

Discussion of *Travels with Charley* by John Steinbeck
Galesburg Public Library Tuesday Book Club
July 2006

1. From the introduction, p. ix:

In a letter to Adlai Stevenson in 1960, Steinbeck wrote, “Having too many THINGS, [Americans] spend their hours and money on the couch searching for a soul. A strange species we are. We can stand anything God and Nature throw at us save only plenty. If I wanted to destroy a nation, I would give it too much and I would have it on its knees, miserable, greedy and sick.”

What do you think about this observation?

2. Commenting on how wasteful Americans are, Steinbeck writes on p. 22,

“I do wonder whether there will come a time when we can no longer afford our wastefulness – chemical wastes in rivers, metal wastes everywhere, and atomic wastes buried deep in the earth or sunk in the sea. When an Indian village became too deep in its own filth, the inhabitants moved. And we have no place to which to move.”

Steinbeck wrote this 45 years ago. Was it prophetic, or in error?

3. On p. 50, Steinbeck writes,

“It occurs to me that, . . . we Americans bring in mercenaries to do our hard and humble work. I hope we may not be overwhelmed one day by peoples not too proud or too lazy or too soft to bend to the earth and pick up the things we eat.”

This made me think about all the debate today around immigration policies. What do you think?

4. From p. 159,

“For all of our enormous geographic range, for all of our sectionalism, for all of our interwoven breeds drawn from every part of the ethnic world, we are a nation, a new breed. Americans are much more American than they are Northerners, Southerners, Westerners, or Easterners. And descendants of English, Irish, Italian, Jewish, German, Polish are essentially American. This is not patriotic whoop-de-do; it is carefully observed fact. California Chinese, Boston Irish, Wisconsin German, yes, and Alabama Negroes, have more in common than they have apart.”

Do you agree?

5. From p. 185

“Traveling about, I early learned the difference between an American and the Americans. They are so far apart that they might be opposites. Often when a European has described the American with hostility and scorn he has turned to me and said, “Of course, I don’t mean you. I am speaking of those others.”

6. Any thoughts about this today?

7. What other problems observed by Steinbeck still exist today?

8. How has American changed in the 45 years since the book was written?

9. Where would you go today to “find” America?