

**John Ernst Steinbeck** (February 27, 1902 – December 20, 1968) is one of the best-known and most widely read American writers of the 20th century. A winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962, he wrote the novella *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), both of which examine the lives of the working class and the migrant worker during the Great Depression. Steinbeck populated his stories with struggling characters and is often considered an exponent of the naturalist school. His characters and his stories drew on real historical conditions and events in the first half of the 20th century. His body of work reflects his wide range of interests, including marine biology, jazz, politics, philosophy, history, and myth.

Seventeen of his works, including *Cannery Row* (1945), *The Pearl* (1947), and *East of Eden* (1955), went on to become Hollywood films, and Steinbeck himself achieved success as a Hollywood writer, garnering an Academy Award nomination for Best Writing for Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat*, in 1945.

He was known by many as a regionalist, naturalist, mystic, and proletarian writer. He was also respected for his empathy for the migrant workers of the time.

## Biography

### Early life and work

The house in which John Steinbeck lived until he was 17 years old in Salinas, California. Steinbeck, who was born to John Ernst Steinbeck II (a first-generation American of German and Irish descent), had off and on attendance at Stanford University until 1925 when he officially left Stanford (prior to graduating) to pursue his dream as a writer.

Steinbeck's first novel, published in 1929, was the unsuccessful mythological work *Cup of Gold*. Steinbeck achieved his first critical success with the novel *Tortilla Flat* (1935), which won California Commonwealth Club's Gold Medal. The story of the adventures of young men in Monterey during the Great Depression was made into a film of the same name in 1942, starring Spencer Tracy, Hedy Lamarr, and John Garfield

## Critical success

Back in California, Steinbeck found his stride in writing "California novels" and Dust Bowl fiction, set among common people in the Great Depression. His socially-conscious novels about the struggles of rural workers achieved major critical success. *Of Mice and Men* (1937), his novella about the dreams of a pair of migrant laborers working the California soil, was critically acclaimed. Steinbeck would ultimately write only two stage plays (his second was an adaptation of *The Moon Is Down*).

The stage adaptation of his novel *Of Mice and Men* was a smash hit, starring Broderick Crawford as the dim-witted but physically powerful itinerant farmhand "Lennie" and Wallace Ford as Lennie's companion, "George." However, Steinbeck refused to travel from his home in California to attend any performance of the play during its New York run, telling Kaufman that the play as it existed in his own mind was "perfect", and that anything presented onstage would only be a disappointment.

The play was rapidly adapted into a 1939 Hollywood film, in which Lon Chaney Jr. played "Lennie" (he had already portrayed this role in the Los Angeles production of the play) and Burgess Meredith was cast as "George." Steinbeck followed this wave of success with *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), based on newspaper articles he had written in San Francisco, and considered by many to be his finest work. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize for the Novel in 1940 even as it was made into a famous film version starring Henry Fonda and directed by John Ford.

The success of *The Grapes of Wrath*, however, was not free of controversy, as Steinbeck's liberal political views, portrayal of the ugly side of capitalism, and mythical reinterpretation of the historical events of the Dust Bowl migrations[1] led to backlash against the author, especially close to home. In fact, claiming the book was obscene and misrepresented conditions in the county, the Kern County Board of Supervisors banned the book from the county's public schools and libraries in August 1939, lasting until January 1941.[2] Of the controversy, Steinbeck himself wrote, "The vilification of me out here from the large landowners and bankers is pretty bad. The latest is a rumor started by them that the Okies hate me and have threatened to kill me for lying about them. I'm frightened at the rolling might of this damned thing. It is completely out of hand; I mean a kind of hysteria about the book is growing that is not healthy." [3]

The film versions of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men* (by two different movie

studios) were in production simultaneously, and Steinbeck spent a full day on the set of *The Grapes of Wrath*, then the next day on the set of *Of Mice and Men*.

### **1940s–1960s**

Steinbeck divorced his first wife, Carol Henning in 1943. He immediately married Gwyn Conger that same year, and had two sons, Thomas Myles in 1944 and John IV, (Catbird) in 1946. They divorced in 1948. Two years later, Steinbeck married the ex-wife of Zachary Scott, Elaine Scott. They were married until his death in 1968. Steinbeck had one grandchild.

In 1940, Steinbeck's interest in marine biology and his friendship with Ed Ricketts led him to a historical voyage in the Gulf of California, also known as the "Sea of Cortez," where they collected biological specimens. Their account of this trip was later published as *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, and describes the daily experiences of the trip. Ed Ricketts had a tremendous impact on Steinbeck's writing. Not only did he help Steinbeck while he was in the process of writing, but he aided Steinbeck in his social adventures. Steinbeck would frequently go on trips with Ricketts to collect biological specimens and have a good time away from his writing. This down time gave Steinbeck an opportunity to think about things other than his writing, and gave him some very significant ideas. Ricketts' impact on Steinbeck was so great that Steinbeck decided to base his character "Doc" in *Cannery Row*, on Ricketts. Steinbeck's relationship with Ricketts would end when Steinbeck moved away from Salinas, California, to pursue a life away from his wife Carol.

During the World War II, Steinbeck served as a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*. It was at that time he became friends with Will Lang Jr. of TIME/ LIFE Magazine. Some of Steinbeck's writings from his correspondence days were later collected and made into *Once There Was A War* (1958).

He continued to work in film, writing Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1944), and the film *A Medal for Benny* (1945), about paisanos from *Tortilla Flat* going to war.

His novel *The Moon is Down* (1942), about the Socrates-inspired spirit of resistance in a Nazi-occupied village in northern Europe, was made into a film almost immediately. It is presumed that the country in question was Norway, and in 1945 Steinbeck received the

Haakon VII Medal of freedom for his literary contributions to the Norwegian resistance movement.

After the war, he wrote *The Pearl* (1947), already knowing it would be filmed.[4], and traveled to Mexico for the filming; on this trip he would be inspired by the story of Emiliano Zapata, and wrote a film script (*Viva Zapata!*) that was directed by Elia Kazan and starred Marlon Brando and Anthony Quinn.

In 1948 Steinbeck again toured the Soviet Union, together with renowned photographer Robert Capa. In the same year he was also elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Following his divorce of Gwyndolyn Conger, and the sudden, tragic death of his close friend Ed Ricketts, Steinbeck wrote one of his most popular novels, *East of Eden* (1952). This book, which he wrote to give his sons some idea of their heritage, was the book he repeatedly wrote of as his best and his life's work.

In 1952, Steinbeck appeared as the on-screen narrator of 20th Century Fox's film, *O. Henry's Full House*. Although Steinbeck later admitted he was uncomfortable before the camera, he provided interesting introductions to several filmed adaptations of short stories by the legendary writer O. Henry. About the same time, Steinbeck recorded readings of several of his short stories for Columbia Records; despite some obvious stiffness, the recordings provide a vivid "record" of Steinbeck's deep, resonant voice.

Following the success of *Viva Zapata!*, Steinbeck collaborated with Kazan on the theatrical production of *East of Eden*, James Dean's film debut. Steinbeck did not care for Dean, he claimed that the actor was arrogant, but said that Dean was the perfect person to play Cal Trask.

Steinbeck was a friend to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.

Steinbeck's last novel, *The Winter of Our Discontent*, was written in 1961. In many of his letters to friends, he spoke of how this book was his statement on the moral decay of the US culture. Like many of his works, it was critically savaged; unlike his previous works, it also did not find popularity with the masses.

In 1962, Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize for Literature for his "realistic and imaginative writing, combining as it does sympathetic humor and keen social perception." In his acceptance speech, he said,

"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 believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature." [5]

In 1964, Steinbeck was awarded the United States Medal of Freedom by President Johnson.

In 1967, at the behest of *Newsday* magazine, Steinbeck went to Vietnam to report on the war there. Thinking that the Vietnam War was a heroic venture, he was considered a Hawk for his position on that war. His sons both served in Vietnam prior to his death.

On December 20, 1968 John Steinbeck died in New York. His death is listed as heart disease or heart attack [6]

### **Legacy**

The Salinas, California area, including the Salinas Valley, Monterey, and parts of the nearby San Joaquin Valley, acted as a setting for many of his stories. Because of his feeling for local color, the area is now sometimes called "Steinbeck Country".

The day after Steinbeck's death in New York City, reviewer Charles Poore wrote in the *New York Times*: "John Steinbeck's first great book was his last great book. But Good Lord, what a book that was and is: *The Grapes of Wrath*." Poore noted a "preachiness" in Steinbeck's work, "as if half his literary inheritance came from the best of Mark Twain—and the other half from the worst of Cotton Mather." But he asserted that "Steinbeck didn't need the Nobel Prize—the Nobel judges needed him." Poore concluded: "His place in [U.S.] literature is secure. And it lives on in the works of innumerable writers who learned from him how to present the forgotten man unforgettably."

Steinbeck's works are frequently included on required reading lists in American and Canadian high schools. His works are much less commonly taught at the university level, particularly when compared to the works of contemporaries such as William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Steinbeck's boyhood home in downtown Salinas has been preserved and there is now a Steinbeck center in the same city. The cottage his father owned on Eleventh Street in

Pacific Grove, where Steinbeck wrote some of his earliest books, has also survived.

### Political views

Steinbeck's literary background brought him into close collaboration with leftist authors, journalists, and labor union figures, who may have influenced his writing. Steinbeck was mentored by radical writers Lincoln Steffens and his wife Ella Winter, and through Francis Whitaker, a member of the United States Communist Party's John Reed Club for writers, Steinbeck met with strike organizers from the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union.[7]

Although the FBI never officially investigated him, Steinbeck did come to their attention because of his political beliefs, and he was screened by Army Intelligence during World War II to determine his suitability for an officer's commission. They found him ideologically unqualified. "Do you suppose you could ask Edgar's boys to stop stepping on my heels? They think I am an enemy alien. It is getting tiresome," Steinbeck wrote to Attorney General Francis Biddle, in 1942. [8]

In later years, he would be criticized from the left by those who accused him of insufficient ideological commitment to Socialism. In 1948 a women's socialist group in Rome condemned Steinbeck for converting to "the camp of war and anti-Marxism" [9]and in 1955 an article in the *Daily Worker* criticized Steinbeck's portrayal of the American Left.[10] In 1967, Steinbeck traveled to Vietnam to report on the war, and his sympathetic portrait of the United States Army caused the *New York Post* to denounce him for betraying his liberal past. Steinbeck biographer Jay Parini has suggested that Steinbeck's personal affection for Lyndon Johnson, whom he considered a friend, influenced his view of the situation in Vietnam.

In addition to the above mentioned information, Steinbeck was also a close associate with Arthur Miller, a playwright and author of *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*. In the 1950s, Steinbeck took a personal and professional risk by standing up for his companion, who was held in contempt of Congress, for refusing to name names in the infamous HUAC trials, and Steinbeck called the time one of the "strangest and most frightening times a government and people have ever faced".