

Background Information

The Pearl by John Steinbeck was written in 1947 and so will not be written in the same style as the young adult fiction you read. Steinbeck was born in 1902 in Salinas, California; his writing style and diction will reflect his times. This novella is not difficult to read, but it will be helpful to have some information.

The setting is Baja, California, which is not a part of the United States. Baja is directly south of California, but it is actually in northwest Mexico, not connected to the main part of Mexico. It is bordered on the west by the Pacific Ocean and on the east by the Gulf of California, also known as the Sea of Cortez. Directly across the Gulf of California to the east lay the mainland of Mexico, the Mexican state of Sonora, and the American state of Arizona. The capital of Baja which is referred to in the book is LaPaz, Mexico.

Historically, it is important to know that in the sixteenth century, the Spanish landed in Mexico and proceeded to subjugate and enslave the native people of the area. While at the time Steinbeck wrote, their descendents were not enslaved, the Indians were still the underclass, while the descendents of the Spanish settlers were the richer, more powerful, professional ruling class. (Think Greasers and Socs from *The Outsiders*.) Because of this Spanish intervention, Kino and his family practice both the Catholic religion, which the Spaniards brought, while at the same time holding on to their old beliefs of pagan gods. Because of these beliefs, their race and poverty, the Spanish consider the Indians inferior.

Steinbeck wrote often about the poor, working-class people, showing how powerless they were against the rich. He also explores the idea of social injustice and the idea of good and evil in humans.

