

Maybe I picked this book about the adventures and social life of country mice because I am currently reading Terry Tempest Williams's book: *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*. Part of her book is about prairie dogs, which create diversity, are very social and rather intelligent and in danger of extinction. She has included a letter in her book from Con Slobodchikoff with amazing information about their communication system. He writes: '..... One of my PhD students did a comparative study of the alarm calls of all five species of prairie dogs, calling for her when she was wearing either a yellow shirt or a green one. All five species had distinctly different calls for the two colors of shirts. Also, each species had different vocalizations for each color, suggesting that each species has its own language, but the languages differ from one another, much as German, French, and English differ. We just published a study of black-tailed prairie dogs, showing that they had the same kind of descriptive elements in their alarm calls as the Gunnison's, describing the color of clothes and the size and shape of different humans. We also showed that they could remember when someone shot a gun, and could incorporate this information into their alarm calls, calling in a way that was distinctly different from the alarm calls that they gave to the same person prior to his shooting the gun. So my guess is that each species has a very sophisticated language, and has the cognitive capacity to detect subtle differences among predators and incorporate information about these differences into the alarm calls. I am hoping that this work will help show that prairie dogs, and all animals, are not just mindless robots that can be disposed of as vermin or property but are sentient beings that should be treated with empathy and respect.'

Terry Tempest Williams discusses if economics should be the only standard when creating our world or defining development and how racism and specism are connected. She writes; 'What kind of world are we creating? Is economics the only standard by which we measure society's values? Or is it possible to adopt another ethical structure that extends our notion of community to include compassion toward other species?.....If we can extend our idea of community to include the lowliest of creatures, call them "the untouchables," then we will indeed be closer to a path of peace and tolerance. If we cannot accommodate "the other," the shadow we will see on our own home ground will be the forecast of our own species' extended winter of the soul..... Most people are not comfortable making a connection between racism and specism or the ill treatment of human beings and the mistreatment of animals. We want to keep our boundaries clean and separate. But isn't that the point, to separate, isolate, and discriminate? We create hierarchies, viewing life from the top down..... This is the attitude of

power, and it hinges on who is in control. Who has power over whom? How does this kind of behavior infiltrate the psyche of a culture? And what are the consequences of **scala naturæ**? Arrogance is arrogance, and cruelty committed to a person or an animal is cruelty. We would rather not think too much about “what is being done to those outside the sphere of the favored group,” yet I believe it is time in the evolution of our imagination to make a strong case for the extension of our empathy toward the Other.

Her references to one of her favourite books by John Steinbeck turned my attention to my own relationship with his work. His books have now retired on a shelf and I have not read any recently, but they definitely made an impression on me in my adolescence and twenties. Below is a short extract from *The Winter of Our Discontent*, which seems very relevant and contemporary: “I guess we're all, or most of us, the wards of that nineteenth-century science which denied existence to anything it could not measure or explain. The things we couldn't explain went right on but surely not with our blessing. We did not see what we couldn't explain, and meanwhile a great part of the world was abandoned to children, insane people, fools, and mystics, who were more interested in what is than in why it is. So many old and lovely things are stored in the world's attic, because we don't want them around us and we don't dare throw them out.”