

# Cannery Row Notes

## Chapter Summary

1

Lee Chong's grocery. Horace settles his debts with Lee by turning over his building, then shoots himself. Mack suggests the boys could protect the building by living in it. They name it the Palace Flophouse and Grill.

2

A Prayer. "Lee Chong is ... an Asian planet held to its orbit by the pull of Lao Tze and held away from Lao Tze by the centrifugality of abascus and cash register..." "Mack and the boys ... are the Virtues, the graces, the Beauties..." "Our Father who art in nature."

3

Dora's Bear Flag Restaurant. Twelve girls, a Greek cook and a watchman. Dora's obligations. Alfred's tasks. How William tried to join the boys, was rejected, visited Eva, and killed himself in the Greek's kitchen.

4

The old Chinaman's path at dusk, and back a dawn, between the street above the Palace down between Western Biological and Hediondo Cannery. Andy's taunting of him and its resulting vision.

5

Western Biological Laboratory is described in detail. Doc is introduced.

6

The Great Tide Pool is described. Doc and Hazel (whose name is explained) collect starfish. Gay may move into the Palace (his wife beats him). Henri has been building a boat for seven years (he's afraid of the ocean). That stink bugs pray.

7

Furnishing the Palace Flophouse. Mack's chalked spaces, Hughie's cot, Mack and Hughie haul a 300 lb iron stove 5 miles from Seaside, Eddie brings mixed booze from La Ida. The boys decide to throw a party for Doc.

8

Mr. and Mrs. Malloy moved into the boiler on the vacant lot in 1935 and two years later rented out the large pipes as bedrooms. Mrs. Malloy then wanted things, even curtains.

9

Mack mentions Phyllis Mae's infection from a tooth she knocked out of drunk, then proposes he and the boys catch frogs for Doc to make money. Doc is going to La Jolla that night; he gives Mack a note for ten dollars of gas. Mack talks Lee Chong into letting Gay fix Lee's truck to use on the frog trip.

10

Frankie comes to the lab and befriends Doc. He loves Doc better than his mother and the uncles at home. He tries to repeat his success offering a beer to a lady and drops the tray.

11

Gay works on the Model T. Eddie and Jones pumps tires. Eddie steals some dry cells from Gay's house. Mack tries to do Red out of money but fails. The truck dies on Carmel Hill and Gay goes for a needle valve and is gone 180 days (he's picked up by Brucia, celebrates his birthday, gets arrested).

12

Mr. Carriaga sees a small boy with a liver running from the gulch near Alvarado Street. The gulch is where the French doctor threw the tripe of embalmed customers. It was the great writer, Josh Billings, who died at the Hotel del Monte.

13

Mack and the boys cook a meal and discuss whatever happened to McKinley Moran, and Gay. Married men can't be trusted. The Captain orders them off his land. Mack offers to cure the dog Nola's tick bite, and the Captain suggests hunting at his frog pond.

14

The time between first light and sunup. Two soldiers and two girls stroll from La Ida's past Dora's and Lee Chongs to the end of Cannery Row, then up to the tracks and down to Hopkins Marine Station and its little beach.

15

Mack medicates Nola and is offered the pick of her litter. The captain opens a keg of corn liquor and they all have several short ones. Mack's new method of hunting frogs yields six or seven hundred. After more short ones they douse the burning curtains and leave the happy captain asleep on the floor.

# Cannery Row Notes

16

Dora is short three girls and new troops arrive at the Presidio. The flu hits. Doc helps out everywhere, then so do Dora's girls.

17

Henri watches a pole skater hired by Holman's Department Store. Doc heads for La Jolla. Eats a hamburger at Herman's, then more at Gonzales, King City, Paso Robles, Santa Maria and Santa Barbara where he picks up a hitchhiker whom he throws out at Ventura where he has a beer milkshake.

18

Doc arrives at La Jolla at 2am. At dawn he collects baby octopi. He sees the face of a dead girl in the reef and tells a stranger (who says there's a bounty) to report it.

19

The flagpole skater is a big success. Dr. Merrivale is told to stop shooting at him with a Daisy air rifle. Everyone wonders where he goes to the toilet. Richard Frost finally gets drunk and asks him.

20

Mack convinces Lee to treat the frogs as money. Lee winds up with all the frogs. The boys decorate the laboratory. Eddie bakes a cake which Darling (the spoiled pup) gets sick in. They drink all the Old Tennis Shoes and eat the steaks and break the phonograph records, and a drunk crashes into the frog box (they escape).

21

Doc returns in the early morning (hour of the pearl). Mack apologizes and Doc slugs him in the jaw. Doc gets two quarts of beer from Lee Chong's and shares them with Mack. Doc takes all day to clean up the mess.

22

Henri's boat which is never finished. Women come and go because of the cramped quarters. His hallucination of a handsome young man slashing the throat of a baby. Doc's date goes back to the boat with him, for five months.

23

Gloom hangs over the Palace. Bad luck hits everyone. Doc and Richard Frost discuss Mack and the boys as philosophers, unaware of how badly they feel. Dora's has to close during a busy season. Darling gets distemper, and the boys ask Doc to cure her. Mack asks Dora what they can do for Doc; she suggests a party he can attend.

24

When her husband Tom is depressed over his inability to get anything published, Mary suggests a party. She invites the neighbor kitties, one of which is playing with a mouse. Tom kills it.

25

Mack tries to find out Doc's birthdate. He gets him discussing astrology, says his own in April 12. Doc says his is October 27 (it's December 18) and suggests they chart him.

26

Two boys chase a cat. Joey admits his dad committed suicide by taking rat poison because he couldn't get a job (next day a man came to offer him one).

27

All of Cannery Row begins to prepare for the party. Even Doc finally gets wind of it, from a drunk, and makes his own preparations (putting away valuables, putting in food).

28

Frankie admires the clock with St. George killing the dragon at Jacob's Jewelry Store on Alvarado. He wants it as a present for Doc, steals it, gets caught. Doc asks him why. "I love you," he says. He can't be paroled to Doc.

29

The day of the party the boys have caught 22 tom cats for Doc. Dora and her girls have quiet drinks. No one wants to be too early.

30

Doc's party begins rather sedately at eight o'clock. Everyone brings presents. Mr. and Mrs. Gay arrive. Lee Chong brings firecrackers. Dora's girls bring a quilt. Doc cooks steaks and reads "Black Marigolds". A huge fight breaks out. Someone lights the firecrackers.

31

The trials of the gopher who sets up house in vacant lot.

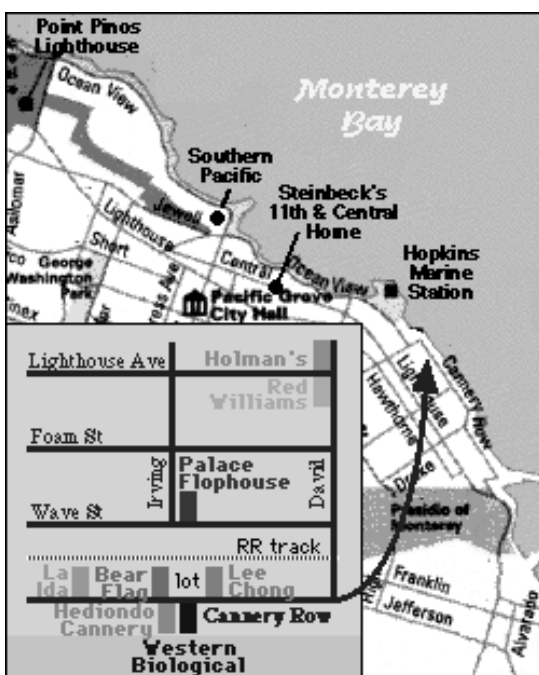
32

Aftermath. The Flophouse, Dora's - everything is closed and in recovery. Lee Chong lets Doc in to buy a bottle of beer. He goes back and cleans up Western Biological Laboratory and himself.

# Cannery Row Notes

## Summary

*Cannery Row* is a book without much of a plot. Rather, it is an attempt to capture the feeling and people of a place, the cannery district of Monterey, California, which is populated by a mix of those down on their luck and those who choose for other reasons not to live "up the hill" in the more respectable area of town. The flow of the main plot is frequently interrupted by short vignettes that introduce us to various denizens of the Row, most of whom are not directly connected with the central story. These vignettes are often characterized by direct or indirect reference to extreme violence: suicides, corpses, and the cruelty of the natural world.



The "story" of *Cannery Row* follows the adventures of Mack and the boys, a group of unemployed yet resourceful men who inhabit a converted fish-meal shack on the edge of a vacant lot down on the Row. Mack and the boys want to do something nice for Doc, the proprietor of a biological supply house on the Row who is a gentle and intellectual man and a friend and caretaker to all but who always seems haunted by a certain melancholy. They plan to give Doc a party and spend a good deal of energy acquiring provisions for the party in the process alternately enriching and enraging Lee Chong, the local grocer.

They set up in Doc's lab (which doubles as his living quarters) one night while he is gone on a specimen-collecting trip, and the party begins while they wait for him to return. Doc is late in getting back, though, and when he drives up at dawn the party is over and his place is completely trashed. A bad feeling pervades the Row for a long time after the party, and an influenza epidemic and several other unfortunate events occur. Finally the tide of luck changes, and the inhabitants of the Row start faring a little better. Grateful to Doc for curing their sick puppy, Mack and the boys again decide to do something nice for him. Following the advice of Dora, the local madam, they fix on another party, this time a party that Doc can actually attend. Chastened by their first failure, the boys are much more careful with the planning and execution this time around. The party is a great success. The novel ends the morning after the party with Doc cleaning up his home and reflecting on life.

# Cannery Row Notes

## Character List

<b>Lee Chong</b>	grocery store owner on Cannery Row
<b>Horace Abbeville</b>	owner of what became the Palace Flophouse
<b>Mack</b>	elder, leader, mentor of a group of men which included:
<b>Hazel</b>	strong 26-year-old man
<b>Eddie</b>	understudy bartender at La Ida
<b>Hughie and Jones</b>	collectors of frogs and cats for Western Biological
<b>Dora Flood</b>	50 years girl and madam at the Bear Flag Restaurant
<b>Alfred</b>	watchman at the Bear Flag
<b>William</b>	Alfred's predecessor
<b>Gay</b>	man whose wife beats him
<b>Whitey</b>	bartender at La Ida
<b>Old Chinaman</b>	makes daily walk to sea
<b>Andy</b>	beautiful ten-year-old from Salinas
<b>Doc</b>	owner/operator of Western Biological Laboratory
<b>Henri</b>	a painter
<b>Mr. Randolph</b>	director of Hediondo Cannery 1932
<b>Sam Malloy</b>	moved into the boiler 1935
<b>Mrs. Malloy</b>	wife of Sam
<b>Phyllis Mae</b>	girl from Dora's
<b>Red Williams</b>	Doc's gas station man
<b>Frankie</b>	young truant who comes to the lab
<b>Jimmy Brucia</b>	picks up Gay on Carmel Hill
<b>Sparky Enea</b>	helps Jimmie celebrate, breaks wrist
<b>Tiny Colletti</b>	friend of Sparky and Jimmy
<b>Robert Louis Stevenson</b>	onetime resident of Monterey
<b>Josh Billings</b>	great writer, humorist
<b>Mr. Carriaga</b>	lived up the hill from Alvarado St
<b>McKinley Moran</b>	a deep-sea diver
<b>The Captain</b>	owner of the frog pond and Nola
<b>Captain's wife</b>	member of the Assembly, away
<b>Elsie Doublebottom</b>	girl at Dora's on novena
<b>Blaisdell</b>	poet who proposed the beer milkshake
<b>Herman</b>	owner of Herman's cafe in Monterey
<b>Hitchhiker</b>	rides with Doc Santa Barbara to Ventura
<b>Flagpole skater</b>	outside Holman's Department Store
<b>Dr. Merrivale</b>	Mason, shoots at skater with air rifle
<b>Richard Frost</b>	high-strung brilliant young man
<b>Elmer Rehati</b>	loses both legs on the SP track
<b>Earl Wakefield</b>	catcher of two-headed sculpin
<b>Mary Talbot</b>	loves parties
<b>Tom Talbot</b>	Mary's husband, writer and cartoonist
<b>Joey and Willard</b>	two boys
<b>Eric</b>	barber friends of Henri's
<b>Doris</b>	girl at Dora's

# Cannery Row Notes

## In-depth look at main characters

**Mack and the boys** - A group of down-and-out but always scheming men who live together in the run-down fish-meal shack, owned by Lee Chong, which they call the Palace Flophouse and Grill. Mack is their ringleader, a smart, charismatic man who can charm anyone into anything; as one of the boys says, Mack could be president of the United States if he wanted to be, but he wouldn't want to do anything like that that wasn't fun. Mack's attempts to do things the easy way and to his advantage often get him into trouble. Eddie, another of the boys, is a substitute bartender at La Ida, the local bar. He brings home stolen bottles and a jug filled with remnants from customers' drinks; this makes him immensely popular all around. Hazel is perhaps the hardest-working of the boys: He often accompanies Doc on collecting trips. Ironically, though, the narrative claims he was too lazy to pick up real criminal habits as a boy. He got his name because his overworked mother didn't notice what his gender was when he was born. Gay lives with the boys because his wife beats him. He is often at the local bar or in jail as a result of brawls with his wife. Gay is a gifted mechanic who can make any vehicle run.

**Doc** - The proprietor of Western Biological Laboratory, a specimen supply house. Doc is a gentle, melancholy man who is a source of culture, benevolence, and aid for all on the Row. He introduces Dora's girls and the boys to opera, classical music, and literature, and he takes Frankie in and cares for him. He is also a bit of a womanizer. Somehow, though, Doc always seems lonely, and everyone on the Row is constantly wanting to do something to show him how much he is loved.

**Dora Flood** - The local madam; proprietor of the Bear Flag Restaurant, a brothel. Dora is a huge woman with bright orange hair and flamboyant clothes. She runs a tight ship - her girls aren't allowed to drink or talk to men on the street - but she is kindhearted and generous. She paid the grocery bills for many local families during the Depression, and she organizes an aid effort during the influenza epidemic. She is always in danger of being shut down by the authorities, so she must watch her step and do twice as much charitable giving as anyone else.

**Lee Chong** - The Chinese grocer of the Row. Lee Chong's store stocks absolutely everything, and he is willing to engage in almost any transaction, provided it's profitable and risk-free. Sometimes, however, his calculations prove to be wrong, as the business with Mack and the frogs shows. Lee Chong is a shrewd, even occasionally manipulative, businessman but also good-hearted; he extends credit generously, tries to take care of the unfortunate, helps with the parties for Doc, and even arranged for his grandfather to be disinterred and reburied in his homeland.

**Frankie** - A mentally handicapped boy who is neglected by his mother and taken in by Doc. Frankie is incapable of doing any work; he just seems to do everything a little bit wrong. He loves Doc, though, and frequently tells him so. Frankie is institutionalized after breaking in to a jewelry store to steal a gift for Doc. Frankie can be compared to Benjy in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* or to Lenny in Steinbeck's own *Of Mice and Men*.

# Cannery Row Notes

## Some questions to consider when studying

What is the symbolic importance of collecting in this novel? How do Doc's collecting activities inform the plot? How is collecting a metaphor for the act of writing?

*Collecting involves taking a random sample and using it to make generalities about a larger population. This is what Doc does by selecting specimens for scientists to study; it is also what Steinbeck does by introducing random characters through brief sketches inserted into the main plot. Collecting also implies taking what you find in front of you rather than trying to construct something original. Steinbeck seeks to describe a specific place and to capture some of its local specificity; he is less concerned with constructing a story that will be universally applicable. In this way, his creative technique has something in common with Doc's collecting activities.*

How is success defined in this novel? Who is the most successful: Doc, Mack, Mack, Dora, or Lee Chong? Why? Try to argue the case for each of these characters.

*Dora may be the most successful character in the novel. She is a successful businesswoman, and, although her business may seem to modern readers to involve the exploitation of others, we see throughout the novel how her brothel provides a needed outlet for some of the sexual energies of the town. Dora also exemplifies a sense of community: She is constantly giving help to those who need it, and she uses her "girls" to help the people during the influenza epidemic. Mack is too self-centered, and his plans often go awry as a result. Lee Chong is mostly concerned with profits, and, again, he often faces disaster as a result of his neglect of the human side of situations. Doc is hampered by his melancholy and doesn't really form any strong bonds with others. Overall, Dora is the character who best combines humanity and financial success. (Note: this is only a sample answer; Dora should not be considered as definitively the most successful character in the novel.)*

How do the interspersed vignettes and anecdotes about the people of Cannery Row inform the main plot? Do they have anything to do with the main plot or are they there merely for atmosphere?

*The interspersed sections let Steinbeck paint a broader picture of Cannery Row: They give him a chance to introduce more characters and show more of the Row without having to construct a convoluted or artificial plot to do so. Many of the anecdotes end on a note of violence, death, or cruelty, though, and, as such, they provide another perspective on the sometimes overly sunny portrait Steinbeck paints. By remaining outside the main plot, though, they provide a more subtle commentary, without forcing Steinbeck to use heavy irony by having disaster befall his main characters.*

What is the function of violence in this novel? Why are there so many suicides and other deaths?

Would you characterize Steinbeck's writing as realistic? As fairy-tale-like? As abstract? As allegorical? Explain the reasons for your answer.

How does Steinbeck use the idea of place? What does it mean to be part of a neighborhood or community in this novel?

How do families and marriages function in this novel? Who are the most important people in a character's life? Why might family be a troublesome concept?

What are the financial and social issues surrounding drinking in this novel? Consider the two parties at Doc's, Dora's policies for her girls, and Lee Chong's success as a purveyor of "Old Tennis Shoes."

Doc claims that it's easier to lie than to tell the truth and that people like you better when you lie to them. Does Steinbeck "lie" in his narrative? Why or why not? If he does lie, what are his reasons?