

Renowned Author Writes to Marine Biologist Jack Rudloe

Steinbeck's Letters to Panacea

By JACK RUDLOE

In the winter of 1962 I began a correspondence with John Steinbeck, one of America's most famous novelists. Among his most noted works were "The Grapes of Wrath," "East of Eden," "Tortilla Flat" and many, many others. But at the time, two of his works, "Cannery Row" and "Log of the Sea of Cortez" were the most important to me because I was starting my business of collecting marine life in Panacea.

Long before I ever picked up the book, people were telling me I was Doc in "Cannery Row." Doc was a biologist who had a laboratory that sold pickled sea creatures, embalmed cats and rattlesnakes to schools and research laboratories. Next door to "Western Biological" was a warehouse, a sardine cannery, and a Chinese Grocery store. Doc was a real person, Edward F. Ricketts, and he did have a commercial laboratory, "Pacific Biological Laboratories." John Steinbeck was a partner at one point in time, and together they wrote the "Log of the Sea of Cortez" about their expedition into the Gulf of California to collect marine invertebrates and bring them back to study. They were traveling uncharted ground at the time in a purse seiner called the "Western Flier."

I read both books, and I was particularly interested in the difficulties they encountered with academia. At the time I was having my troubles with Florida State University, and I wrote Steinbeck a letter telling him that things hadn't changed since the book was written in 1941, that some professors were still antagonistic to individual scientific pursuits outside the university. I didn't expect an answer because I knew he got tons of mail, but it was the beginning of a long correspondence.

I look upon John Steinbeck as my mentor. Without his encouragement, I doubt I would have written the books and articles or continued with my business when it looked like it was failing. I might have given up, taken a job and gone onto other things, I don't know. But when he died in 1965, it was a loss, a deep-felt one.

But one time when I was visiting him in New York, I complained about how hard it is to get published. He got angry, "Don't give me that crap, Jack. If you're worth a damn you'll get published, it may take a long time, but sooner or later you will. And if you're not, you won't."

John Steinbeck
190 East 72nd Street
New York, 21, New York

Dear Jack Rudloe:

It was a great pleasure to get your letter of April 1(?). As you must know, my mail has become a matter of horror to me. It is like the seventh wave and composed of flatterers (they think), people who want something, women who have confused prose and sex, plus a large group of just plain lung housers. Your letter made my day.

I wish I could see your part of the country. The name Panacea is charming. Your letter head (hammerhead shark and a moray unless I am slipping) very good.

Your restlessness with the specialists is not unknown to me. Ed and I had some of it, except for the great ones. They were always friendly and easy and open. Only the half assed are priestly. You see they aren't very secure. They are fighting for positions and for promotions. They are usually pretty dull people. Be kind to them. They are as vain as actors and flattery will get you any place with them. But they do have value in identification under our rotten taxonomic structure.

Of course there is a way of joining the club - a degree and a grant of some kind even from an institution you have to invent - will work. And still, there are some awfully good people working in the field. There's a tagging station on St. John VI also studying the poison factors absorbed from some algae and the people there are fine and friendly.

You say you have difficulty with identification. We have found that in certain areas, even the non pelagic animals may be new species - or variations pronounced enough to be confusing.

I have looked at the largest scale map I have of the northeast shore and cannot find Panacea, Fla. I wish you would tell me the area. Is it east of Panama City? Does it extend down the coast? The water seems to be all under 200 meters. I don't have a hydrographic map of the Gulf nor any library of currents. But it should be a fascinating area. Please tell me more.

I am in a rush right now. Trying my best under pressure to get some work done but your letter was a breath of fresh air.

Yours,
John Steinbeck

Jack Rudloe
318 East 11th St., New York 3
Dear Rudloe:

I was on the point of writing you when I received your last letter. I'll be delighted to see you. There are things I want to discuss with you. The New York telephone is in the book. It is

quiet and peaceful time will be in Florida. I'm still hoping to be able to do that.

And forgive me about your coming out here. It wouldn't be any fun just now.

As for the books - don't worry if I am slow. Some things take some time to get. But I do have a man who is quite good at digging things out but it's a slow business. Also I always have to arrange for tax deductions for educational material. Unhappily this is so. And if I don't have the leisure to do some work pretty soon, there won't be any income from which to deduct.

Sorry to be so frantic. I am not built to do things fast. My pace is much slower.

Let me hear from you

Yours,
Jh

Dear Jack: ***

Good letter from you. Changed attitude becomes you. I can't write much because I can't see much. But the eye will be all right in time. Just takes a long, tiresome time and I can't read or write as I wish.

Suggestion - when you send stuff in for identification, ask for advice on material. Most of these people have written separates and they may well send them to you. Everyone likes to be heard.

I'll write more as I can.

Yours,
John Steinbeck

Dear Jack: ***

I have read your letter with pleasure. Your observation of the hermit crab is good. And you are not taken by the "clown." There is a great simplicity which can only be arrived at late and after a great deal of looking so that when asked "Why does the fiddler crab wave his large pinky as though he had won an Arthur Murray award," you may answer - "I have seen this. He does thus and so - and thus and so has followed according to what I have seen." This requires the humility of knowledge. Ed used to say that speculation left room for error but you should tread softly with generality for if one factor is missing, your generality may fall on its face - and since numbers of factors are always missing one should as a matter of course avoid generalities, and take out one's creative induction in speculation, being sure that one knows what one is doing.

I don't know whether you have taken a great leap in your thinking or whether, perhaps through trust, you are simply more open, but I never saw or heard such a change as you have made since your first letter to me - There's a joy in what you're writing and it's better - much better. Could it be that you don't have to slip into a shell anymore, being confident in your crabness? Anyway - a whole new tone comes through and I hear it with pleasure. Welcome from Anthropoid paranoia to the free and fierce Kingdom of Life.

Remember the Land of Oz? Maybe we could help to colonize the World of Is. It is more fantastic than the moon and littler known than Mars and it has the curious advantage of being here.

Congratulations on the Indian Ocean Expedition. Please give my regards to Humes with whom I think I have corresponded. And if you should meet any other friends of mine like Ralph Bolia - embrace them for me - They are good, whole men in a half assed world.

My eye is making a remarkable recovery. I had to wear the pin point covers.

Delivered in person, September 25, 1963.

February 7, 1964

Mr. Jack Rudloe
Centre d'Océanographie
et des Pêches
Nossi-Bé, Madagascar
Malagasy Republic
Africa

Dear Jack:
Your wonderful letter just arrived and your reaction to organized collecting is almost

"Remember the Land of Oz? Maybe we could help to colonize the World of Is. It is more fantastic than the moon and littler known than Mars and it has the curious advantage of being here."



John Steinbeck

like Ed Ricketts'. He found that he was content to do it his way and make less money and I imagine that will be your final decision. But I must say that your training in method will be invaluable to you as well as the little letters after your name for having taken part for once in decent society collecting. I know what you mean, though, about the zombie approach.

I think that you have invented a whole new ecology - if not invented it, discovered it. Collecting marine animals in a fish market should have been obvious to anyone. But here you see how you widened the horizons of your ecological section to include beggars, buyers, dogs and dervishes or whatever they have in Madagascar.

I hope I will be in New York when you come through, because I will be terribly pleased to see you and you will have a great fund of stories. I suggest that you go back to Florida, put up your feet and start writing some of them.

Thanks for your letter. It gave me a great deal of pleasure and I hope to see you soon.

Sincerely,
J.S.

17 February 65

Dear Jack:

I haven't meant to be so neglectful. But these have been strange and a little desperate times. Two deaths in the family and all the attending things that have to be done. Also I am trying like the devil to get on with my book and I don't have any idea how it is going, not well enough, I guess.

Very interesting that you should be teaching. It is a very great art, maybe the greatest. I am fortunate. I have had two great teachers. Some people have never had any.

Excuse the shortness. In addition to everything else I had to get the flu and it was a rough one. What the bug didn't do, the antibiotics did. I feel a little battered.

Yours,
jn

22 March 65

Dear Jack:

Thanks for your letter and the enclosed story. I know it well. What he hates about the Sea of Cortez is that it describes him. He is the same kind of man who screamed with pain at the Cruise of the Beagle. Incidentally, Fred Zimmerman, the great director, asked me to write a picture script for "Beagle." I refused. It would take three years to do it well.

I don't know how the television series to be based on "Sea of Cortez" progresses. And I don't ask because I am working so hard on my present book. But if it should come to life, I might ask you to stand in for me in the matter of collecting techniques and attitudes. As a matter of face, with a beard, you could even play Doc Ricketts. But as I say, I've heard nothing more.

As for the degree - if you could get one without effort, it would do no harm. But the best people won't demand one of you - only the second raters who have to wear their knowledge in the set of the tassel of their

mortar boards. Do you know, I turn down at least six honorary degrees a month. Recently a funny thing happened. Maybe I told you.

I have always refused the "Doctorates" on the ground that since I had no degree from my own university, Stanford, it would be unseemly to accept an honorary one from some other. Well recently the president of Stanford asked me to take a "Doctorate" there. I wrote him a rush note, told him he was cutting the ground out from under me and asked him to withdraw his offer - which he did.

You seem to be doing fine. I think you realize the value of writing one's degrees now.

Look - you seem to be unhappy about your agent. Would you like to query mine - the only ones I ever had. Elizabeth Otis or Shirley Fisher. I'll tell them I have recommended you and you do also if you write to them. They are wonderful people and Shirley Fisher is particularly interested in your field although not specially trained in it. You don't have to stay with one agent you don't want - unless you have a contract. I have no contract with mine and I've had them for 25 years.

I'm in a rush now --
I thought you'd like teaching
Yours
JS

(The beginning of the following letter is missing:)

...anecdote as you can. Tell of your failures and make it exciting. The stern and scholarly profs who look down their noses at what they call popularization, are dull people who can't interest people. When they can, they are delighted. The old bastard who hates me, does so because I described him. He's dead and the animals are alive.

As for the degrees. If you can get them without interfering with what you want to do, get them. Letters never made anyone read a book. Actually, once you have a degree, you never use it again. Only the incompetents hide behind their titles.

I finished my book about The Americans - a kind of diagnostic study - (read - a flock of opinions) and am in the doleful process of rewriting. It's a sad and unpleasant job. And it always brings me up short to re-recognize the dreadful dignity of the simple English sentence.

I'm going to Sag Harbor next Saturday to get this book finished and to start the next one. I hope to get well into "The Arthur" this summer and to finish it next winter. Then we'll go to Ireland again and stay awhile. I found a folk tale there I want to write. Besides, I feel at home there. I'm related.

I guess that's all. I liked your magazine piece. So few people work out of their own experience. Why don't you ask Woods Hole for a grant for experimentation in preservation in the field of delicate animals. So many species disintegrate before you can get them fixed.

Must go now - good luck
John

New York
March 5, 1966
Dear Jack:

Just got back from Europe to find your long letter. I found a three tone pile of mail, hence the cards. As for the pictures, I think they are my property but would suggest you clear them with Viking Press. Tom Guinzburg, tell him I gave them to you. I haven't read the "Sea of Cortez" maybe ever. Too late now. New rule - to preserve an animal without distortion - put yourself in his place. How would you like to be put away? For myself, I think I would like to melt and drip away.

No more time now -
Yours,
J.S.

Sag Harbor
I think its March 18

Dear Jack: Your letter was forwarded. I am sorry about Linda. In many ways this hurts more than a human death, I think because there is an objectiveness about another human but a dog is purely subjective. I've mourned over so many dogs that you would think I would get used to their going but I never have. It's just as bad every time. When, very young, my first dog was killed by a fire engine and the world came to an end, my father said - get another dog quick. And I thought him a heartless wretch not to have known that there were no other dogs. But he was right. There are, and no two are alike. Angel doesn't take Charley's place but he takes a place left vacant. And he does very well. You do well to look for another dog and even better perhaps of a different breed.

There's nothing wrong in killing - only in the reason for it. The most dedicated animal lovers rarely pass up a steak. What you must not do - or rather try not to do is to inform the subject with your own feelings which are compounded of yourself plus your experience. Subject may have equal sensitiveness but it cannot be the same. Only a primitive empathy is valid.

I've been cleaning up the wreckage winter leaves on the point and have neglected everything else. Elaine is in Texas attending her mother through a gall bladder operation. I stay out here as much as possible. Increasingly dislike the city. It makes me unhappy - and I don't have a copy of "Cannery Row" out here. I'm not sure I have one in town. They get taken. I don't have many of my own books left and that's all right. I know how they came out.

But with all the leaf raking I've neglected the pile of mail, some of which has to be answered and I guess I'd better get to it.

Yours,
John

24 May, 66

Dear Jack:

My son John is here with us on his leave before Vietnam and I am spending as much time with him as I can. He has about two more weeks. Then I'm going to work on a novel and that's as it is. I shall not be in town. However, if you should drive out this way, I would be glad to see you if you would understand that I am not all of me present and accounted for.

Yours,
JS

June 3, 1966

Dear Jack:

I had your letter yesterday. Congratulations. You couldn't have a better publisher. Shirley must be very pleased too. She is away right now. I will be glad to see you next week. I work until two o'clock every day but after that I will be available. Please phone the day you are coming. Sag Harbor 5-0997, unlisted. I have to go in town the 12 and 13 of June but otherwise will be here. When you arrive in Sag, you will have to phone so we can meet you. You can't find it and no one will direct you. See you then and again my congratulations.

Yours,
John