



PENGUIN BOOKS

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 labourer 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 Californian 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 course regularly. Three powerful novels of the late 1930s focused on the Californian labouring 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) preceded 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 travelled 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 post-humously 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 numerous undergraduate and graduate teaching awards, including the Jeanette G. Grasselli Faculty Teaching Award in 1997. He is a former director of the Center for Steinbeck Studies at San Jose State University, and is currently on the Editorial Board of the Center's *Steinbeck Newsletter*. He is Editor (with Elaine Steinbeck as Special Consultant) of the Library of America's three-volume edition of John Steinbeck's writings, of which *Novels and Stories, 1932–1937* (1994) and *The Grapes of Wrath and Other Writings, 1936–1942* (1996) 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.

JOHN STEINBECK

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With an Introduction by Robert DeMott



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To **CAROL** who willed it.

To **TOM** who lived it.

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Introduction

“What some people find in religion a writer may find in his craft... a kind of breaking through to glory.”

—Steinbeck in a 1965 interview

I

On June 18, 1938, a little more than three weeks after starting *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck confided in his daily journal (posthumously published 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 constant during its tumultuous process of composition, *The Grapes of Wrath* turned out to be not only a “fine” book, but the greatest of his seventeen novels. Steinbeck's aggressive mixture of native philosophy, common-sense politics, blue-collar radicalism, working-class characters, folk wisdom, and home-spun literary 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: “I like it 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,” Steinbeck announced on September 10, 1938, to Elizabeth Otis, his literary agent.

After his arduous march of 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 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 dustjacket illustration (which pictured the exiled Joads looking out on a lush California valley). And true to Steinbeck’s insistence that *The Grapes of Wrath* be “keyed into the American scene from the beginning,” Covici had insured that Viking Press printed words and music from the “Battle Hymn” on the book’s endpapers in an attempt (unsuccessfully, it turned out) to deflect accusations of communism against the novel.

Given the drastic plight of the migrant labor situation in California, Steinbeck refused to write a popular book or court commercial success. It was ironic, then, that shortly after its official publication date on April 14, 1939, fueled by the nearly ninety reviews—mostly positive—that appeared in newspapers, magazines, and literary journals between April and June, *The Grapes of Wrath* climbed to the top of the best-seller lists for most of the year, selling 428,900 copies in hardcover at \$2.75 each. (In 1941, when the 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 \$1000 prize to writer Ritch Lovejoy), eventually became the cornerstone of his 1962 Nobel Prize award, and proved itself to be among the most enduring works of fiction by any American author, past or present. In spite of the flaws its critics perceive (frequent sentimentality, flat characterizations, heavy-handed symbolism, unconvincing dialogue)—or perhaps because of them (general readers tend to embrace the book’s mystic soul and are less troubled by its imperfect body)—*The Grapes of Wrath* has

resolutely entered both the American consciousness and its conscience. If a literary classic can be defined as a book that speaks directly to readers' concerns in successive historical eras, then surely *The Grapes of Wrath* is such a work.

Although Steinbeck could not have predicted this success (and was nearly ruined by the notoriety it achieved), the fact is that, in the past half century, *The Grapes of Wrath* has sold more than 14 million copies. Many of them end up in the hands of students at schools and colleges where the novel is taught in literature and history classes at every level from junior high to doctoral seminars. The book 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. Then Nunnally Johnson scripted a truncated film version, which was nonetheless memorably paced, photographed, and acted (especially by Henry Fonda as Tom Joad, Jane Darwell as Ma, and John Carradine as Jim Casy) under the direction of John Ford in 1940. (A "hard, straight picture... that looks and feels like a documentary film and... has a hard, truthful ring," Steinbeck reported after seeing its Hollywood preview.) Recently, Frank Galati faithfully adapted the novel for his Chicago-based Steppenwolf Company, whose Broadway production won a Tony Award as Best Play in 1990. *The Grapes of Wrath* has also been translated into nearly thirty languages. It seems that Steinbeck's words continue, in Warren French's apt phrase, "the education of the heart."

Every strong novel redefines our conception of the genre's dimensions and reorders our awareness of its possibilities. Like other products of rough-hewn American genius—Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (three other "flawed" novels that also humanize America's downtrodden by exposing social ills)—*The Grapes of Wrath* has a home-grown quality: part naturalistic epic, part jeremiad, part captivity narrative, part road novel, part transcendental gospel.

Many American authors, often with little in the way of a shared novelistic tradition to emulate, or finding that established fictional