

travels with charley in search of america

Travels with Charley in Search of America: Exploring Steinbeck's Legendary Journey

travels with charley in search of america is not just the title of John Steinbeck's iconic travelogue; it embodies a heartfelt quest to rediscover the essence of a vast and diverse nation. This literary masterpiece chronicles Steinbeck's cross-country journey in the early 1960s alongside his loyal poodle, Charley. Through vivid descriptions, keen observations, and personal reflections, Steinbeck captures a snapshot of American life during a time of profound social change. This article delves into the fascinating layers of *Travels with Charley in Search of America*, exploring its themes, narrative style, and enduring relevance for modern readers and travelers alike.

Understanding Travels with Charley in Search of America

John Steinbeck, already an acclaimed novelist, embarked on this road trip to reconnect with the country he had known and loved. The book recounts a three-month expedition in 1960 where Steinbeck traversed over 10,000 miles, driving his customized camper truck named Rocinante. His goal was simple yet profound: to "see America as it really is" by interacting with everyday people and observing the cultural and geographical diversity firsthand.

Steinbeck's narrative is more than a travel diary. It's a thoughtful meditation on identity, community, and change. The book touches on themes like the American Dream, regional disparities, and the tensions between tradition and progress. His encounters range from warm, humorous conversations with small-town locals to contemplative moments alone in nature, all enriched by Charley's companionship and unique perspective as a canine observer.

The Setting and Context of the Journey

The early 1960s America was on the cusp of transformation. Civil rights movements were gaining momentum, the Cold War influenced public consciousness, and technological advancements were reshaping everyday life. Steinbeck's travels took him from the bustling urban centers of the Northeast to the serene landscapes of the Pacific Northwest, through the heartland and the Southwest. Each region offered a distinct flavor of American culture, traditions, and challenges.

By situating his journey in this particular historical context, Steinbeck provides readers with a time capsule that reflects both the optimism and anxieties of the era. This snapshot allows modern audiences to appreciate the continuity and change that define America's social fabric.

The Narrative Style and Literary Significance

Steinbeck's prose in *Travels with Charley in Search of America* is engaging, warm, and accessible. Unlike his more fiction-oriented works, this travelogue adopts a conversational tone that invites readers to join the journey as companions rather than distant observers. His skillful storytelling blends humor, empathy, and critical insight, making complex social observations feel personal and relatable.

Use of Dialogue and Character Sketches

One standout feature of the book is Steinbeck's vivid portrayal of the people he meets. Through snippets of dialogue and detailed character sketches, he brings to life a tapestry of voices representing the American public. These interactions reveal the hopes, fears, and contradictions of the individuals and communities he encounters, adding depth and texture to the narrative.

Steinbeck's Relationship with Charley

Charley, the French poodle, is more than just a pet; he serves as a symbol of companionship and a conduit for Steinbeck's reflections. The dog's reactions and behaviors often mirror or contrast with the human world around them, offering subtle commentary on social dynamics. This dynamic adds a layer of warmth and humor that balances the sometimes serious undertones of the journey.

Travel Insights from Travels with Charley in Search of America

For those interested in travel writing or planning their own cross-country adventure, Steinbeck's experiences offer valuable lessons and inspiration.

Embracing Slow Travel and Spontaneity

Steinbeck's approach to travel emphasizes taking the time to truly engage with places and people rather than rushing through destinations. He often deviates from planned routes, guided by curiosity and chance meetings. This willingness to explore the unexpected enriches his journey and allows for authentic experiences.

Importance of Observational Travel

Rather than merely ticking off landmarks, Steinbeck observes the nuances of everyday life, local customs, and regional dialects. This detailed attention to surroundings encourages travelers to look beyond surface attractions and appreciate the cultural and social layers of their destinations.

Traveling with a Companion

Charley's presence highlights the joys and comforts of having a travel companion. Whether human or animal, companionship during long trips offers emotional support, shared memories, and a unique viewpoint on the journey. Travelers can benefit from this perspective, making their trips more meaningful.

Legacy and Modern Relevance of Travels with Charley in Search of America

Though written over six decades ago, *Travels with Charley in Search of America* continues to resonate with readers and travel enthusiasts. Its themes of identity, belonging, and the search for meaning are timeless. The book offers a template for mindful and purposeful travel, encouraging readers to slow down, listen, and engage deeply with the world around them.

In today's fast-paced digital age, where travel is often documented through fleeting social media posts and hurried itineraries, Steinbeck's journey reminds us of the value of presence and reflection. His observations about regional differences, social tensions, and the evolving American spirit still prompt thoughtful discussion and inspire new generations to explore their own countries with curiosity and openness.

For anyone planning an American road trip or interested in literary travelogues, *Travels with Charley in Search of America* remains a compelling and enriching read. It captures not just the geography of the United States but also the heartbeats of its people, making it a timeless companion for seekers of authentic experiences.

The story of *Travels with Charley in Search of America* is more than a travel narrative; it's an invitation

to embark on a journey of discovery—of place, culture, and self. Steinbeck's footsteps on the open road remind us that sometimes, the best way to understand a country is simply to go out and meet it, one small town and one friendly conversation at a time.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who is the author of 'Travels with Charley in Search of America'?

The author of 'Travels with Charley in Search of America' is John Steinbeck.

What is the main theme of 'Travels with Charley in Search of America'?

The main theme of the book is a journey of self-discovery and an exploration of American culture and identity during the 1960s.

When was 'Travels with Charley in Search of America' published?

The book was published in 1962.

Who is Charley in 'Travels with Charley in Search of America'?

Charley is John Steinbeck's French Poodle who accompanies him on his road trip across the United States.

What mode of transportation does Steinbeck use in his journey in the book?

Steinbeck travels in a specially designed camper truck named Rocinante.

What motivated John Steinbeck to undertake the journey described in 'Travels with Charley'?

Steinbeck wanted to reconnect with the American people and understand the country after feeling disconnected due to his travels abroad and changing times.

Which regions of the United States does Steinbeck explore in his travels?

Steinbeck travels through various regions including the Northeast, Midwest, South, and the Pacific Northwest.

How does 'Travels with Charley' reflect the social and political climate of America in the early 1960s?

The book provides insights into American attitudes, racial tensions, and cultural shifts occurring during that era, capturing the mood and concerns of the American people.

Is 'Travels with Charley in Search of America' considered a memoir or a travelogue?

'Travels with Charley' is considered a blend of both memoir and travelogue, combining personal reflections with detailed descriptions of places and people Steinbeck encounters.

Additional Resources

Travels with Charley in Search of America: A Journey through Steinbeck's Iconic Road Trip

travels with charley in search of america is a seminal work by John Steinbeck that chronicles his poignant road trip across the United States in 1960. This travelogue offers more than a mere

description of landscapes; it captures the socio-cultural pulse of America during a period of significant transformation. Steinbeck's reflective narrative, combined with his acute observations, provides readers with a textured understanding of American identity, making the book a vital reference for those interested in mid-20th-century American literature and travel writing.

Exploring the Essence of Travels with Charley in Search of America

At its core, *Travels with Charley in Search of America* is a literary exploration that blends personal memoir with social commentary. Steinbeck set out in a custom-built camper truck, *Rocinante*, accompanied by his French poodle, Charley, to rediscover the country he had long called home. The journey spanned roughly 10,000 miles and covered a diverse cross-section of the United States—from the industrial Northeast to the farmlands of the Midwest, down through the Deep South, and across the vast Western territories.

Steinbeck's narrative delves into the complexities of American life at a time when the country was grappling with civil rights issues, rapid urbanization, and cultural shifts. His observations reveal a nation simultaneously proud and conflicted, united yet fragmented by regional differences. This duality renders the book a compelling study of American identity through the eyes of one of its most celebrated literary figures.

The Context and Motivation Behind the Journey

John Steinbeck's decision to undertake this road trip was motivated by a desire to reconnect with the American people and understand the evolving social fabric. After spending years abroad and writing about diverse global themes, Steinbeck felt a pressing need to "see America again." This sentiment reflects a broader post-war American consciousness characterized by introspection and reevaluation.

The choice of a camper truck as his mode of travel was strategic. It afforded Steinbeck both mobility and solitude, enabling spontaneous detours and unfiltered encounters. Traveling with Charley also added an element of companionship and informal engagement, softening the boundaries between traveler and local.

Steinbeck's Narrative Style and Literary Significance

The prose in *Travels with Charley in Search of America* is marked by a blend of straightforward reportage and lyrical reflection. Steinbeck's journalistic inclination surfaces in detailed descriptions of towns, people, and conversations, while his literary craftsmanship is evident in the empathetic tone and philosophical musings. This duality enhances the book's appeal, bridging the gap between travel writing and social critique.

From a literary standpoint, the work occupies a unique niche. Unlike Steinbeck's earlier novels, which often focused on fictionalized portrayals of American life, *Travels with Charley* takes a non-fictional, first-person perspective. It is a precursor to the modern American road trip genre and has influenced countless writers exploring themes of identity, place, and belonging.

Key Themes and Observations in *Travels with Charley in Search of America*

Steinbeck's journey illuminates several recurring themes that resonate throughout the narrative. These themes contribute to the book's enduring relevance and provide valuable insights into the American psyche.

The Search for Authenticity and Connection

Central to the narrative is Steinbeck's quest for genuine human connection amid a rapidly modernizing landscape. He frequently contrasts the impersonal nature of urban centers with the warmth and simplicity found in small towns and rural areas. This juxtaposition underscores a yearning for authenticity that many Americans shared during the 1960s.

Regional Diversity and Cultural Contrasts

Throughout the trip, Steinbeck encounters stark regional differences, from dialects and customs to attitudes and economic conditions. His depiction of the South, with its entrenched racial tensions, contrasts sharply with the more progressive outlooks of the West Coast. Such observations serve as an informal ethnographic record, highlighting the challenges of national unity.

Reflection on American Values and Ideals

Steinbeck's reflections often circle back to foundational American ideals such as freedom, equality, and opportunity. However, he does not shy away from critiquing the gaps between these ideals and the lived realities of many citizens. His candid assessments capture a nation in transition, grappling with contradictions inherent in its identity.

Comparative Analysis with Other American Road Narratives

Travels with Charley in Search of America stands alongside other iconic American road narratives, yet it maintains distinct characteristics that set it apart.

Comparison with Jack Kerouac's On the Road

While both Steinbeck and Kerouac explore themes of freedom and self-discovery, Steinbeck's approach is more measured and socio-politically conscious. *On the Road*, published in 1957, emphasizes youthful rebellion and spontaneity, whereas *Travels with Charley* offers a reflective, mature perspective anchored in social observation.

Influence on Contemporary Travel Writing

Steinbeck's methodical blend of travelogue and social commentary has influenced contemporary travel writers who seek not only to describe places but also to analyze cultural dynamics. The narrative's balance of personal experience and broader societal insights remains a model for nuanced travel literature.

Practical Insights from Travels with Charley in Search of America

Beyond its literary and cultural significance, the book offers practical insights into mid-century American travel and the road trip experience.

Mode of Travel and Its Implications

Steinbeck's choice of a camper truck highlights the advantages of self-sufficient travel—flexibility, comfort, and the ability to engage deeply with diverse environments. Today's travelers can glean lessons on the value of slow travel and immersive exploration from his journey.

Interacting with Locals and Cultural Sensitivity

Steinbeck's open-mindedness and respectful engagement with people from different backgrounds underscore the importance of cultural sensitivity in travel. His willingness to listen and observe without judgment enriches the narrative and offers a model for contemporary travelers aiming for meaningful connections.

Documenting Travel as a Form of Social Inquiry

The book demonstrates how travel writing can transcend mere description to become a form of social inquiry and historical documentation. Steinbeck's detailed notes on regional attitudes and economic conditions provide valuable snapshots of America's social landscape during a pivotal era.

- Emphasis on authentic experience over tourist superficiality
- Integration of personal reflection with broader cultural analysis
- Use of travel as a means to engage with national identity and social issues

Travels with Charley in Search of America remains a compelling exploration of the American spirit, capturing a nation at a crossroads through the eyes of one of its most insightful observers. Its enduring appeal lies in Steinbeck's ability to weave personal narrative with incisive social commentary, offering readers a multifaceted portrait of America's complexities and charms. For those intrigued by the intersection of travel, literature, and cultural history, this work continues to provide an invaluable lens through which to view the evolving quest for identity and belonging across the American landscape.

Travels With Charley In Search Of America

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travels with charley in search of america: Travels with Charley in Search of America

John Steinbeck, 1980-01-31 An intimate journey across America, as told by one of its most beloved writers To hear the speech of the real America, to smell the grass and the trees, to see the colors and the light—these were John Steinbeck's goals as he set out, at the age of fifty-eight, to rediscover the country he had been writing about for so many years. With Charley, his French poodle, Steinbeck drives the interstates and the country roads, dines with truckers, encounters bears at Yellowstone and old friends in San Francisco. Along the way he reflects on the American character, racial hostility, the particular form of American loneliness he finds almost everywhere, and the unexpected kindness of strangers.

travels with charley in search of america: Travels with Charley in Search of America John Steinbeck, 1997-04-01 An intimate journey across America, as told by one of its most beloved writers A Penguin Classic In September 1960, John Steinbeck embarked on a journey across America. He felt that he might have lost touch with the country, with its speech, the smell of its grass and trees, its color and quality of light, the pulse of its people. To reassure himself, he set out on a voyage of rediscovery of the American identity, accompanied by a distinguished French poodle named Charley; and riding in a three-quarter-ton pickup truck named Rocinante. His course took him through almost forty states: northward from Long Island to Maine; through the Midwest to Chicago; onward by way of Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana (with which he fell in love), and Idaho to Seattle, south to San Francisco and his birthplace, Salinas; eastward through the Mojave, New Mexico, Arizona, to the vast hospitality of Texas, to New Orleans and a shocking drama of desegregation; finally, on the last leg, through Alabama, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey to New York. Travels with Charley in Search of America is an intimate look at one of America's most beloved writers in the later years of his life—a self-portrait of a man who never wrote an explicit autobiography. Written during a time of upheaval and racial tension in the South—which Steinbeck witnessed firsthand—Travels with Charley is a stunning evocation of America on the eve of a tumultuous decade. This Penguin Classics edition includes an introduction by Jay Parini. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

travels with charley in search of america: Travels with Charley in Search of America by John Steinbeck John Steinbeck, 1962 Travels with Charley: In Search of America is a 1962 travelogue written by American author John Steinbeck. It depicts a 1960 road trip around the United States made by Steinbeck, in the company of his standard poodle Charley. Steinbeck wrote that he was moved by a desire to see his country on a personal level because he made his living writing about it. He wrote of having many questions going into his journey, the main one being What are Americans like today? However, he found that he had concerns about much of the new America he witnessed. Steinbeck tells of traveling throughout the United States in a specially made camper he named Rocinante, after Don Quixote's horse. His travels start in Long Island, New York, and roughly follow the outer border of the United States, from Maine to the Pacific Northwest, down into his native Salinas Valley in California across to Texas, through the Deep South, and then back to New York.

Such a trip encompassed nearly 10,000 miles. According to Thom Steinbeck, the author's oldest son, the reason for the trip was that Steinbeck knew he was dying and wanted to see his country one last time. The younger Steinbeck has said he was surprised that his stepmother allowed his father to make the trip; his heart condition meant he could have died at any time. Part One Steinbeck opened the book by describing his lifelong wanderlust and his preparations to rediscover the country he felt he had lost touch with after living in New York City and traveling in Europe for 20 years. He was 58 years old in 1960 and nearing the end of his career, but he felt that when he was writing about America and its people he was writing of something [he] did not know about, and it seemed to [him] that in a so-called writer this is criminal (p. 6). He bought a new GMC pickup truck, which he named Rocinante, and had it fitted with a custom camper-shell for his journey. At the last minute, he decided to take his wife's 10-year-old French Poodle Charley, with whom he has many mental conversations as a device for exploring his thoughts. He planned on leaving after Labor Day from his summer home in Sag Harbor on the eastern end of Long Island, but his trip was delayed about two weeks due to Hurricane Donna, which made a direct hit on Long Island. Steinbeck's exploits in saving his boat during the middle of the hurricane, which he details, foreshadow his fearless, or even reckless, state of mind and his courage in undertaking a long, arduous and ambitious cross-country road trip by himself. Part Two Steinbeck began his trip by traveling by ferry from Long Island to Connecticut, passing the U.S. Navy submarine base at New London where many of the new nuclear submarines were stationed. He talked to a sailor stationed on a sub who enjoyed being on them because they offer all kinds of - future. Steinbeck credited uncertainty about the future to rapid technological and political changes. He mentioned the wastefulness of American cities and society and lamented the large amount of waste that resulted from everything being packaged. Later he had a conversation with a New England farmer. The two concluded that a combination of fear and uncertainty about the future limited their discussion of the coming election between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy. Steinbeck enjoyed learning about people by eating breakfast in roadside restaurants and listening to morning radio programs, though he noted that, If 'Teen-Age Angel' [sic] is top of the list in Maine, it is the top of the list in Montana (35), showing the ubiquity of pop culture brought on by Top 40 radio and mass media technologies.

travels with charley in search of america: Travels with Charley in Search of America

John Steinbeck, 2012-10-02 A collectible 50th anniversary deluxe edition featuring an updated introduction by Jay Parini and first edition cover art and illustrated maps of Steinbeck's route by Don Freeman A Penguin Classic In September 1960, John Steinbeck embarked on a journey across America. He felt that he might have lost touch with the country, with its speech, the smell of its grass and trees, its color and quality of light, the pulse of its people. To reassure himself, he set out on a voyage of rediscovery of the American identity, accompanied by a distinguished French poodle named Charley; and riding in a three-quarter-ton pickup truck named Rocinante. His course took him through almost forty states: northward from Long Island to Maine; through the Midwest to Chicago; onward by way of Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana (with which he fell in love), and Idaho to Seattle, south to San Francisco and his birthplace, Salinas; eastward through the Mojave, New Mexico, Arizona, to the vast hospitality of Texas, to New Orleans and a shocking drama of desegregation; finally, on the last leg, through Alabama, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey to New York. Travels with Charley in Search of America is an intimate look at one of America's most beloved writers in the later years of his life—a self-portrait of a man who never wrote an explicit autobiography. Written during a time of upheaval and racial tension in the South—which Steinbeck witnessed firsthand—Travels with Charley is a stunning evocation of America on the eve of a tumultuous decade. This Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition also features French flaps and deckle-edged paper. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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travels with charley in search of america: Quicklet on John Steinbeck's Travels with Charley in Search of America (CliffNotes-like Summary) David Shook, 2012-02-24 ABOUT THE BOOK I came to John Steinbeck's work through his novella *The Pearl*, a diminutive but dark allegory about a Native American pearl diver whose discovery of an enormous pearl hurls him and his family into a world of greed and its disastrous consequences. From *The Pearl*, I found *Cannery Row*, my favorite Steinbeck novel. From its first sentence, Steinbeck's descriptions vibrate with the same energy and poetry that his eclectic cast of outcasts embody as they throw unauthorized parties and philosophize with Doc, based on Steinbeck's real-life friend Ed Ricketts, on 1920s Monterey Bay, the American sardine capital at that time. "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." I turned next to Steinbeck's nonfiction, attracted to *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* because of my own experiences on Routes 10 and 40, mostly heading west towards California, or back to Oklahoma or Texas to wait until I could go again. Like Steinbeck with his standard poodle Charley, I drove with my steadfast companion, Okie Doke, a considerably smaller pooch. MEET THE AUTHOR David Shook studied endangered languages in Oklahoma and poetry at Oxford. He's published essays about dancing with the President of Burundi and being detained in Equatorial Guinea, and his poetry, translations, and book reviews regularly appear in magazines like *Ambit*, *Poetry*, and *World Literature Today*. His most recent translations include Mario Bellatin's novella *Shiki Nagaoka: A Nose for Fiction*, Roberto Bolano's 1976 manifesto "Leave Everything, Again," and the selected love poems of Isthmus Zapotec poet Victor Teran. His current writing projects include *Kilometer Zero*, a covertly filmed documentary about lost Equatoguinean poets, a miniature encyclopedia, and a collection of travel essays. Shook lives with his wife and chihuahua in Los Angeles, where he edits *Molossus*. He's a competitive foosballer, miniature book collector, banjolele picker, and aspiring rapper. His moustache is sponsored by Oregon Wild Hair Moustache Wax, the most literary moustache wax in the world. EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, two years after his driving tour across the continent and just months after the publication of *Travels with Charley*. His winning propelled *Travels with Charley* to the number one spot on the New York Times Best Seller List. In his acceptance speech he lauded "man's proven capacity for greatness," and challenged all writers to celebrate that greatness in their written work. For Steinbeck, that was literature's ultimate purpose, and he compellingly articulated his opinion throughout his speech: "I hold that the writer who does not believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature." Born in Salinas, California on 27 February 1902, John Steinbeck witnessed man's capacity for greatness in the fertile farmlands surrounding the agricultural hub town. While working those fields himself—notably in the company town of Spreckels, which boasted the world's largest beet sugar processing plant—he witnessed many of man's less noble attributes, including corporate and individual greed, the poor treatment of migrant workers, and the degradation of the physical environment, all themes he explored in his work. Buy a copy to keep reading!

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the cabin of a small boat. #3 The best way to attract attention, help, and conversation is to be lost. A man who sees his mother starving to death on a path will cheerfully give wrong directions to a stranger who claims to be lost. #4 I knew that I would not be able to write hot on an event, so I prepared for a week of emergency. I took writing material and dictionaries, encyclopedias, and reference books. I knew I would never get around to reading them.

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travels with charley in search of america: Steinbeck's Uneasy America Barbara A. Heavilin, Susan Shillinglaw, 2024 The first scholarly assessment of Steinbeck's bestselling travelogue *Travels with Charley*, published in 1962, a narrative that blurs the lines between nonfiction and fiction Steinbeck's *Uneasy America* is the first collection of critical scholarship devoted to *Travels with Charley in Search of America*, John Steinbeck's best-selling, late-career travel memoir. In 1960, Steinbeck was a renowned man of American letters. Many considered him America's troubadour of ordinary people, the conscience of the country. But weakened by two small strokes and anxious that he had lost touch with America, he embarked on a cross-country road trip accompanied by his wife's standard poodle, Charley. Two years later, he published *Travels with Charley* to popular acclaim and robust sales. Throughout this narrative, Steinbeck insists that all of our perceptions are warped by personality, history, and society. And while this hybrid and experimental book has long been accepted as an accurate account of his journey, journalists and scholars agree that the narrative is part factual, part fiction--America as seen through Steinbeck's particular warp. The work is long overdue for scholarly assessment. Steinbeck's *Uneasy America* explores three main topics. Part 1 explores genre and form to consider the degree to which the work is fiction or nonfiction. Part 2 assesses Steinbeck's increasingly bleak assessment of America--almost a jeremiad that warns citizens of ecological excess and political apathy. Part 3 focuses on *Travels with Charley* as a road text, travel adventure, and literary influence. This volume's authors offer rich scholarly insights and a wealth of stories, facts, and anecdotes about Steinbeck and the adventures and misadventures he and Charley met on the road. Lively and groundbreaking, the collection both enlightens and enlivens discussions of Steinbeck and of the twentieth-century American book world. CONTRIBUTORS Danica Čerče / William P. Childers / Donald V. Coers / Robert DeMott / Cecilia Donohue / Charles Etheridge / Mimi R. Gladstein / Barbara A. Heavilin / Kathleen Hicks / Carter Davis Johnson / Gavin Jones / Sally S. Kleberg / Jay Parini / Brian Railsback / Susan Shillinglaw / Nicholas P. Taylor

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