

# Commentary

## Bucket list or bucket missed

Bill Hall |

Oh, great. I just finished reading a book by John Steinbeck and now I owe him another apology.

Pity that he's dead. He was also dead the first time I owed him an apology. In fact, it was his dying that made me so regretful I hadn't written to him.

We humans love our lists - the best movies we ever saw, the biggest fish we ever caught, the most beautiful actress we never caught (Sophia Loren) and the best novel we ever read ("East of Eden" by John Steinbeck.)

Actually, it's virtually impossible to choose No. 1 in such matters. The best movie and the best novel are like your favorite child; there's usually no such thing. You love one kid for this and the other for that and they both shine in your mind and in your heart.

It's like trying to decide whether your favorite food is fried chicken, pizza, caramel ice cream or chocolate chip cookies. I refuse to choose and I don't have to.

But when it comes to books and you threaten to eat my cookies if I don't tell you my favorite, then I would have to say it is Steinbeck's "East of Eden." (I can't really explain why. If you really want to know, just read it yourself. And get your hands off my cookies!)

In fact, I enjoyed "East of Eden" so much that I read it a second time. I read it aloud to Sharon not long after we met. We were just getting to know each other. To know me is to love Steinbeck. And vice versa.

Suffice it to say, some elderly Chinese-American characters in that book fortified me with a nourishing truth that still serves me all these years later: They demonstrated that a person is never too old to learn something new, including something difficult like another language.

I felt like I owed Steinbeck for that and other nuggets. So I was really miffed when he won the Nobel Prize for Literature and some twit at Time magazine wrote that he didn't deserve the prize. He even got Steinbeck to admit it.

That was like Steinbeck. He was less conceited than most writers. He had the grace to be a little startled himself that he had won the Nobel Prize.

But taking advantage of his modest nature irked me the same way it irks a person when some ignorant New York Yankees fan won't agree that Ichiro Suzuki of the Seattle Mariners will be in the Baseball Hall of Fame.

After reading that outrageous Time article on Steinbeck, I decided I would write to the wise and gifted novelist and tell him not to worry, that I knew in my heart he deserved a Nobel Prize.

And he did. If you read three of his novels - "East of Eden," "Grapes of Wrath" and "Of Mice and Men" - you will find it hard to believe they were all written by the same guy. Most of his books were utterly original, each from the other. Far more often, writers crank out slightly different versions of the same old bag of tricks.

Unfortunately, before I got around to writing a letter to Steinbeck, he died. To this day, I feel like a lazy bum about that.

Many of us have a bucket list - things we want to do before we croak. Finally hearing Willie Nelson sing in person last summer was near the top of my bucket list.

But we also need a bucket missed list - things we always wanted to do and never did, a sad collection of regrets, stumbles like my failure to write to Steinbeck.

The other day, I ran across Steinbeck's little travelogue book about a drive around America with his dog Charley. I had always rejected the book "Travels With Charley: In Search of America," assuming it was a little fluff he tossed off the top of his head late in life.

Not so. The book is better than that. He has a lot to say and he says it at a level as high in quality as what Willie Nelson does with a guitar.

I underestimated that book for 30 years - until I read it last month, and that proved me wrong. I guess you know what that means:

It means I owe him another letter.

But he's dead. So I hope, wherever he and Charley are traveling these days, he will consider this remorseful column my sincere and embarrassed apology.

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