

**What might John Steinbeck think of a Salinas Valley Comic Con?
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"How in the hell do we know what literature is?" John Steinbeck, 1953

What might John Steinbeck say about a Comic Con? In Salinas, his home town?"

"Hurray!" I think.

Steinbeck was a man who, on the one hand, documented migrant woe in California during the 1930s and, on the other, loved whimsy and laughter, shaggy dog stories and bad jokes. His was a hearty embrace of popular culture. In the 1930s he never missed an episode of Paul Rhymer's witty radio drama "Vic and Sade," just Illinois "home folks." He wrote a blurb for Gypsy Rose Lee's "irresistible" 1957 memoir ("I bet some of it is even true, and even if it wasn't, it is now.") He dabbled at science fiction in the mid-1950s.

And he loved comic strips—Pogo and Li'l Abner and Milton Caniff's *Terry and the Pirates*, particularly *Dragon Lady*, "a powerful but prickly woman." (Caniff gave Steinbeck a drawing of her, which hung in his Sag Harbor, NY writing house.)

In 1952, travelling in Europe, he readily agreed to write an introduction for a forthcoming collection of Al Capp's *Li'l Abner*. For years, he writes, he'd been sending Capp "humorous suggestions and directives" because he loved Daisy Mae and Li'l Abner. "Capp may very possibly be the best writer in the world today," he insists. "I'm sure that he is the best satirist since Laurence Sterne. Capp has taken our customs, our dreams, our habits of thought, our social structure, our economics, and examined them gently like amusing bugs."

And what are comic book writers doing sixty some years after Steinbeck penned that introduction? About the same thing. Marvel Comics' Thor has become a woman. Kamila Khan, a Pakistani Muslim living in New Jersey, has taken on the mantle of Ms. Marvel. D.C. Comics Batman is the hero of a land mines awareness comic, a "humanitarian comic book." Lalo Alcaraz (L.A. comic artist who is a guest speaker this year) peers at today's politicians "like amusing bugs."

Comics can take a long hard look at who we are.

For John Steinbeck, a man who himself wrote in a variety of genres—fiction, journalism, film scripts, plays, nonfiction, musical theater--the net of literature was cast wide. "How in the hell do we know what literature is?" he muses in his

introduction to *The World of Li'l Abner*. "Well, one of the symptoms or diagnostics of literature should be, it seems to me, that it is read, that it amuses, moves, instructs, changes and criticizes people. And who in the world does that more than Capp?"

The comic books, graphic novels and comic strips of the 21st century, of course, amuse and instruct millions of readers. For John Steinbeck, that's literature: "The literature of the Cro Magnon is painted on the walls of the caves of Altamira. Who knows but that the literature of the future will be projected on clouds?" That seems prescient for a writer musing on the nature of literature in the early 1950s.

"If people don't read it, it just isn't going to be literature." Yup, Steinbeck said that.

The 2016 Salinas Valley Comic Con is about literacy. About reading today. About the intersection of images and text. About the power of literature. Charley Chaplin added a "Foreword" to the Al Capp collection: "Al Capp's work... sets the imagination to work." Comics do that as well.

Come to the Salinas Valley Comic Con, held at Hartnell College Student Center. Friday at 5:30 is a free kick off party with Pokemon lures, panels and food! On Saturday and Sunday, doors open at Hartnell at 10:00. Weekend costume contests!

See steinbeck.org/comic.html for details or call 831-775-4721. Adult tickets are \$15 Friday and Saturday, \$25 for the weekend. Ages 8-12, \$5 each day.

Steinbeck might be there—in spirit.