Travels with Charley: In Search of America
by John Steinbeck

Classic Review
A Review by Edward Weeks

[Ed. Note. This review first ran in the Atlantic Monthly, August 1962.]

As his books reveal, John Steinbeck is a writer who is happiest when he gets down to earth. He is a rugged, broad-shouldered, six-foot Californian, born in Salinas, and destined to write his first stories about the Valley. He has the gift of identifying himself passionately with other Americans, with migratory fruit pickers, as in his novel In Dubious Battle, and with the Okies, as in The Grapes of Wrath. He relishes doing things with his own two hands; in a swift self-portrait he writes, "I have always lived violently, drunk hugely, eaten too much or not at all, slept around the clock or missed two nights of sleeping, worked too hard and too long in glory, or slobbed for a time in utter laziness. I've lifted, pulled, chopped, climbed, made love with joy and taken my hangovers as a consequence, not as a punishment." Gradually his career drew him into the success and confinement of Manhattan and Long Island, and it came to him with a shock one day at the age of fifty-eight to realize that not for twenty years had he seen at close hand the country he had been writing about.

His new book, Travels with Charley, is a one-man, one-dog account of the expedition in which he recaptures his familiarity with America. He set out with some misgiving, not sure his health would stand up to the 10,000-mile journey he envisioned; as he traveled, the years sloughed off him, and the eager, sensuous pages in which he writes about what he found and whom he encountered frame a picture of our human nature in the twentieth century which will not soon be surpassed.

For the trip Mr. Steinbeck wanted a three-quarter-ton truck, and on it a little house built like the cabin of a small boat. He tells in delightful detail of the cabin and of the viands and equipment with which it was stocked. "I had to go alone and I had to be self-contained, a kind of casual turtle carrying his house on his back." For companionship he took with him Charley, a middle-aged French poodle, and Charley, as we come to know him, is one of the most civilized and attractive dogs in literature. They set off together in Rocinante, as the truck is called, in the early autumn, and they drove north through Connecticut and on to Deerfield, where the writer stopped to say good-bye to his teen-age son, one of "two hundred teen-age prisoners of education just settling down to serve their winter sentence." The boys of Eaglebrook came down to visit the truck, and "they looked courteous curses at me because I could go on and they could not." This was the effect that he and the little cabin were to have on hundreds of casual visitors. "Lord, I wish I could go with you!" was what they said or thought. And on he goes through the blazing foliage into Maine, pausing at Deer Isle, commenting on why he prefers climate to weather and wondering how a State-of-Mainer could ever find contentment in the sameness of Florida. Then, at our most northerly border, he turns west, and camping now on a knoll, now beside a trout brook, now in his man-made loneliness in the drumming rain, he and Charley find their way back to the understanding of this monster land.

This is a book to be read slowly for its savor, and one which, like Thoreau, will be quoted and measured by our own experience. It holds such happy passages as his love for Montana, his
rediscovery of San Francisco, and his surprising new impressions of the Middle West; it holds such horror as he witnessed in the rancid race demonstrations in New Orleans. And as all good journeys must, this one suddenly went flat as he was returning through Virginia. Thereafter, his one desire was to get home, and when a policeman forbade him to drive through the Holland Tunnel with so much butane in the cabin, all the novelist could say was, "But I want to get home. How am I going to get home?" Incidentally, in his passage of over 10,000 miles through thirty-eight states, he was not recognized even once.

Read more about this book

Special *Atlantic Monthly* subscription price for Powell's shoppers — subscribe today for only $19.95.

*Atlantic Monthly* places you at the leading edge of contemporary issues — plus the very best in fiction, poetry, travel, food and humor. Subscribe today and get 8 issues of the magazine delivered to you for only $19.95 — that's a savings of over $19 off the newsstand price.

To order at this special Powell's price click [here](http://www.powells.com).