary history. "East of Eden", set in the Salinas Valley, is based on Steinbeck's own maternal ancestry and draws on the biblical story of Adam and his two sons, Cain and Abel. "Of Mice and Men" is

the tragic story of two traveling ranch workers in the 1930's and centers on themes of racism, loneliness, prejudice against the mentally ill and the struggle for personal identity. "Cannery Row" is the fictional name Steinbeck gave to the location of sardine fisheries in Monterey. The story follows the lives of local workers and owners of small businesses attempting to eke out a living during the 1930's depression years.

Much more can be said, written and analyzed about this prolific American literary figure. But once when asked his approach to pursuing his craft, Steinbeck offered an answer in just ten words: "In utter loneliness, a writer tries to explain the inexplicable."