

# 'Of Mice and Men:' Steinbeck's controversial banned book for over 50 years



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July 11, 2012

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In 1937, John Steinbeck explained in a letter to his godmother that “For too long the language of books was different from the language of men. To the men I write about profanity is adornment and ornament and is never vulgar and I try to write it so.”

Published that same year, “Of Mice and Men” is an eloquent example of Steinbeck’s desire to describe the world using stories written in the language of the general public. Due to this same language, he was often the center of censorship campaigns from the 1950s until the 2000s.

Steinbeck creates a story through “Of Mice and Men” that shows the lives of two migrant workers, George and Lennie, making their way through the Great Depression by working on various farms. George is the “brains” of the two, making all decisions, giving directions, and creating all plans for the future. Lennie, George’s companion, is described as being a simple minded, child like man, who has the physical ability to complete the work of two.

Much of the novel centers around Lennie's desire to care for living animals (mice, rabbits, puppies, etc.) and to pet the soft creatures, but not realizing that due to his strength, he easily kills them with his "petting." George continuously tries to steer Lennie away from upcoming problems by often telling him to just be quiet and not respond when people speak to him.

The characters Lennie and George have been portrayed and/or used in a variety of books, movies, television shows, and songs. Looney Tunes has a famous scene with an abominable snowman wanting to capture a bunny, call it "George," and "hug him, and pet him, and squeeze him" very reminiscent of Lennie's character in the book. A Youtube video of the animation can be seen here: (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JIVqfC8-UI>)

"Of Mice and Men" has been challenged and/or banned since the 1950s mainly due to the promotion of euthanasia, racial slurs, being anti-business, and containing offensive language, according to the American Library Association. Steinbeck's book, though found to be offensive over the years, remains a constant within the literature curriculum in high schools along with other of the author's books such as "The Pearl" and "The Grapes of Wrath." Many other Steinbeck books that often can be found on bookshelves include: "To a Good Unknown," "Cannery Row," "East of Eden," and "Travels with Charley: In Search of America."

Steinbeck, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962, set out to write books that portrayed real people in the real language of the land, and "Of Mice and Men" is no exception to this plan. The "offensive language" within the novel is used believably by characters to show their own common vernacular. The "n" word is used as a racial slur a few times and the "g.d." phrase is spoken within conversations throughout the book, all within context of the novel.

The language of the characters becomes crasser than the literal definitions of the words due to Steinbeck's eloquence in portraying the setting. When describing the world surrounding George and Lennie, Steinbeck paints within the reader's mind a sweet picture that clashes with the reality of the words uttered by Steinbeck's characters. This can be seen as a further tool of the author to demonstrate how truly tough the world of George and Lennie is during the Great Depression against an environment which might be found visually beautiful.

Euthanasia is a jarring point in the novel and is introduced first with the death of a dog that is so old that he can barely walk, eat, or see. Later, death comes at a greater cost to George and Lennie, yet still is portrayed as the kindest ending available. Readers will have to

individually balance their own opinions on George's actions and undoubtedly will have to ask themselves if they would do the same if placed in the position described in "Of Mice and Men." They might then ask: would that choice be kind or cruel?

Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men" is an example of a novel and author that are by most standards great, yet for decades have been challenged and banned due to content. Most readers will remember at some point in time during 9th or 10th grade reading the novel and discussing its themes and characters.

Much of what made this book banned is the time period when it was published. Society often does not want to see a reflection of that which is negative within their current time and so instead choose to cast a blind eye to a novel that truly tries to place a mirror up to the time period.

"Of Mice and Men" is gruff and gritty in its language as reality usually is when it is being lived. Today the novel is but the written example of the memory of a hard time of the past. No matter why it was banned over 50 years ago, it will remain a constant to the bookshelves of readers of the future and can be found along with numerous other John Steinbeck novels at the Barnes & Noble in Winston-Salem. Directions to Barnes & Noble can be seen **here**: