



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

The Grapes of Wrath

by John Steinbeck



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Preface

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is not merely a great American novel. It is also a significant event in our national history. Capturing the plight of millions of Americans whose lives had been crushed by the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, Steinbeck awakened the nation's comprehension and compassion.

Written in a style of peculiarly democratic majesty, *The Grapes of Wrath* evokes quintessentially American themes of hard work, self-determination, and reasoned dissent. It speaks from assumptions common to most Americans whether their ancestors came over in a stateroom, in steerage, or were already here to greet the migrants.



“Literature is as old as speech. It grew out of human need for it, and it has not changed except to become more needed.”

What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

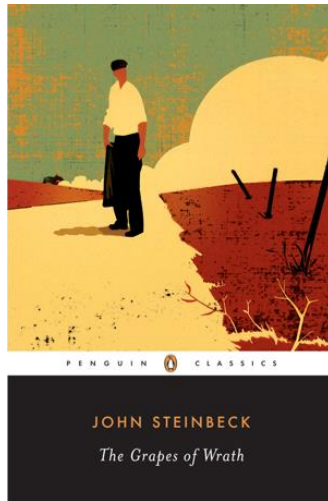
A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to the Book

Can a book top the bestseller list, win a Pulitzer Prize, save lives, and still be underrated? If that book is *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the answer is most definitely yes. For too long, Steinbeck's masterpiece has been taught as social history, or dismissed as an "issue novel." It's both these things, of course, but before all that, it's a terrific story. The characters fall in love, go hungry, lose faith, kill, live, and die with an immediacy that makes most contemporary novels look somehow dated by comparison.



The novel begins with young Tom Joad's return home from a prison term to find his family's Oklahoma farmstead in ruins and deserted. He soon locates his relatives nearby, preparing to leave their land for the promise of a new life in California. We follow their travails and partake of their hopes, only to share in their disappointment when California's agricultural bounty makes no provision for them except as occasional day laborers. Under the strain, the Joad family gradually comes apart until only a struggling remnant survives. In an unforgettable conclusion, we leave these few bereft of everything except their imperishable humanity.

Along the way, we meet a cast of characters as overstuffed as the Joad family's panel truck. From the indomitable matriarch Ma Joad to the starving old man in the book's final scene, Steinbeck gives them the individuality that an unforgiving economy threatens to cost them. In a remarkable balancing act, they represent those displaced by the Depression without ever subsiding into mere symbols.

And that's only half the story. *The Grapes of Wrath* is at least two books in one. Roughly half the chapters tell the saga of the Joads, while the other half have no continuing characters, and hardly any named people at all. These "generals," as Steinbeck usually called his interchapters, emphasize the point that the Joads stood in for all the Depression-era westward migrants. He felt a greater sense of responsibility to his material in this book than any other, and he was determined that no reader mistake the Joad's travails for an isolated case.

Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* in an amazing five-month burst of productivity. His first marriage was starting

to crack, and every day brought new entreaties from good causes to chair this committee or attend that benefit. In retrospect, the days that birthed the novel stand testament to perhaps its greatest theme: the dignity of hard work, done by hand and beset by doubt, with all one has, and for others to share.

Major Characters in the Book

Tom Joad

Just released from prison as the novel begins, Tom is quick to fight but fundamentally decent. He loves his family and finds himself gradually radicalized by its slow disintegration.

Ma Joad

Blessed with the ability to improvise a meal or a bed from the barest of provisions, Ma's strength and resilience ultimately prove her the true bulwark of the family.

Jim Casy

A defrocked preacher turned itinerant philosopher, Jim gives voice to much of Steinbeck's own mistrust of organized religion and belief in social justice.

Rosasharn Joad Rivers

Under Ma's influence, Tom's sister matures from a fairly insufferable expectant mother into a woman capable of one of the most memorable sacrifices in American literature.

Uncle John Joad

Uncle John is a sometime drunk who holds himself responsible for his late wife's death. His most memorable scene comes when he sets the youngest Joad adrift in the river to bear mute witness against the suffering of all the Dust Bowl migrants.

Al Joad

Al becomes suddenly indispensable to his family, since he's the only one who can keep their precious truck running. Unfortunately, some things are even more gripping to a teenage boy like Al than an automobile—for example, teenage girls.

The "man who lay on his back"

Never named, this minor but indelible character shares the novel's final, unforgettable tableau with Rosasharn. Like the prostrate underclass he represents, he needs help to survive but is too proud to beg.

How *The Grapes of Wrath* Got Its Name

Battle-Hymn of the Republic

by Julia Ward Howe

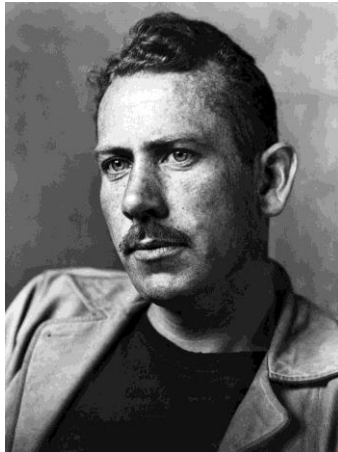
*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath
are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift
sword:
His truth is marching on.*

Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910) published her popular Union song, "Battle-Hymn of the Republic," in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1862. Carol Steinbeck thought the first verse's phrase "the grapes of wrath" would be the perfect title for her husband's epic novel.

About the Author

John Steinbeck (1809-1849)

The California farm town of Salinas welcomed John Steinbeck into the world on February 27, 1902, but the welcome eventually wore out. From an early age, his schoolteacher mother imparted a love of learning and language. From his bankrupt father, Steinbeck



John Steinbeck, 1939
(Bettmann/Corbis)

acquired a hypersensitivity to social nuances, a profound empathy for the underprivileged, and a strong work ethic that rarely left him. After receiving his diploma from Salinas High in 1919, he alternated work as a field hand with sporadic attendance at Stanford University.

His fourth novel, *Tortilla Flat* (1935), made his name as a writer. Then, drawing on his strengths—deep regard for his native California and empathy for his fellow hard workers—Steinbeck spent years researching and a miraculous five months writing *The Grapes of Wrath*. Published in 1939, it won him both the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and decades of enmity from his hometown, where he was viewed as a traitor to his (middle) class.

In a span of three months between 1939–1940, critically and commercially successful films of both *The Grapes of Wrath* and the short novel *Of Mice and Men* came out. During World War II, *The New York Herald Tribune* signed him on as a war correspondent and he filed dispatches from England and the Mediterranean.

After the war, Steinbeck left California for New York and cast around for a subject that would engage him as fully as *The Grapes of Wrath* had. He divided his attention among science writing, journalism, screenplays, and shorter novels. Finally, in 1952, following the collapse of his second marriage and the sudden death of his beloved friend, marine biologist Ed "Doc" Ricketts, Steinbeck wrote his way imaginatively back to California for *East of Eden*, among his strongest and most enduring novels.

The 1962 memoir *Travels with Charley* freshened and deepened Steinbeck's already wide readership. The highest honors were given to him: the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962, the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964, and appointment to the National Council on the Arts in 1966.

Steinbeck died in New York City in 1968 and was buried with little fanfare in Salinas. Today, the handsome National Steinbeck Center anchors Salinas's downtown revival, complete with research library and a museum featuring the original camper truck from *Travels with Charley*. Migrants still pick most of the fruit in California's Central Valley, but they come from Central America instead of Oklahoma, and agriculture has a new partner driving the region's economy: literary tourism.

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of John Steinbeck

1910s

- 1914: Gavrilo Princip assassinates Archduke Franz Ferdinand during his visit to Sarajevo, igniting World War I.
- 1918: Armistice signed on November 11, ending World War I.
- Steinbeck attends Stanford University, declaring English as his major.

1920s

- Steinbeck quits Stanford to read and write, leaving his roommate a note reading, "Gone to China. See you again sometime. Please free the chipmunk."
- 1929: Stock market crashes, triggering the Great Depression.

1930s

- 1932: Franklin Roosevelt elected president.
- 1936: Armed guards use tear gas against striking lettuce pickers in the "battle of Salinas."
- 1937: *Of Mice and Men* becomes a success, while the unemployment rate continues to soar.
- 1939: Steinbeck writes *The Grapes of Wrath*, published to popular acclaim in April.

1940s

- 1940: Steinbeck wins the Pulitzer Prize for *The Grapes of Wrath*.
- 1941: Japanese attack Pearl Harbor.
- 1943: Steinbeck works with Alfred Hitchcock on *Lifeboat*.
- 1945: World War II ends.
- Steinbeck's sons are born: Thom in 1944, John IV in 1946.

1950s

- 1950: Senator Joe McCarthy brandishes a list of alleged communists in the State Department, heralding the dawn of the Cold War.
- 1951: Steinbeck writes of biologist friend Ed Ricketts in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*.
- 1952: *East of Eden* published.

1960s

- 1964: Gulf of Tonkin Resolution officially embroils U.S. in Vietnam.
- 1966: Cesar Chavez organizes striking California pickers on a march to Sacramento, leading to a five-year grape boycott and the first-ever major victory for U.S. farm workers.
- 1968: Steinbeck dies in Manhattan and is buried in Salinas.

Half a Million Joads: The Dust Bowl Migration

The roots of the Great Depression are as dry and snarled as a dead orchard. If you want to watch two economists fight, just ask them what caused the October 1929 stock market crash. Easier to unearth, though, are the roots of the Depression-era Dust Bowl migration to California.

In the mid-nineteenth century, migrants had come to California for gold. In the twentieth they came to California just to stay alive, and the failure rate was high. The migrants came from Oklahoma and the states around it. They came because the post-World War I recession had forced them to buy new machinery to increase their yield, so they bet on the easy credit of the 1920s and lost. They came because a seven-year drought dried up their topsoil and blew it all away, and the bankers foreclosed on their farms. They came, too, because the Depression unemployment rate was pushing 30 percent, and California entrepreneurs were spreading rumors of better days to the west.

All told, between 300,000 and 500,000 migrants came to California during the 1930s from Texas, Arkansas, Missouri, and, most typically, from Oklahoma. The general name for them that fit easiest into headlines was "Okies," and among Oklahomans it still rankles as deeply as any ethnic slur. These migrant families were practically invisible to the

general public because they followed the crops from farm to farm, well outside of major population centers.

The gradual end of the Dust Bowl crisis in the late 1930s had as many causes as its beginning. Federally run Migratory Labor Camps, like the one founded in Arvin by Steinbeck's good friend Tom Collins, began to ease the misery of some California field hands. The state's shipyard and aerospace mobilization before and during World War II lessened competition for California agricultural jobs. And Steinbeck's own work, first in a series of articles in the San Francisco News and eventually transmuted into *The Grapes of Wrath*, caught the conscience of a nation and resulted in somewhat improved conditions. In the end, Steinbeck's novel fulfilled the same mission that Uncle John envisions for Rosasharn's unnamed child: "Go down an' tell 'em.... Maybe they'll know then."

"The Grapes of Wrath, by John Steinbeck, both repels and attracts you. The horrors of the picture, so well drawn, make you dread sometimes to begin the next chapter, and yet you cannot lay the book down or even skip a page. The book is coarse in spots, but life is coarse in spots, and the story is very beautiful in spots just as life is...Even from life's sorrows some good must come. What could be a better illustration than the closing chapter of this book?"

—Eleanor Roosevelt, from her column, *My Day*, on June 28, 1939

Other Works/Adaptations

Steinbeck and His Other Works

Much of John Steinbeck's prolific output falls, with a little coaxing, into suites of three books apiece. First comes his semi-experimental trilogy, consisting of the historical novel *Cup of Gold* (1929), the loosely linked story collection *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932), and the myth-maddened *To a God Unknown* (1933). All are journeyman works, promising but somewhat frustrating when read in sequence. A reader drums his fingers, waiting for the prodigious leap that's coming.

Steinbeck was now ready to undertake what's come down to us as his Labor Trilogy: the defiantly clear-eyed, unsentimental strike novel *In Dubious Battle* (1936), the haunting, fable-like *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and, of course, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). *Of Mice and Men* also pioneered a form that Steinbeck more or less invented, the play-novelette. In that book, and also in the 1942 wartime allegory *The Moon Is Down* and the abstruse parable *Burning Bright* (1950), Steinbeck wrote short, dialogue-heavy novels whose exposition could be stripped out, leaving stage dramas almost ready for production.

Steinbeck's travel literature, too, sorts itself into three principal texts. *Sea of Cortez* and his reworking of it into *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951) record Steinbeck's and Ed 'Doc' Ricketts's findings on their exploration of Baja California. In *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (1962), Steinbeck brought his prodigious observational powers to bear on the country around him. Finally, *America and Americans* (1966) cannibalized six months' worth of newspaper essays.

One can get carried away with this sort of literary numerology, but even Steinbeck's ephemera lends itself to tripartite groupings. There's the episodic, strongly regional, still endearing black comedy of *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *Cannery Row* (1945), and *Sweet Thursday* (1954). There are the late, less than successful novels *The Wayward Bus* (1947), *The Short Reign of Pippin IV* (1957), and *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961).

The major book left over after all this sorting and re-sorting may be *East of Eden* (1952). Here Steinbeck captures his feel for time's toll on the landscape as well as anything he ever wrote. The family dynamics have an elemental quality that he never approached again. *The Grapes of Wrath* may be his best book, but the rest of his corpus offers intelligent, humane company at almost every turning in a reader's life: *Of Mice and Men* for friendship, *Cannery Row* for laughter, *Travels with Charley* for wisdom, or some yet undervalued Steinbeck, just waiting for the next reader to see in it what no one else has.

Selected Works by Steinbeck

- *Tortilla Flat*, 1935
- *In Dubious Battle*, 1936
- *Of Mice and Men*, 1937
- *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939
- *The Moon Is Down*, 1942
- *Cannery Row*, 1945
- *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, 1951
- *East of Eden*, 1952
- *Sweet Thursday*, 1954
- *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*, 1962
- *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters*, 1969
- *The Harvest Gypsies: On the Road to The Grapes of Wrath*, 1988

The Book at the Movies

Within twenty-four hours during December of 1939, John Steinbeck had an experience unsurpassed in the whole long tango between literature and Hollywood. After traveling down to Los Angeles, he and his wife Carol got their first look at not one but two new masterpieces made from his work: *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Of the latter film, Steinbeck himself claimed that, "[Producer Darryl] Zanuck has a hard, straight picture in which the actors are submerged so completely that it looks and feels like a documentary film and certainly has a hard, truthful ring.... It is a harsher thing than the book, by far. It seems unbelievable but it is true."

We should take Steinbeck's claim with a large grain of salt, but also recognize the genuine cinematic artistry that enabled him even to compare the filmmakers' achievement with his own. Screenwriter Nunnally Johnson stands as first among equals beside his colleagues. Johnson reversed the Joads' stays in the two migrant camps, allowing the more humane government-run sanitary facility to come last, and blunt a bit of the novel's bleakness. He also bowed to the censors' expected rejection of the book's final, unforgettable image, transposing a speech of Ma's to improvise an ending hopeful enough to pass muster, yet plaintive enough to generate real, productive anger among audiences.

Johnson's was one of seven Oscar nominations for *The Grapes of Wrath*, but only Jane Darwell's performance as Ma and Ford's direction won their categories. The film is director John Ford's most atypical movie and, for some, still his best. It's not a western, except geographically. It's about survival, not gallantry, and John Wayne is nowhere in sight. Instead Ford relies on the lantern-lit cinematography of Gregg Toland and the remarkable work of his actors. Besides Darwell's heroic incarnation of Ma Joad, the ensemble includes Henry Fonda in his iconic Oscar-nominated role as Tom, John Carradine as Jim Casy, and the luminous Dorris Bowdon as Rosasharn. Ford once said, "The main thing about directing is: photograph the people's eyes." There's hardly a face in the picture that doesn't stare back at the audience in tacit accusation.

Some filming took place near the actual sites that Steinbeck and his friend, Tom Collins, visited during research for the novel. Collins, director of the compassionately run Weedpatch Camp in Arvin, California, was a consultant on the film, ensuring as much accuracy as possible. The result is a starkly beautiful movie, suffused in every scene with the intensity of craftsmen working on what even they must have suspected was the most important picture they might ever make.

Selected films from the works of Steinbeck

- *Of Mice and Men*, 1992
- *Cannery Row*, 1982 (adapted from *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*)
- *East of Eden*, 1955
- *The Moon Is Down*, 1943
- *Tortilla Flat*, 1942
- *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1940
- *Of Mice and Men*, 1939

An Inspiring Work

What Steinbeck did for the Dust Bowl's dispossessed in fiction, the great American folksinger Woody Guthrie did for them in song. Guthrie saw the film of *The Grapes of Wrath*, which strongly influenced his classic song cycle "Dust Bowl Ballads"—sometimes directly, as in "Tom Joad, Parts 1 and 2."

As Guthrie wrote, "There was a feller who knew us Okies, and he knew what it was like in Oklahoma, and he knew about the dust and the debts that covered us up."

Discussion Questions

1. Why would Steinbeck weave general chapters—often called "interchapters"—with the Joad story? Is the alternation consistent, or are there deviations?
2. The turtle in Chapter 3 is often interpreted as a parable or symbol. What do you think?
3. In prison, Tom "learned to write nice as hell." Meanwhile, Casy leaves the pulpit to "hear the poetry of folks talkin'." How does Steinbeck strike a balance between the more metaphorical, image-laden prose of "birds an' stuff" and "the poetry of folks talking"?
4. Casy says, "I ain't preachin'. Preachin' is tellin' folks stuff. I'm askin' 'em." Do you feel Steinbeck is doing either in *The Grapes of Wrath*?
5. At which points in the book does the power in the family gradually shift from Pa to Ma?
6. Where do Grandpa and then Grandma die? What might this suggest about where they ultimately do or don't belong?
7. What enduring piece of American writing does Ma's line—"Why, we're the people"—remind you of? How could this be ironic?
8. What sorts of things happen by rivers in the novel? Why might that be?
9. As Casy goes to jail, "On his lips there was a faint smile and on his face a curious look of conquest." And in the novel's last sentence, Rosasharn's "lips came together and smiled mysteriously." Why do both characters leave the novel with a smile?
10. Steinbeck is known for creating some of the most memorable friendships in American literature. How does Casy serve as a role model for Tom Joad, and Ma Joad for Rosasharn?
11. Steinbeck's writing was influenced by the cadences and themes of the Old Testament. How does the plight of the Joad family parallel the Israelites in Exodus? Do the Joads receive their Promised Land?
12. Why do you think this novel continues to have such wide, popular appeal? Is its message still relevant today?

Additional Resources

Works about Steinbeck and *The Grapes of Wrath*

- Benson, Jackson J. *John Steinbeck, Writer: A Biography*. New York: The Viking Press, 1984.
- Parini, Jay. *John Steinbeck: A Biography*. New York: Henry Holt, 1995.
- Shillinglaw, Susan, ed. *John Steinbeck: Centennial Reflections by American Writers*. San Jose: Center for Steinbeck Studies, 2002.
- Shillinglaw, Susan. *On Reading The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Penguin Books, 2014.
- Steinbeck, Elaine, and Robert Wallsten, eds. *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*. New York: The Viking Press, 1975.

If you want to read more books that influenced Steinbeck, you might enjoy:

- The King James Bible
- Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'arthur*, 1485
- John Dos Passos's *USA Trilogy*, 1930-36
- The WPA Guides to America, 1935-36

If you want to read other writers influenced by Steinbeck, you might enjoy:

- Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, 1948
- Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, 1950
- Susan Straight's *Highwire Moon*, 2001
- Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*, 2004

Websites

- [The National Steinbeck Center](http://www.steinbeck.org/)
The National Steinbeck Center is a museum, library, and archive devoted to the exploration of Steinbeck's work and themes.
<http://www.steinbeck.org/>
- [The Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies, San Jose University](http://www.sjsu.edu/steinbeck)
This website is a resource for readers, students, teachers, and scholars of Steinbeck.
<http://www.sjsu.edu/steinbeck>

Credits

Works Cited

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Steinbeck, John. *Working Days: The Journals of "The Grapes of Wrath," 1938-41*. Ed. Robert DeMott. New York: The Viking Press, 1989.

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