
PENGUIN CLASSICS

JOHN STEINBECK

# *The Grapes of Wrath*

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CLASSICS

# THE GRAPES OF WRATH

Born in Salinas, California, in 1902, JOHN STEINBECK grew up in a fertile agricultural valley about twenty-five miles from the Pacific Coast—and both valley and coast would serve as settings for some of his best fiction. In 1919 he went to Stanford University, where he intermittently enrolled in literature and writing courses until he left in 1925 without taking a degree. During the next five years he supported himself as a laborer and journalist in New York City, all the time working on his first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929). After marriage and a move to Pacific Grove, he published two California fictions, *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933), and worked on short stories later collected in *The Long Valley* (1938). Popular success and financial security came only with *Tortilla Flat* (1935), stories about Monterey's paisanos. A ceaseless experimenter throughout his career, Steinbeck changed courses regularly. Three powerful novels of the late 1930s focused on the California laboring class: *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and the book considered by many his finest, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Early in the 1940s, Steinbeck became a filmmaker with *The Forgotten Village* (1941) and a serious student of marine biology with *Sea of Cortez* (1941). He devoted his services to the war, writing *Bombs Away* (1942) and the controversial play-novelette *The Moon Is Down* (1942). *Cannery Row* (1945), *The Wayward Bus* (1947), *The Pearl* (1947), *A Russian Journal* (1948), another experimental drama, *Burning Bright* (1950), and *The Log from the* Sea of Cortez (1951) preceeded publication of the monumental *East of Eden* (1952), an ambitious saga of the Salinas Valley and his own family's history. The last decades of his life were spent in New York City and Sag Harbor with his third wife, with whom he traveled widely. Later books include *Sweet Thursday* (1954), *The Short Reign of Pippin IV: A Fabrication* (1957), *Once There Was a War* (1958), *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962), *America and Americans* (1966), and the posthumously published *Journal of a Novel: The* East of Eden *Letters* (1969), *Viva Zapata!* (1975), *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (1976), and *Working Days: The Journals of* The Grapes of Wrath (1989). He died in 1968, having won a Nobel Prize in 1962.

ROBERT DEMOTT is Edwin and Ruth Kennedy Distinguished Professor at Ohio University, where he has received half a dozen undergraduate and graduate teaching awards, including the Jeanette G. Grasselli Faculty Teaching Award and the Honors College's Outstanding Tutor Award. He is a former director of the Center for Steinbeck Studies at San Jose State University, and served for more than three decades on the editorial boards of the *Steinbeck Quarterly, Steinbeck Newsletter,* and *Steinbeck Studies.* He is editor (with Elaine Steinbeck as Special Consultant) of the Library of America's multivolume edition of John Steinbeck's writings, of which *Novels and Stories 1932-1937* (1994), The Grapes of Wrath *and Other Writings 1936-1942*

(1996), and *Novels 1942-1952* (2001) have so far appeared. His annotated edition of John Steinbeck's *Working Days: The Journals of* The Grapes of Wrath was chosen as a *New York Times* Notable Book in 1989, and his *Steinbeck's Typewriter: Essays on His Art* (1996) received the Nancy Dasher Book Award from the College English Association of Ohio in 1998.

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# The Grapes of Wrath

*Introduction and Notes by*
ROBERT DEMOTT

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*To* CAROL *who willed it.*

*To* TOM *who lived it.*[1]

# Introduction

“My whole work drive has been aimed at making people understand each other. . . .”

*—Steinbeck in a 1938 letter*

“Boileau said that Kings, Gods, and Heroes only were fit subjects for literature. The writer can only write about what he admires. Present day kings aren’t very inspiring, the gods are on a vacation, and about the only heroes left are the scientists and the poor. . . . And since our race admires gallantry, the writer will deal with it where he finds it. He finds it in the struggling poor now.”

*—Steinbeck in a 1939 radio interview*

# I

*The Grapes of Wrath* is one of the most famous novels in America— perhaps even in the world. When John Steinbeck wrote this book he had no inkling that it would attain such widespread recognition, though he did have high hopes for its effectiveness. On June 18, 1938, a little more than three weeks after starting his unnamed new manuscript, Steinbeck confided in his daily journal (posthumously published in 1989 as *Working Days*):

If I could do this book properly it would be one of the really fine books and a truly American book. But I am assailed with my own ignorance and inability. I'll just have to work from a background of these. Honesty. If I can keep an honesty it is all I can expect of my poor brain. . . . If I can do that it will be all my lack of genius can produce. For no one else knows my lack of ability the way I do. I am pushing against it all the time.

Despite Steinbeck's doubts, which were grave and constant during its composition, *The Grapes of Wrath* turned out to be not only a fine book, but the most renowned and celebrated of his seventeen novels. Steinbeck's liberal mixture of native philosophy, common-sense leftist politics, blue-collar radicalism, working-class characters, homespun folk wisdom, and digressive narrative form—all set to a bold, rhythmic style and nervy, raw dialogue—qualified the novel as the "American book" he had set out to write. The novel's title—from Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic"—was clearly in the American grain—and Steinbeck, a loyal Rooseveltian New Deal Democrat, liked the song "because it is a march and this book is a kind of march—because it is in our own revolutionary tradition and because in reference to this book it has a large meaning," he announced on September 10, 1938, to Elizabeth Otis, his New York literary agent.

After its arduous composition from late May through late October 1938 ("Never worked so hard in my life nor so long before," Steinbeck told Carl Wilhelmson), *The Grapes of Wrath* passed from his wife's typescript to published novel (Viking's designers set the novel in Janson type-face) in a scant four months. In March 1939, when Steinbeck received copies from one of three advance printings, he told Pascal Covici, his editor at The Viking Press, that he was "immensely pleased with them." The novel's impressive physical and aesthetic appearance was the result of its imposing length (619 pages) and Elmer Hader's striking dust jacket illustration (which pictured the exiled Joads looking down from Tehachapi Pass to lush San Joaquin Valley).

Steinbeck's insistence that *The Grapes of Wrath* be "keyed into the American scene from the beginning" by reproducing all the verses of "Battle Hymn," was only partly met: Viking Press compromised by printing the first page of Howe's sheet music on the book's endpapers in an attempt (unsuccessfully, it turned out) to deflect accusations of communism against the novel and its author.

Given the drastic plight of the migrant labor situation in California during the Depression, Steinbeck refused intentionally to write a popular book or to court commercial success. It was ironic, then, that shortly after its official publication date on April 14, 1939 (the fourth anniversary of "Black Sunday," the most devastating of all Dust Bowl storms), fueled by the nearly 150 reviews—mostly positive—that appeared in newspapers, magazines, and literary journals during the remainder of the year, *The Grapes of Wrath* climbed to the top of the bestseller lists for most of the year, selling 428,900 copies in hardcover at $2.75 each. (In 1941, when Sun Dial Press issued a cloth reprint for a dollar, the publisher announced that more than 543,000 copies of *Grapes* had already been sold.) *The Grapes of Wrath* won the 1940 Pulitzer Prize (Steinbeck gave the $1,000 prize to friend Ritch Lovejoy to encourage his writing career), eventually became a cornerstone of his 1962 Nobel Prize, and proved itself to be among the most enduring—and controversial—works of fiction by any American author, past or present. In spite of flaws, gaffes, and infelicities its critics have enumerated—or perhaps because of them (general readers tend to embrace the book's mythic soul and are less troubled by its imperfect body)—*The Grapes of Wrath* has resolutely entered both the American consciousness and its conscience. Few novels can make that claim.

If a literary classic can be defined as a book that speaks directly to readers' concerns in successive historical and cultural eras, no matter what their critical approaches, methods, or preoccupations are, then surely *The Grapes of Wrath* is such a work. Each generation of readers has found something new and relevant about it that speaks to its times. You might love it, you might hate it, but you probably won't be indifferent. Although Steinbeck could not have predicted its success (and was nearly ruined by its roller-coaster notoriety), the fact is that, in the past six-plus decades, *The Grapes of Wrath* has sold more than fifteen million copies and currently sells annually 150,000 copies. A graph in *Book* (July/August 2003) indicates that of the fifty bestselling "classic" British and American novels in 2002, *Grapes* ranks eleventh—five spots behind Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, but seven ahead of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (Steinbeck and Hemingway are

the only writers with three titles each on the list). In that same issue of *Book*, Jerome Kramer includes *Grapes* as one of the twenty books that changed America. Moreover, a recent spate of turn-of-the-century polls, all employing differing, even opposed methodologies, agendas, and criteria, arrived at similar conclusions: surveys by Radcliffe Publishing Course, Modern Library Board, *Hungry Mind Review* (now *Ruminator Review*), *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Heath Anthology of American Literature Newsletter*, *Library Journal*, and British booksellers Waterston's all place *The Grapes of Wrath* among the premier works in English of the twentieth century.

Moreover, an elaborate *Writer's Digest* (November 1999) survey of readers, writers, editors, and academics ranked John Steinbeck as the number one writer among the century's "100 Best" (a list whittled down from more than seven hundred nominees). The criteria—admittedly slippery—used to judge each author included "influence," "quality," and "originality." Even with a healthy dose of critical skepticism thrown into the mix, and a strong awareness of our turn-of-the-century obsession with compiling "best" lists, there is still something more significant at work in these dovetailing independent assessments of *Grapes*' achievement than the mere operation of special pleading, narrow partisanship, demographic distribution, or simpleminded puffery. Something more than the vagaries of cultural correctness and identity politics is at work in these polls that keeps Steinbeck's novel relevant to the kind of large-scale public conversation that took place in California in 2002, the year of Steinbeck's one hundredth birthday, when the state's Humanities Council, in an unprecedented and ambitious project, invited everyone in the state to read and discuss the novel at 140 public library venues. California's effort was itself part of a nationwide Steinbeck centennial honoring the "Bard of the People," which, according to Anne Keisman, became the "largest single author tribute in American history."

*Grapes* has also had a charmed life on screen and stage. Steinbeck sold the novel's film rights for $75,000 to producer Darryl F. Zanuck at 20th Century Fox. Then Nunnally Johnson scripted a truncated film version, which was nonetheless memorably paced, photographed (by ace cinematographer Greg Tolland), and acted (Henry Fonda as Tom Joad, Jane Darwell as Ma Joad, and John Carradine as Jim Casy) under the direction of John Ford in 1940. The film was nominated for seven Academy Awards, and took home two Oscars —Ford as Best Director; Darwell as Best Supporting Actress. (A restored DVD version with added historical features, Movietone documentary newsreel footage of Dust Bowl conditions, and extended interpretive

commentary by Susan Shillinglaw and Joseph McBride was released in 2004.) It proved to be a "hard, straight picture . . . that looks and feels like a documentary film and . . . has a hard, truthful ring," Steinbeck reported on December 15, 1939, after seeing its Hollywood preview. (Folksinger/songwriter Woody Guthrie said it was the "best cussed pitcher I ever seen," and urged readers of his column in *People's World*, "go to see it and don't miss. You was the star in that picture. ") Frank Galati faithfully adapted the novel for his Chicago-based Steppenwolf Company, whose Broadway production, featuring Gary Sinise as Tom Joad and Lois Smith as Ma Joad, won a Tony Award for Best Play in 1990.

Steinbeck's novel has created legacies in other ways, too. Cesar Chavez, Jim Harrison, Edward R. Murrow, John Sayles, and Bruce Springsteen have all acknowledged Steinbeck as a valued predecessor. Ike Sallas, the hero of Ken Kesey's *Sailor Song* (1992), prizes the novel and places it among his collection of classic American books—"the esssential heavies," he calls them. Steinbeck's literary legacy goes on and on, show-cased recently by Shillinglaw's *John Steinbeck: Centennial Reflections by American Writers*, a gathering of statements, homages, commentaries, reminiscences, and affections by nearly four dozen contemporary men and women writers of every genre and identity, from Edward Albee to Ursula K. Le Guin to Al Young. "John Steinbeck was the writer who taught me that literature could be about real people in real places," California writer Gerald Haslam summed up in recalling Steinbeck's impact. There are hilarious send-ups, too: *MAD* magazine's "The Wrath of Grapes," by John Steinfull, and Will Jacobs and Gerard Jones's "The Beaver of Wrath" in their *The Beaver Papers: The Story of the "Lost Season"* of the television series *Leave It to Beaver*. *The Grapes of Wrath* has also been translated into nearly thirty languages. One way or another, it seems that Steinbeck's words continue in Warren French's apt phrase "the education of the heart." Even Harold Bloom, among Steinbeck's most inflexible critics and Olympian detractors, confessed in 1988 that "there are no canonical standards worthy of human respect that could exclude *The Grapes of Wrath* from a serious reader's esteem."

Every strong novel redefines our conception of fiction's dimensions and reorders our awareness of its possibilities. *The Grapes of Wrath* has a populist, homegrown quality: part naturalistic epic, part labor testament, part family chronicle, part partisan journalism, part environmental jeremiad, part captivity narrative, part road novel, part transcendental gospel. Many American authors, upon finding that established fictional models don't fully suit their sensibilities, forge their own genealogy by synthesizing personal

vision and experience with a disparate variety of popular motifs, cultural forms, and literary styles.

Steinbeck was no exception; he was susceptible to many texts, ideas, currents, impulses, and models. To execute *The Grapes of Wrath* he drew directly and indirectly on the jump-cut technique of John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy (1938), the narrative tempo of Pare Lorentz's radio drama *Ecce Homo!* and the sequential, rapid-fire quality of Lorentz's documentary films *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937), the stark visual effects of Dorothea Lange's photographs of Dust Bowl Oklahoma and California migrant life, the timbre of the Greek epics, the rhythms of the King James Bible, the refrains of American folk music, the philosophical implications of Darwinism, the view of cooperative matriarchal society defined in Robert Briffault's anthropological treatise *The Mothers* (1931), as well as Edward F. Ricketts's all-important theories of natural ecology and phalanx ("group man") organization (aided and abetted by interdisciplinary readings in ethnography, marine biology, political philosophy, and contemporary science). Steinbeck transformed these ancient, classical, and modern resources (especially biblical themes, parallels, analogies, and allusions) into his own kind of combinatory textual structure. As David Minter says, it is a mistake to read Steinbeck solely as "a realist, a naturalist, or a proletarian novelist." *The Grapes of Wrath* is large; it contains multitudes. Malcolm Cowley's claim that a "whole literature is summarized in this book and much of it is carried to a new level of excellence" is still pertinent. Thus, Steinbeck pushed back the boundaries of traditional mimetic fiction and redefined proletarian form.

And yet *The Grapes of Wrath* is in some ways an old-fashioned book, with roots in two major American fictional traditions: the masculine escape /adventure myth and the feminine sentimental/domestic tradition. The former features a sensitive young loner who retreats from civilization by lighting out for unknown frontier territory, while the latter highlights home-based values by creating, nurturing, and sustaining family and community relations through the performance of sentiment and affect. Historically, in nearly every regard, these two spheres appear to be separate and antagonistic, as aesthetically and thematically oppositional as Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Alcott's *Little Women*, but Steinbeck, borrowing from both spheres and adding grimly realistic contemporary twists of his own, has woven them together in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Tom Joad, an archetypal bad guy, a paroled, unrepentant killer, lights out