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Electronic Green Journal

Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Electronic Green Journal, 1(41)

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Publication Date

2018

DOI

10.5070/G314138008

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Review: Citizen Steinbeck: Giving Voice to the People

By Robert McParland

Reviewed by Ryder W. Miller

New York, NY, USA

McParland, Robert. *Citizen Steinbeck: Giving Voice to the People*. Lanham, MD, USA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. 259 pp. ISBN: 9781442268302, hardback. US\$40.00; alkaline paper; also available as an e-book.

Citizen Steinbeck: Giving Voice to the People provides a wonderful and fascinating overview of the life and literary achievement of John Steinbeck (1902-1968). English Professor Robert McParland tells a detailed story about Steinbeck's life which begins in Salinas, California, as well as his struggle to be a successful writer, his days at work and in the war, and his literary success and achievements. As a writer, Steinbeck went beyond being a regionalist to become one of America's most famous writers; he won a Pulitzer Prize, The National Book Award, and the Nobel Prize for Literature. He also had an international perspective having been part of the American military struggles overseas and having done some travel writing and setting some of his stories in other countries.

Steinbeck began as a reporter but went on to write some stories with mythological elements as well as having characters that believed in witchcraft and astrology. His novels were set in the land with lush descriptions of the outdoors. Salinas, CA was part of the farming community and Steinbeck wrote of their times and struggles. Steinbeck also wrote about some of the animals in these landscapes and one could argue that he also gave them and the land a voice. *Citizen Steinbeck* is a special treat for those who have read Steinbeck's writing. The book is rich in factual details about his life and times and literary creations. One gets a fuller sense of the writer here, but there are subjects that are too large for this book, especially for the readers with Postmodernist, Feminist, and Sociological concerns.

Steinbeck was a controversial male writer who represented his times, finding his successes in The Great Depression years of the 1930s and the turbulent and difficult times that followed. The tough times of the 1930s, marriage to Carol Henning, and the war, turned Steinbeck into a realist. He was a knight of sorts and became a spokesperson for America. *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), essential reading to understand this country, remains a literary classic that reminds us of the damage we can cause the environment and the human consequences that can follow. It is a great book for social workers as well as those interested in the times.

If environmentalists want to pick a favorite American literary realist, they are likely to do best with John Steinbeck rather than Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, or William Faulkner. Hemingway was an adventurer, hunter, and outdoorsman, Fitzgerald wrote about romance and The Jazz Age. Faulkner could be opaque, experimental, difficult, and never fully escaped regionalism.

All achieved great literary accomplishments, but Steinbeck also wrote about the results of the damage we did to the land, the ocean and ourselves.

Citizen Steinbeck can provide the context to understand the writer and his times. Steinbeck wrote about the people who bore the brunt of some of the damage we caused the environment. Faulkner took us to the forest, but most of it was sociological. Fitzgerald took us out for drinks and failed romances and Hemingway brought back trophies from his time in the wild. Steinbeck reminded us of the wild creatures and people whom could wind up as road kill. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck reminds readers that people will also face the repercussion of what we do the environment. *Citizen Steinbeck*, however, reminds us of the need to acknowledge problems and to fight to make things better. This book is recommended for academic libraries.

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Electronic Green Journal, Issue 41, Spring 2018, ISSN: 1076-7975