

NOTES FROM: *Of Mice and Men*, by John Steinbeck

SUMMARY: John Steinbeck can deliver more emotional force in 100 pages than anyone has in the last 100 years. *Of Mice and Men* is “controversial” (to semi-literate simpletons), but *man* is it incredible. You can read it in a day and think about it for a *decade*.

Actually, the first time I read it was in high school, where we watched the movie version as well, and now I can’t *not* see Gary Sinise as George and John Malkovich as Lennie. The movie is fairly faithful to the book, and it follows two friends as they try to make their way in America during the Great Depression.

George and Lennie are both itinerant day laborers, and the novella picks up after they were unceremoniously expelled from their last temporary stop after an unfortunate “incident.” See, Lennie is a mostly-friendly giant who doesn’t know his own strength.

Simple-minded but good-natured, he can never keep a pet because he keeps petting them to death. After accidentally killing a person instead of a pet, the pair are on the run, looking for a new place to settle down, and that’s where we pick up their story.

The last three notes below contain spoilers, but I can tell you here that George and Lennie have a plan. They’re going to own an acre of land and a shack that they can call their own, and they’re saving up their money to buy a specific plot of land they’d seen earlier. Things seem to be going well, until they meet the boss’s son, a man named Curley, and his wife, who unintentionally threatens to disrupt the best-laid plans of mice and men.

“That ranch we’re goin’ to is right down there about a quarter mile. We’re gonna go in an’ see the boss. Now, look - I’ll give him the work tickets, but you ain’t gonna say a word. You jus’ stand there and don’t say nothing. If he finds out what a crazy bastard you are, we won’t get no job, but if he sees ya work before he hears ya talk, we’re set. Ya got that?”

“Lennie looked sadly up at him. ‘They was so little,’ he said, apologetically. ‘I’d pet ‘em, and pretty soon they bit my fingers and I pinched their heads a little and then they was dead - because they was so little.’ I wish’t we’d get the rabbits pretty soon, George. They ain’t so little.’ ‘The hell with the rabbits. An’ you ain’t to be trusted with no live mice. Your Aunt Clara give you a rubber mouse and wouldn’t have nothing to do with it.’ ‘It wasn’t no good to pet,’ said Lennie.”

“George, you want I should go away and leave you alone?” “Where the hell could you go?” “Well, I could. I could go off in the hills there. Some place I’d find a cave.” “Yeah? How’d you eat. You ain’t got sense enough to find nothing to eat.” “I’d find things, George. I don’t need no nice food with ketchup. I’d lay out in the sun and nobody’d hurt me. An’ if I foun’ a mouse, I could keep it. Nobody’d take it away from me.” George looked quickly and searchingly at him. “I been mean, ain’t I?” “If you don’ want me I can go off in the hills an’ find a cave. I can go away any time.” “No - look! I was jus’ foolin’, Lennie. ‘Cause I want you to stay with me. Trouble with mice is you always kill ‘em.” He paused. “Tell you what I’ll do, Lennie. First chance I get I’ll give you a pup. Maybe you wouldn’t kill it. That’d be better than mice. And you could pet it harder.” Lennie avoided the bait. He had sensed his advantage. “If you don’t want me, you only jus’ got to say so, and I’ll go off in those hills right there - right up in those hills and live by myself. An’ I won’t get no mice stole from me.” George said, “I want you to stay with me, Lennie. Jesus Christ, somebody’d shoot you for a coyote if you was by yourself. No, you stay with me. Your Aunt Clara wouldn’t like you running off by yourself, even if she is dead.” Lennie spoke craftily, “Tell me - like you done before.” “Tell you what?” “About the rabbits.””

“Well...tell you what. Curley’s like a lot of little guys. He hates big guys. He’s alla time picking scraps with big guys. Kind of like he’s mad at ‘em because he ain’t a big guy. You seen little guys like that, ain’t you? Always scrappy?”

“There was a gravity in his manner and a quiet so profound that all talk stopped when he spoke. His authority was so great that his word was taken on any subject, be it politics or love.”

“His ear heard more than was said to him, and his slow speech had overtones not of thought, but of understanding beyond thought.”

“His tone was friendly. It invited confidence without demanding it.”

“George spoke proudly. ‘Jus’ tell Lennie what to do an’ he’ll do it if it don’t take no figuring. He can’t think of nothing to do himself, but he sure can take orders.’”

“Guy don’t need no sense to be a nice fella. Seems to me sometimes it jus’ works the other way around. Take a real smart guy and he ain’t hardly ever a nice fella.”

“Crooks scowled, but Lennie’s disarming smile defeated him. ‘Come on in and set a while,’ Crooks said. ‘Long as you won’t get out and leave me alone, you might as well set down.’”

“George still stared at Curley’s wife. ‘Lennie never done it in meanness,’ he said. ‘All the time he done bad things, but he never done one of ‘em mean.’”

“Lennie said, ‘I thought you was mad at me, George.’ ‘No,’ said George. ‘No, Lennie. I ain’t mad. I never been mad, an’ I ain’t now. That’s a thing I want ya to know.’ The voices came close now. George raised the gun and listened to the voices. Lennie begged, ‘Le’s do it now. Le’s get that place now.’ ‘Sure, right now. I gotta. We gotta.’ And George raised the gun and steadied it, and he brought the muzzle of it close to the back of Lennie’s head. The hand shook violently, but his face set and his hand steadied. He pulled the trigger. The crash of the shot rolled up the hills and rolled down again. Lennie jarred, and then settled slowly forward to the sand, and he lay without quivering.”

“Slim said, ‘You hadda, George. I swear you hadda. Come on with me.’ He led George into the entrance of the trail and up toward the highway. Curley and Carlson looked after them. And Carlson said, ‘Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin’ them two guys?’”