

JOHN STEINBECK

Celebrating his

CENTENNIAL

A POWERFUL VOICE DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION, JOHN STEINBECK CHALLENGED READERS TO CONFRONT THE TREMENDOUS SUFFERING OF THE TIMES AND TO CONDUCT THEIR OWN LIVES WITH A STRONGER MORAL VISION. IN THIS TIME OF NATIONAL TRAGEDIES, RECESSION, AND MASSIVE BANKRUPTCIES, HIS WORDS HAVE NEW RELEVANCE.

STEINBECK'S BEST-KNOWN WORK, *The Grapes of Wrath*, had a profound impact with its release and bestseller status in 1939. No writer had so powerfully captured the ravaging effects of the Great Depression on migrant farmworkers, uprooted by the dust storms in Oklahoma and resigned to live in barren work camps in central California. The book was both denounced on the floor of Congress and hailed by Eleanor Roosevelt in her "My Day" newspaper column. This novel was the culmination of years of writing about the poor and downtrodden in California, including another classic, *Of Mice and Men*. It also marked a turning point for its author; after *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck's focus widened, writing about where his life took him—World War II, biological expeditions, and European history, with occasional forays back to California fiction, as in *East of Eden*.

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas Valley, CA in 1902. He worked his way through Stanford University for six years, writing fiction while in school and taking numerous quarters off to earn tuition. He left without a degree. Steinbeck's jobs during college foretold of later works: the ranch near King City later become the setting for *Of Mice and Men*, and the labor problems at Spreckels Sugar Company laid the groundwork for *The Grapes of Wrath*. He published his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, in 1928. Over 30 would follow.

A sentimental writer, Steinbeck's life and works record and defy human cynicism. His characters did not always make noble choices, nor did noble choices always lead to happy endings. However, the question of what is right, of what people's obligations are to each other, ran through every book.

John Steinbeck and the Critics

Steinbeck's sentimentality has not always attracted critical regard over the years. His reputation peaked early with critics who marked him as a social realist—a great documenter of the plight of migrant farmworkers—and who lost interest in him when he moved on to other topics. Over time, Faulkner and Hemingway gained in critical stature while Steinbeck's more accessible writing was relegated to high school classrooms.

Steinbeck's work has always been seen as too much of its time; one review of *The Grapes of Wrath* predicted a short-lived future for the book: "to lie in that honourable vault which houses the books

that have died when their purpose as propaganda has been served" (*New Statesman & Nation*, 9/16/39). Upon the announcement of Steinbeck's Nobel Prize in 1962, *The New York Times* ran an editorial entitled "Does a Moral Vision of the Thirties Deserve the Nobel Prize?" and argued that Steinbeck should not receive the award.

Today in that same newspaper, Martin Arnold states that Steinbeck is undergoing a resurgence—his centennial year has attracted new attention, and with the passage of time, critics are better able to place his work in its historical context. Steinbeck was in the first generation of writers who wrote in the midst of a great national crisis but had to compete with

other forms of media to make their views known. Arnold notes: "Laura Browder, associate professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University and director of its creative writing program, makes an interesting point about the connection between novelists and political action. During the Civil War, our first great national crisis, 'writers were read by everyone and were important figures,' she said, adding, 'By the '30s, the next great crisis, writers were supplanted by the movies and tabloid culture and had to find a way to make their books accessible, to people who went to the movies and did not read serious literature.'" Steinbeck wrote as he did to communicate his message as well as tell his stories.

AN OVERVIEW OF JOHN STEINBECK'S BOOKS

CUP OF GOLD, 1929. A fictional account of the life of a late-seventeenth-century Welsh buccaneer, Henry Morgan. Steinbeck and critics paid it little mind.

THE PASTURES OF HEAVEN, 1932. Each chapter tells the story of a different resident of the central-California town of Pastures of Heaven. How idyllic is agrarian life?

TO A GOD UNKNOWN, 1933. A man imagines a huge tree as representing his dead father's spirit. His brother cuts the tree down, and consequences follow. After little success from these first three novels, Steinbeck had to find another publisher.

TORTILLA FLAT, 1935. Steinbeck's first bestseller, an often-humorous tale of Mexican-Americans in Monterey, CA. They chase women, make music, drink, steal, and try to live a low-cost, pleasurable life to its fullest

* **IN DUBIOUS BATTLE, 1936.**

* **OF MICE AND MEN, 1937.**

****THE RED PONY, 1937.**

THE LONG VALLEY, 1938. Steinbeck's best book of short stories. Includes "The Red Pony" as well as pieces that later inspired *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Cannery Row*.

THEIR BLOOD IS STRONG, 1938. A collection of investigative reports on the living conditions of Dust Bowl refugees. These were originally published in *The San Francisco News* as a seven-part

series called "*The Harvest Gypsies*" and were the basis of research for *The Grapes of Wrath*.

* **THE GRAPES OF WRATH, 1939.**

SEA OF CORTEZ, 1941. A non-fiction account of an expedition with his friend, marine biologist Ed Ricketts, filled with science, adventure, and philosophy.

* **THE MOON IS DOWN, 1942.**

BOMBS AWAY: THE STORY OF A BOMBER TEAM, 1942. Non-fiction about the training and coming together of a bomber team. Dismissed by critics as more war propaganda.

* **CANNERY ROW, 1945.**

****THE PEARL, 1947.**

THE WAYWARD BUS, 1947. A group of passengers are stuck together when their bus bogs down on an old road. A character study that Steinbeck later regretted publishing.

A RUSSIAN JOURNAL, 1948.

Written with photographer Robert Capa, recounting their travels in search of the "real" Russia. *Journal* is not as in-depth as they had hoped—Russian escorts kept them moving and provided a constant supply of vodka.

BURNING BRIGHT, 1950. A play in novel form—the characters remain the same throughout the book, but are given different occupations and settings in each act. Written after the breakup of his second marriage and not particularly well received.

* **EAST OF EDEN, 1952.**

VIVA ZAPATA!, 1952. A screenplay about Mexican Revolutionary Emiliano Zapata. Nominated for an Academy Award.

SWEET THURSDAY, 1954. A humorous sequel to *Cannery Row*, well liked by critics. As with its predecessor, there is an underlying seriousness.

THE SHORT REIGN OF PIPPIN IV, 1957. A light book that came from Steinbeck's year in Paris—a scholarly astronomer is pushed to the throne by the French government.

ONCE THERE WAS A WAR, 1958. A compilation of newspaper articles from his time as a war reporter, including compelling descriptions of his participation in commando raids.

THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT, 1961. His last novel, in which an ethical businessman compromises his morals to find success. Though critics had their complaints, this morality play has appeal.

TRAVELS WITH CHARLEY: IN SEARCH OF AMERICA, 1962. A non-fiction account of Steinbeck's travels across the back roads of America with his poodle, Charley. An odd mixture of Americana, lovable dog stories, and darker notes of urbanization and racism.

AMERICA AND AMERICANS, 1966. A coffee table book that gave Steinbeck's final thoughts on the country and its citizens.

AMERICA AND AMERICANS AND SELECTED NONFICTION, 2002. In time for his centennial, a reprinting of the 1966 book along with many selected pieces of Steinbeck's journalism.

* **Books are discussed above.**

** **Discussed in "Younger Readers" on page 23.**

MAJOR AWARDS

1938

New York Drama Critics' Circle Award
OF MICE & MEN

1940

Pulitzer Prize Fiction Award
THE GRAPES OF WRATH

1946

King Haakon Liberty Cross
THE MOON IS DOWN

1962

Nobel Prize for Literature

1964

United States Medal of Freedom

More than 60 years after the predicted irrelevance of *The Grapes of Wrath* and 30 years after the skepticism regarding his Nobel prize, Steinbeck's books continue to sell over two million copies a year. Steinbeck's "moral vision," and his works, have proven timeless. Critics come and go, but his avid readers remain.

The Migrant Farmworker Trilogy

For many, these three books were the peak of Steinbeck's work. He focused on farmworkers and ranch hands working in California, presenting three views of hard lives.

In Dubious Battle (1936)

The emergence of Steinbeck's politics, after the semi-comic tone of his first best seller, *Tortilla Flats*

THE STORY: Non-union migrant workers in an apple orchard declare a strike. The novel explores the power of the growers, the tactics and difficulty in organizing disparate workers, and the violence that follows.

CRITICAL INSIGHT:

"One of the most courageous and desperately honest book...as Sinclair Lewis at his best..."—New York Times, 1936

"Having just come out of a 49-day strike myself, I can say Steinbeck captures the logistics of a strike: the manipulation by the media against the strikers, the changes [in] moods... the importance of gathering public support."—David Flood, Amazon.com

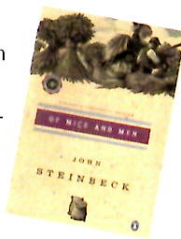
THE BOTTOM LINE: The characters may be stereotypes, and this book is the least of the trilogy. However, if the times, the issues, and the dilemmas interest you, *In Dubious Battle* delivers.

Of Mice and Men (1937)

★ New York Drama Critics' Circle Award (for the play from the novel)

After the wide scope of *In Dubious Battle*, a smaller, focused story. Along with *The Grapes of Wrath*, this is Steinbeck's other widely acknowledged classic.

THE STORY: A tragic tale of George Milton and Lennie Small, two ranch hands. Lennie is a giant man, mentally retarded; George works with him and cares for him, promising him that someday



Migrant field worker's home. Imperial Valley, CA. 1937.



BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN IN CONCERT

I AM GLAD TO BE HERE tonight for the John Steinbeck Research Center. I think the values of his work are more real today than they ever were: to increase understanding and patience and compassion, to get a chance to fight that isolation that seems to be part of the American character. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Preacher Casey calls that isolation the wilderness. That's what it is. I think John Steinbeck's work was to reach in and pull you out of that wilderness, out into the world.

It's a work that resonated through my whole life and was as important as all those voices on all those records. It had the same kind of power. It showed me the importance of beauty—because where there's beauty, there's hope. And where there's hope, there's faith. That's always what I aspired to, to do something that meant something. Salvation is not individual, though bad men do prevail and good men do fall. Yet there's a place where that is measured in you. And that counts for something.

—October 26, 1996, from a song introduction at a benefit for the John Steinbeck Research Center

they'll have a farm of their own. However, "the best laid schemes o'mice an' men" soon fall apart.

CRITICAL INSIGHT:

"A thriller, a gripping tale...that you will not set down until it is finished. It is more than that, but it is that."—NY Times, 1937
 "You feel the affection that binds Lennie and George together. You hear talk as natural as grass. You recognize in them a hunger which moves all men."
 —Atlantic, 1937
 "P.S. This is the only novel which depressed me for an entire weekend. Read it on a Monday."—Scott Eckert, Amazon.com

THE BOTTOM LINE: A classic. Tough, tender, tragic.

MOVIE: 1939, starring Burgess Meredith and Lon Cheney; and 1992, starring Gary Sinise and John Malkovich.

The Grapes of Wrath (1939)

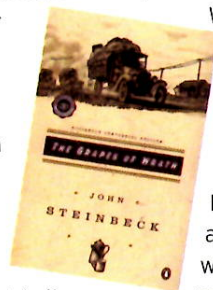
★ 1940 Pulitzer Prize, Fiction
 ★ #10, Modern Library's Top 100 Novels of the Twentieth Century
 ★ Harold Bloom's Western Canon
 And suddenly, the masterpiece. To most critics, *The Grapes of Wrath* is a magnificent novel whose flaws are as clear as the vitality of its message. That the writing is indeed very good allows the book itself to be great.

THE STORY: After the Joad family loses their tenant farm in Oklahoma, they join thousands of others moving to California and think they will find a land of opportunity. Instead, they confront hunger, poverty, and humiliation.

CRITICAL INSIGHT:

"To me, *The Grapes of Wrath* is the summation of eighteen years of realism, a novel whose hunger, passion, and poetry are in direct answer to the angry stirring of our conscience these past seven years."—Atlantic, 1939

"It is Steinbeck's best novel, i.e. his toughest and tenderest, his roughest written, and most mellifluous, his most realistic and, in its ending, his most melodramatic, his angriest and most idyllic. It is 'great'...because it is inspired propaganda, half tract, half human-interest story, emotionalizing a great theme." —Time, 1939



"The book has faults. It is too detailed, particularly in the latter half...the folk note is forced a little...the ending is the tawdriest kind of fake symbolism."—New Yorker, 1939

"If you want to experience what Wilco, Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and others were singing about, this book will bring it all to life..."—Friendly Spirit, Amazon.com

"I live in a citrus community in Florida, which is populated by a large number of migrant workers. It never occurred to me to wonder how they felt about their lives."—Amazon.com

ON THE OTHER HAND: "John Steinbeck was a communist and he is trying to infect our lives with his ideals by making everyone hate owners, and want to strive

**JOHN STEINBECK
 NOBEL ACCEPTANCE**

LITERATURE WAS NOT promulgated by a pale and emasculated critical priesthood singing their litanies in empty churches—nor is it a game for the cloistered elect, the tin-horn mendicants of low calorie despair. Literature is as old as speech. It grew out of human need for it, and it has not changed except to become more needed... Humanity has been passing through a gray and desolate time of confusion. My great predecessor, William Faulkner, speaking here, referred to it as a tragedy of universal fear so long sustained that there were no longer problems of the spirit, so that only the human heart in conflict with itself seemed worth writing about.

Faulkner, more than most men, was aware of human strength as well as of human weakness. He knew that the understanding and the resolution of fear are a large part of the writer's reason for being. This is not new. The ancient commission of the writer has not changed. He is charged with exposing our many grievous faults and failures, with dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams for the purpose of improvement. Furthermore, the writer is delegated to declare and to celebrate man's proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit—for gallantry in defeat—for courage, compassion and love. In the endless war against weakness and despair, these are the bright rally-flags of hope and of emulation. I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man, has no dedication nor any membership in literature...

John Steinbeck's acceptance speech for the 1962 Nobel Prize for Literature

toward a collective society."—a reader, Amazon.com

THE BOTTOM LINE: Steinbeck's finest work.

FOR FURTHER READING: 1941—*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, by James Agee and Walker Evans.

1996—*Journey to Nowhere: The Saga of the New Underclass*, by Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson.

MOST LIKELY AN URBAN LEGEND—The Japanese translation was entitled "Angry Raisins."

MOVIE: 1940, starring Henry Fonda and directed by John Ford.

**Other Major Works
 The Moon is Down (1942)**

★ King Haakon Liberty Cross (Norway)

Steinbeck worked and wrote for various

WHERE TO START

Two very different books are at the top of the list. *THE GRAPES OF WRATH* is the big American novel, and the best of Steinbeck's work. *OF MICE AND MEN* is a smaller, simpler, but still profound story.

After these two, your interests should direct your choices. Start with another classic, *EAST OF EDEN*, explore Steinbeck's politics with *DUBIOUS BATTLE* and *THE MOON IS DOWN*, or enjoy the simpler stories in *CANNERY ROW*.

branches of the U.S. Government during World War II. This book was written in part to help resistance movements in Occupied Europe, and dismissed it as propaganda.

THE STORY: A small Scandinavian town is occupied by an opposing army; the townspeople confront evil from without and betrayal from within.

CRITICAL INSIGHT:

"So strong, so simple, so true, so dramatic in its values..."—*New York Times*, 1942
"[The book] strikes me as unsatisfactory on two counts. Its form is deceiving and its message is inadequate." *New Yorker*, 1942

BOTTOM LINE:

A book very much of its time and place—it was well-received in Europe.

NOTES: Though never stated, the novel takes place in Norway. The book was popular in occupied Europe and was awarded the Liberty Cross by the Norwegian government in 1946.

Cannery Row (1945)

A return to California. In counterpoint to World War II and his recent works, Steinbeck attempted something lighter with more humor. Some contemporaneous critics did not react favorably.

THE STORY: Steinbeck explores the lives of various inhabitants of Cannery Row—bums, prostitutes, and the rest who seem to be poor but happy.

CRITICAL INSIGHT:

"It's a puzzler why Steinbeck should have wanted to write or publish such a book at this point in his career."—*New York Times*, 1944

"...One of the least pretentious of his books, but I believe that it is the one I have most enjoyed reading."—*New Yorker*, 1945

"...As Dr. Keating says in *Dead Poets Society*, simple does not and need not necessarily=ordinary. I found myself falling in love with [the characters'] aww-shucks mentality & sleepy-eyed approach to life."—David Scott Roberts, Amazon.com

THE BOTTOM LINE: A pastoral, nicely done.



East of Eden (1952)

Steinbeck's attempt to recapture the scale and quality of *Grapes of Wrath* and tell a story that explored the various natures of good and evil, portraying the power of moral choice.

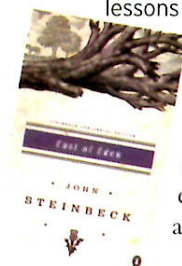
THE STORY: The generations of two Salinas Valley families—the Trasks and the Hamiltons—continually reenact the biblical story of the fall from grace of Adam and Eve and the rivalry of Cain and Abel. The book spans the period between the American Civil War and the end of World War I.

CRITICAL INSIGHT:

"Probably the best of John Steinbeck's novels."—*New York Times*, 1952

"This is certainly his best book since *The Grapes of Wrath* and, I believe, evidence that he has been thinking more deeply than ever before about life..."—*San Francisco Chronicle*, 1952

"This is the type of book which you close and stare at for 20 minutes upon finishing, and then pro-



STEINBECK FOR YOUNGER READERS

IT SHOULD BE SAID THAT few of John Steinbeck's books that are accessible to younger readers have a "happy ending." These works often serve as a transitional phase for middle school and high school readers—the writing is as descriptive as it is plot-driven, and the novels focus on multi-faceted life lessons and on the hard choices and responsibilities that one faces in the world. As such, young readers will get more out of these books with adult guidance and conversation, whether at school or home.

Here are four books in increasing order of age-appropriateness, from middle school to late high school.

THE PEARL—A Mexican fisherman finds a giant pearl, seemingly guaranteeing him and his family prosperity. In the end, however, greed and jealousy overtake those around them. Based on a Mexican folktale, *The Pearl* is an exploration of wealth, happiness, and the difference between the two.

THE RED PONY—Four related stories of a ten year old boy, Jody, growing up on a ranch in California. All are tales of maturation, where Jody learns of love, death, empathy, and longing. An explicit warning, without giving too much away: the pony dies in the first story.

OF MICE AND MEN—A tale of friendship, and loyalty but with a violent turn at the end.

GRAPES OF WRATH—Steinbeck's most admired novel is appropriate for advanced high school juniors and seniors who are ready for all its adult themes.

ceed to take a majestic walk through a park, or better yet a bad part of the neighborhood, and brood over the lessons you have just learned about

man, the universe, and the meaning of life itself."—Douglas LaRose, Amazon.com

THE BOTTOM LINE: *The Grapes of Wrath* is Steinbeck's classic novel. *East of Eden* is quietly assuming a place next to it.

MOVIE: 1955, starring James Dean.

"Now I must tell you that I have just finished a book which is an unforgettable experience in reading. *The Grapes of Wrath*...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 the book?"

From her "My Day" syndicated column, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, 1939