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An Interview With Dr. James D. Watson

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INTERVIEW WITH DR. JAMES D. WATSON

CONDUCTED BY PAUL DOUGLASS FOR *THE STEINBECK REVIEW*

THE STEINBECK REVIEW: Thank you very much for speaking with us about the Nobel Prize ceremonies of 1962 and your impressions of John Steinbeck.

JAMES D. WATSON: I'm afraid it has been a very long time. I may not be able to recall much that is specific.

SR: You were being honored yourself, of course, so it is understandable your attention might be elsewhere.

JDW: It was quite an occasion. White tie affair. Held in the big city hall. I remember a number of long tables, with perhaps twenty people on each side. One table was reserved for the recipients and the King and Queen of Sweden, who personally greeted all of us. It was then or perhaps at the dinner after the ceremony that I sat next to Steinbeck's wife. Of course pictures were taken during and after the prize ceremony, and I have some of those still.

SR: Do you have any recollections of John Steinbeck?

JDW: I remember I very much liked Steinbeck's address. It was a cry for sanity and reason in a time of great stress and irrationality. We talked, and he invited me to go with him on my last night in Stockholm to visit his friend, Bo Beskow, an artist whom he had known since the 1930s, I believe.

SR: And you went to Bo Beskow's house?

JDW: Yes, with Steinbeck and his wife, Elaine. We talked and enjoyed each other's company, and I ended up acquiring one of Beskow's paintings.

SR: Really. What is the subject?

JDW: It is titled "Ballet School," and it is dominated by blue colors, a rather abstract painting.

SR: You still have it?

JDW: Oh, yes. A while ago I had heard about the donation to the Center for Steinbeck Center of one of Beskow's portraits of Steinbeck, and so my assistant contacted you in search of more information, which I obtained.

SR: Beskow apparently painted Steinbeck three times.

JDW: Yes, I found that out.

SR: Do you have any other recollections or impressions of Beskow?

JDW: I'm afraid not.

SR: Any other memories you would be willing to share?

JDW: Well, the formal presentation of the prizes was the occasion of the speech Steinbeck gave, which I liked, as I say. I recollect that when Steinbeck arrived he was worried his address wasn't going to be received as well as Faulkner's. Have you read his speech?

SR: Yes.

JDW: I think it was better than Faulkner's, but he was nervous about how people would react.

SR: And who followed Steinbeck?

JDW: I gave the talk which followed his. My remarks were very simple and unrehearsed. I did not have a script to read from. I remember being saddened that Landau,¹ the Russian who had been given the Nobel for Physics that year, was unable to attend because he had been in a car crash and suffered irreparable brain damage. They saved his life, but his brain was damaged, and he never returned to science after that.

SR: Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to talk with us. Is there anything you would like to add?

JDW: Meeting Steinbeck was in no sense a letdown. Just the opposite. He became one of my heroes after I read *The Grapes of Wrath*, and he has stayed that way.

NOTE

¹ Lev Davidovich Landau (January 22, 1908 – April 1, 1968) was born into a Jewish family in Baku, Azerbaijan and became a prominent Soviet physicist who made fundamental contributions to many areas of theoretical physics. Landau received the 1962 Nobel Prize in Physics for his work on superfluidity, but did not attend because of the car accident to which Dr. Watson refers. He died in 1968.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Dr. Watson is currently Chancellor of the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, which was founded in 1890 as a private, non-profit institution with research programs that now include cancer, neuroscience, plant genetics, genomics, and bioinformatics. On December 10, 1962, he shared the stage in Stockholm with Linus Pauling, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, and John Steinbeck, recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Dr. Watson was honored on that occasion along with Francis Crick and Maurice Wilkins "for their discoveries concerning the molecular

structure of nucleic acids and its significance for information transfer in living material.” Dr. Watson’s most recent book is *A Passion for DNA: Genes, Genomes, and Society* (2000). He spoke via telephone to *The Steinbeck Review* from his offices in Cold Spring Harbor, New York.