

Travels With Charley

By Mel Lavine

Special to the Times

John Steinbeck, the great American writer, died in 1968 at 66. You know his books – “The Grapes of Wrath,” “East of Eden,” “The Red Pony,” “The Wayward Bus,” “Tortilla Flat,” “Cannery Row,” “Of Mice and Men,” and “Travels with Charley,” among others.

“Travels with Charley” was published in the early 1960s and is still read today. Steinbeck was closing in on 60 (old age for many back then) when he set out “In Search of America” as the subtitle has it, accompanied only by a French poodle named Charley. Together they traveled through some 40 states – had many adventures – some scary like a hurricane in New York; some fraternal like sharing cognac with a family of potato pickers in Maine; some humorous, some stirring, some angry about what he found in the America of the time, and some prideful.

So I was shocked when I read an editorial in the New York Times that said a reporter retracing Steinbeck's steps discovered that the author's account of three months of solitary travels was fiction in many instances. The book, said the Times, was "full of improbably colorful characters" and improbable dialogue. All I could think was: another giant of my youth brought down to earth!

The reporter, Bill Seigerwald, (not a Times employee) retraced Steinbeck's 1960 coast to coast trip. He said in a blog and in an article this month in Reason, a magazine, that Steinbeck fudged the facts, dates and places. He had not been gone for months with only the poodle for companionship, as he claimed. The author's wife was with him most of the time; he hardly ever camped; often stayed in fancy hotels.

Why then do I not feel short-changed? Why am I not moved to cast old John aside as another charlatans in the trade?

Maybe because "Travels With Charley" is an historical document of a Twentieth Century odyssey, if made up in parts. Maybe it's because when he was preparing his Great Depression novel, "The Grapes of Wrath," (a primer for our own Great Recession), Steinbeck was inspired to put, in his words, "a tag of shame" on the greedy, despicable people who brought the country to its knees. Maybe, too, it's for lines in "Cannery Row" like, "Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream." Maybe, too, it's for dialogue like, "Okie use' ta mean you was from Oklahoma. Now it means you're scum. Don't mean nothing itself; it' the way they say it." Or, "Owning freezes you forever into 'I,' and cuts yourself off forever from the 'we.'"

The Times is right when it asserts, “Books labeled ‘nonfiction’ should not break faith with readers. Not now, and not in 1962, the year ‘Travels With Charley,’ came out and Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize for Literature.”

And yet I bear Steinbeck no blame. “Travels With Charley” paints a true picture of what our country was like half a century ago. No dearth of reality about that.

I am in agreement with the man who wrote the Times, “Your April 10 editorial. “The Truth About Charley” frets that John Steinbeck lied in portions of his book, “Travels With Charley in Search of America...”

“What if he did? As Picasso said, ‘Art is a lie that makes us realize truth.’”

Mel Lavine was a television producer for many years with NBC News and CBS News in New York. Contact him at his e-mail address: mellavine@aol.com.