

ANALYSIS

Cannery Row (1944)

John Steinbeck

(1902-1968)

“On Cannery Row in Monterey, California, live Doc, the sympathetic, wise, lonely owner of the Western Biological Laboratory; Dora, the touch-minded but warm-hearted madam of a brothel, the Bear Flag Restaurant; Lee Chong, the shrewd, kind proprietor of a remarkably well-stocked grocery store; and Mack and his five happy-go-lucky friends, compounded of ‘Virtues and graces and laziness and zest.’ Since they like and admire Doc, these pleasant, philosophic bums engage in a great expedition to catch frogs for which Doc will pay and thus finance a surprise party they plan for him.

Fortified by liquor got from Lee, they begin their party at Doc’s laboratory, of which they accidentally make a shambles and from which their innumerable frogs escape long before Doc arrives. Ashamed of the disaster, the men settle into gloom until months later, forgiven by Lee and Doc, and with Dora’s aid, they plan a birthday party for Doc, who locks up his valuables for a party that has ‘all the best qualities of a riot and a night on the barricades.’”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 121

“‘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.’ To the memorable characters John Steinbeck created in *Tortilla Flat* must be added these other denizens of Cannery Row: Doc, Mack, Whitey, Hazel, Lee, Chong, and, perhaps most memorable of all, Dora Flood, proprietress of a bordello called the Bear Flag Restaurant, into which many an innocent customer has wandered in search of a sandwich. ‘One of the least pretentious of his books,’ said Edmund Wilson, ‘but I believe that it is the one I have enjoyed most reading’.”

Advertisement

East of Eden by John Steinbeck
(Penguin 1979)

“More at home in such comic studies of character as the inimitable *Cannery Row* and its less happy sequel *Sweet Thursday*, he will be remembered longer for the amoral and happily incongruous ‘Doc’ and his friends than for Tom Joad or Adam Trask, who had undertaken to measure their experiences with the moral issues of this world against universal truths. For Steinbeck had dared, as had Thoreau, to drive life ‘into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it’.”

Robert E. Spiller

The Cycle of American Literature
(Free Press/Collier-Macmillan 1955) 216

“*Cannery Row* returns to the locale of *Tortilla Flat* but portrays different characters, this time chiefly Anglo-Saxon. As in the earlier book, however, the construction is episodic, consisting of little more than a set of interconnected short stories. The chief characters are the carefree and alcoholic Mack; his friends Hazel, Eddie the bartender, Hughie, and Jones; and the biologist Doc, who operates a small marine laboratory. Mack and his friends move in to a house owned by Lee Chong, a Chinese storekeeper, and engage in a series of Rabelaisian adventures similar to those in *Tortilla Flat*. The climax of the novel is a surprise party which the denizens of Cannery Row throw for Doc, their friend and benefactor.

This novel has the advantage over *Tortilla Flat* that it has at least one well-rounded and convincing character: Doc, unassuming and at home with the bums and harlots of Cannery Row, yet a sensitive person who enjoys poetry fine wine, and Gregorian chants. The same locale and characters appear again in a

sequel, *Sweet Thursday* (1954). Neither of these books should be considered among Steinbeck's major works, yet they are charmingly successful examples of their own genre of literature."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 236-37

"In this episodic work Steinbeck returned to the manner of *Tortilla Flat* (1935) and produced a rambling account of the adventures and misadventures of workers in a California cannery and their friends. One character, Doc, was reportedly modeled on the marine biologist, Edward F. Ricketts (1896-1948), with whom Steinbeck collaborated on *The Sea of Cortez* (1941), a study of the fauna of the Gulf of California as observed on a boat trip."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 148

Michael Hollister (2015)

First published in 1945, *Cannery Row* focuses on the acceptance of life as it is—both the exuberance of community and the loneliness of the individual. John Steinbeck draws on his memories of the real inhabitants of Monterey, California, and interweaves their stories in this world where only the fittest survive—creating what is at once one of his most humorous and poignant works.