

DeMott/New Preface to *Steinbeck's Reading*/1

Accurately or not, I have come to think of *Steinbeck's Reading: A Catalogue of Books Owned and Borrowed* (1984) as the first part of a trilogy--the other two are my edition of Steinbeck's *Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath, 1938-1941* (1989) and *Steinbeck's Typewriter: Essays on His Art* (1996). Even before this oddly hybrid reference book (which I worked on piecemeal throughout the 1970s) came out, I knew there was more to be said about Steinbeck's life and career, but I had no sense of the direction or shape that future work would take over the next dozen-plus years. In retrospect, however, if I am not being too precious in second-guessing myself, it appears that all three constellate themselves more or less around aspects of Steinbeck's creativity. Though embarrassed to admit it, most of us only have three or four good ideas in our whole lives. My run of good critical ideas was over a long time ago, but one of them was my belief that Steinbeck was more deeply immersed in the conjoined "reading and writing life" (Toni Morrison's phrase) than most of his earlier critics were willing to admit. Tracing out implications of Steinbeck's creativity, broadly considered, and following the trail of the figure in his carpet, so to speak, became a persistent theme and on-going process, extending from

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Steinbeck's Reading appeared in December, 1983, a month before I began my acting directorship of San Jose State University's Steinbeck Research Center (as it was then known), where I remained for two of the most interesting years of my life before returning to my permanent teaching position at Ohio University. Sometime after that, Elaine Steinbeck told me an entertaining story about her husband: composer and lyricist Frank Loesser brought back a piece of stone from the Roman Coliseum and gave it to Steinbeck as a gift; Steinbeck, concerned about the