



John Steinbeck

(1902-1968)

Compiled by
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Born in Salinas, California, John Steinbeck came from a family of moderate means. His mother, the strong-willed Olive Hamilton, was a teacher.

As a child growing up in the fertile Salinas Valley - called the 'Salad bowl of the nation' - Steinbeck formed a deep appreciation of his environment, not only the rich fields and hills surrounding Salinas, but also the nearby Pacific coast where his family spent summer weekends. At age fourteen he decided to be a writer and spent hours as a teenager living in a world of his own making, writing stories and poems in his upstairs bedroom.

To please his parents, in 1919 he enrolled at Stanford University; to please himself he signed on only for those courses that interested him - classical and British literature, writing courses, and a smattering of science. The president of the English Club said that Steinbeck 'had no other interests or talents that I could make out. He was a writer, but he was that and nothing else'. Writing was, indeed, his passion, not only during the Stanford years but throughout his life. From 1919 to 1925, when he dropped out of university without taking a degree, Steinbeck sometimes worked closely with migrants and bindlestiffs on California ranches. Those relationships, coupled with an early sympathy for the weak and defenceless, deepened his empathy for workers, the disenfranchised, and the lonely and dislocated - an empathy that is characteristic in his work. After leaving Stanford, he briefly tried construction work and newspaper reporting in New York City, and then returned to his native state in order to hone his craft. In the late 1920s, during a three-year stint as a caretaker for a Lake Tahoe estate, he wrote several drafts of his first novel, **Cup of gold** (1929) and met his first wife, Carol Henning, a San Jose

native. After their marriage in 1930, he and Carol settled, rent-free, into the Steinbeck family's summer cottage in Pacific Grove, she to search for jobs to support them, he to continue writing. By 1933, Steinbeck had found his terrain; he had chiselled a prose style that was more naturalistic, and far less strained than in his earliest novels; and had claimed his people - not the respectable, smug Salinas burghers - but those on the edges of polite society. Steinbeck's California fiction, from **To a God Unknown** to **East of Eden** (1952) envisions the dreams and defeats of common people shaped by the environments they inhabit.

Undoubtedly his ecological, holistic vision was determined both by his early years roaming the Salinas hills and by his long and deep friendship with the remarkable Edward Flanders Ricketts, a marine biologist, whom he met in 1930. Founder of Pacific Biological, a marine lab eventually housed on Cannery Row in Monterey, Ed was a careful observer of intertidal life. Considering the depth of his eighteen-year friendship with Ricketts, it is hardly surprising that the bond acknowledged most frequently in Steinbeck's oeuvre is friendship between and among men. Steinbeck's writing style as well as his social consciousness of the 1930s was also shaped by an equally compelling figure in his life, his wife Carol. She helped edit his prose, urged him to cut the Latinate phrases, typed his manuscripts, suggested titles, and offered ways to restructure. Steinbeck's novels can all be classified as social novels dealing with the economic problems of rural labour, but there is also a streak of worship of the soil in his books, which does not always agree with

his matter-of-fact sociological approach.

After the rough and earthy humour of **Tortilla Flat**, he moved on to more serious fiction, often aggressive in its social criticism, to **In dubious battle** (1936), which deals with the strikes of the migratory fruit pickers on California plantations. This was followed by **Of mice and men** (1937), the story of the imbecile giant Lennie, and a series of admirable short stories collected in the volume **The long valley** (1938). In 1939 he published what is considered his best work, **The grapes of wrath**, the story of Oklahoma tenant farmers who, unable to earn a living from the land, moved to California where they became migratory workers.

Steinbeck was determined to participate in World War II, first doing patriotic work **The moon is down**, 1942, a play-novelle about an occupied Northern European country, and **Bombs away**, 1942, a portrait of bomber trainees and then going overseas for the **New York Herald Tribune** as a war correspondent. His war despatch columns were later collected in **Once there was a war** (1958). Immediately after returning to the States, a shattered Steinbeck wrote a nostalgic and lively account of his days on Cannery Row, **Cannery Row** (1945). In that year, however, few reviewers recognised that the book's central metaphor, the tide

pool, suggested a way to read this non-teleological novel that examined the 'specimens' who lived on Monterey's Cannery Row, the street Steinbeck knew so well. Steinbeck often felt misunderstood by book reviewers and critics, and their barbs rankled the sensitive writer; and would throughout his career.

A book resulting from a post-war trip to Russia with Robert Capa in 1947, **Russian**

journal (1948), seemed to many superficial. Reviewers seemed doggedly either to misunderstand his biological naturalism or to expect him to compose another strident social critique like **The grapes of wrath**. Commonplace phrases echoed in reviews of books of the 1940s and other 'experimental' books of the 1950s and 1960s: 'complete departure,' 'unexpected'. A humorous text like **Cannery Row** seemed fluff to many.

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Steinbeck faltered both professionally and personally in the 1940s. He divorced the loyal but volatile Carol in 1943. That same year he moved east with his second wife, Gwyndolyn Conger, a lovely and talented woman nearly twenty years his junior who ultimately came to resent his growing stature and felt that her own creativity as a singer had been stifled. With Gwyn, Steinbeck had two sons, Thom and John, but the marriage started falling apart shortly after the second son's birth, ending in divorce in 1948.

That same year Steinbeck was numbed by Ed Ricketts's death. Only with concentrated work on a film script on the life of Emiliano Zapata for Elia Kazan's film, **Viva Zapata!** (1952) would Steinbeck gradually chart a new course. In 1949 he met and in 1950 married his third wife, Elaine Scott, and with her he moved again to New York City, where he lived for the rest of his life. Much of the pain and reconciliation of those late years of the 1940s were worked out in two subsequent novels: his third play-novelle **Burning bright** (1950), and in the largely autobiographical work he'd contemplated since the early 1930s, **East of Eden** (1952).

With **Viva Zapata!**, **East of Eden**, **Burning bright** and later **The winter of our discontent** (1961), Steinbeck's fiction becomes less concerned with the behaviour of groups and more focused on an individual's moral responsibility to self and community.

Like **The grapes of wrath**, **East of Eden** is a defining point in his career. During the 1950s and 1960s the perpetually 'restless' Steinbeck travelled extensively throughout the world with his third wife, Elaine. With her, he became more social. Perhaps his writing suffered as a result; some claim that even **East of Eden**, his most ambitious post-**Grapes** novel, cannot stand shoulder to shoulder with his searing social novels of the 1930s. In the fiction of his last two decades, however, Steinbeck never ceased to take risks, to stretch his conception of the novel's structure, to experiment with the sound and form of language. **Sweet Thursday**, sequel to **Cannery Row**, was written as a musical comedy, and in 1957 he published the satirical **The short reign of Pippin IV**, a tale about the French monarchy gaining ascendancy. In 1961, he published his last work of fiction, the ambitious **The winter of our discontent**, a novel about contemporary America set in a fictionalised Sag Harbor (where he and Elaine had a summer home).

Increasingly disillusioned with American greed, waste, and spongy morality (his own sons seemed textbook cases) he wrote his

jeremiad, a lament for an ailing populace. The following year, 1962, Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature; the day after the announcement the **New York Times** ran an editorial by the influential Arthur Mizener, *Does a writer with a moral vision of the 1930s deserve the Nobel Prize?* Wounded by the blindside attack, unwell, frustrated and disillusioned, John Steinbeck wrote no more fiction.

But Steinbeck was not silenced. As always, he wrote reams of letters to his many friends and associates. In the 1950s and 1960s he published scores of journalistic pieces.

In the late 1950s - and intermittently for the rest of his life - he worked diligently on a modern English translation of a book he had loved since childhood, Sir Thomas Malory's **Morte d'Arthur**; the unfinished project was published posthumously as **The acts of King Arthur and his noble knights** (1976). Immediately after completing **Winter**, the ailing novelist proposed 'not a little trip of reporting', he wrote to his agent Elizabeth Otis, 'but a frantic last attempt to save my life and the integrity of my creativity pulse'. In 1960, he toured America in a camper truck designed to his specifications, and on his return published the highly-praised **Travels with Charley in search of America**

(1962), another book that both celebrates American individuals and decries American hypocrisy. His last published book, **America and Americans** (1966), reconsiders the American character, the land, the racial crisis, and the seemingly crumbling morality of the American people.

In these late years, in fact since his final move to New York in 1950, many accused Steinbeck of increasing conservatism. True enough that with greater wealth came the chance to spend money more freely. And with status came political opportunities that seemed out of step for a 'radical' of the 1930s.

But it is far more accurate to say that the author who wrote **The grapes of wrath** never retreated into conservatism. He lived in modest houses all his life, caring little for lavish displays of power or wealth. He always preferred talking to ordinary citizens wherever he travelled, sympathising always with the disenfranchised. He was a Stevenson Democrat in the 1950s. Even in the 1930s, he was never a communist, and after three trips to Russia (1937, 1947, 1963) he hated with increasing intensity Soviet repression of the individual.

In fact, neither during his life nor after has the paradoxical Steinbeck been an easy author to pigeonhole personally, politically,

Awards and Honours

1935	Commonwealth Club of California Gold Medal for Best Novel by a Californian (Tortilla Flat)
1936	Commonwealth Club of California Gold Medal for Best Novel by a Californian (In dubious battle)
1938	New York Drama Critics' Circle Award (Of mice and men)
1939	Member of National Institute of Arts and Letters - American Booksellers' Award
1940	Pulitzer Prize Fiction Award (The grapes of wrath)
1946	King Haakon Liberty Cross (The moon is down)
1948	Member of American Academy of Arts and Letters
1962	Nobel Prize for Literature
1963	Honorary Consultant in American Literature to the Library of Congress
1964	United States (US) Medal of Freedom
1964	Trustee of John F Kennedy Memorial Library
1964	Annual Paperback of the Year Award
1964	Press Medal of Freedom
1966	Member of the National Arts Council
1979	US Postal Service issued a John Steinbeck commemorative stamp
1983	Steinbeck Centre Foundation started in Salinas, CA
1984	American Arts Gold Medallion of Steinbeck issued by the US Mint
1998	National Steinbeck Centre Grand Opening (June 27, 1998).

or artistically. As a man, he was an introvert and at the same time had a romantic streak, was impulsive, garrulous, a lover of jests and practical jokes. As an artist, he was a ceaseless experimenter with words and form, and often critics did not 'see' quite what he was up to. He claimed his books had 'layers,' yet many claimed his symbolic touch was cumbersome. He loved humour and warmth, but some said he slopped over into sentimentalism. He was, and is now recognised as, an environmental writer. He was an intellectual, passionately interested in his odd little inventions, in jazz, in politics, in philosophy, history, and myth - this range from an author sometimes labelled simplistic by academe.

All said, Steinbeck remains one of America's most significant twentieth-century writers, whose popularity spans the world, whose range is impressive, whose output was prodigious: 16 novels, a collection of short stories, four screenplays (**The forgotten village**, **The red pony**, **Viva Zapata!**, **Lifeboat**), a sheaf of journalistic essays - including four collections (**Bombs away**, **Once there was a war**, **America and Americans**, **The Harvest Gypsies**) - three travel narratives (**Sea of Cortez**, **A Russian journal**, **Travels with Charley**), a translation and two published journals (more remain unpublished). Three 'play-novelettes' ran on Broadway: **Of mice and men**, **The moon is down**, and **Burning bright**, as did the musical **Pipe dream**. Whatever his 'experiment' in fiction or journalistic prose, he wrote with empathy, clarity, perspicuity: 'In every bit of honest writing in the world', he noted in a 1938 journal entry, '...there is a base theme. Try to understand men, if you understand each other you will be kind to each other. Knowing a man well never leads to hate and nearly always leads to love.'

Note

*For those fortunate enough to take a trip to California a visit to the National Steinbeck Center will allow you to experience a journey through John Steinbeck's world, where literature jumps off the printed page and into your imagination. Discover Steinbeck's works and philosophy through interactive, multisensory exhibits for all ages and backgrounds, priceless artifacts, entertaining displays, educational programmes and research archives. Seven themed theatres showcase **East of Eden**, **Cannery Row**, **Of mice and men**, **The grapes of wrath** and much more. Enjoy ever-changing art and cultural exhibits, the museum store and One Main Street Cafe. The museum's next addition will be the Valley of the World Agricultural History and Education Centre.*

The National Steinbeck Centre is located in historic Oldtown Salinas, a scenic 17-mile drive from Monterey, California on California's Central Coast.

Steinbeck titles in CPLS stock

The acts of King Arthur and his noble knights--: from the Winchester MSS of Thomas Malory and other sources.- Pan, 1979.

America and Americans.- Heinemann, 1966.

Burning bright: a play in story form.- Heinemann, 1967.

Cannery Row.- Clio P, 1986.

Cup of gold.-Thorpe, 1973.

East of Eden.- Heinemann, 1976.

The grapes of wrath.- Pan, 1975.

In dubious battle.- Modern library, 1939.

Journal of a novel: the East of Eden letters.- Heinemann, 1970.

Log from the sea of Cortez: the narrative portion of the book Sea of Cortez with a profile 'About Ed Ricketts'.- Heinemann, 1958.

The long valley.- Heinemann, 1974.

The moon is down.- Heinemann, 1971.

Of mice and men.- Pan, 1974.

Once there was a war.- Heinemann, 1959.

Pastures of heaven.- Quality Press, 1953.

The pearl.- Curley, 1989.

The red pony.- Heinemann Educational Bks., 1961 (1985 printing).

The Russian journal.- Minerva, 1994.

The short novels of John Steinbeck.- Heinemann, 1979.

The short reign of Pippin IV.- Pan, 1973.

Steinbeck: a life in letters.- Heinemann, 1975.

Sweet Thursday.- Heinemann, 1972.

To a God unknown.-Thorpe, 1974.

Tortilla flat.- Modern Lib., 1937.

Travels with Charley: in search of America.- Clio P, 1986.

The wayward bus.- Penguin, 2000.

The winter of our discontent.- Heinemann, 1961.