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 for Books and Writers
 by *Bamber Gascoigne*

John Steinbeck (1902-1968)

American novelist, story writer, playwright, and essayist. John Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. He is best remembered for *THE GRAPES OF WRATH* (1939), a novel widely considered to be a 20th-century classic. The impact of the book has been compared to that of [Harriet Beecher Stowe](#)'s *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Steinbeck's epic about the migration of the Joad family, driven from its bit of land in Oklahoma to California, provoked a wide debate about the hard lot of migrant laborers, and helped to put an agricultural reform into effect.

"Man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up in the stairs of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments." (from *The Grapes of Wrath*)

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California. His native region of Monterey Bay was later the setting for most of his fiction. "We were poor people with a hell of a lot of land which made us think we were rich people," the author once recalled. Steinbeck's father was a county treasurer. From his mother, a teacher, Steinbeck learned to love books. Among his early favorites were Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

Steinbeck attended the local high school and worked on farms and ranches during his vacations. To finance his education, he held many jobs and sometimes dropped out of college for whole quarters. Between 1920 and 1926, he studied marine biology at Stanford University, but did not take a degree—he always planned to be a writer. Several of his early poems and short stories appeared in university publications. After spending a short time as a laborer on the construction of Madison Square Garden in New York City and reporter for the *American*, Steinbeck returned to California. While writing, Steinbeck took odd jobs. He was apprenticeship-carrier, apprentice painter, caretaker of an estate, surveyor, and fruit-picker. During a period, when he was as a watchman of a house in the High Sierra, Steinbeck wrote his first book, *CUP OF GOLD* (1929). It failed to earn back the \$250 the publisher had given him in an advance.

In Pacific Grove in the early 1930s, Steinbeck met Edward Ricketts. He was a marine biologist, whose views on the interdependence of all life deeply influenced Steinbeck's thinking. *THE SEA OF CORTEZ* (1941) resulted from an expedition in the Gulf of California he made with Ricketts.

PASTURES OF HEAVEN (1932) and *THE LONG VALLEY* (1938)

were short story collections, in which the Salinas valley played similar mythical role as the imaginary Yoknapatawpha County in [Faulkner's](#) works, based largely on his hometown of Oxford, in Lafayette County, Mississippi. In the novel TO A GOD UNKNOWN (1933) Steinbeck mingled Ricketts' ideas with [Jungian](#) concepts and themes, which had been made familiar by the mythologist [Joseph Campbell](#). The novel depicts a farmer, Joseph Wayne, who receives a blessing from his pioneer father, John Wayne, and goes to build himself a new farm in a distant valley. Joseph develops his own beliefs of death and life, and to bring an end to a drought, he sacrifices himself on a stone, becoming "earth and rain". Steinbeck did not want to explain his story too much and he knew beforehand that the book would not find readers.

Steinbeck's first three novels went unnoticed, but his humorous tale of pleasure-loving Mexican-Americans, TORTILLA FLAT (1935), brought him wider recognition. The theme of the book—the story of King Arthur and the forming of the Round Table—remained well hidden from the readers and critics as well. However, Steinbeck's financial situation improved significantly—he had earned \$35 a week for a long time, but now he was paid thousands of dollars for the film rights to *Tortilla Flat*.

IN DUBIOUS BATTLE (1936) was a strike novel set in the California apple country. The strike of nine hundred migratory workers is led by Jim Nolan, devoted to his cause. Before his death Jim confesses: "I never had time to look at things, Mac, never. I never looked how leaves come out. I never looked at the way things happen." One of the characters, Doc Burton, a detached observer, Steinbeck partly derived from his friend Ed Ricketts. Later Steinbeck developed his observer's personality with changes in such works as CANNERY ROW (1945), which returned to the world of *Tortilla Flat*. The novel was an account of the adventures and misadventures of workers in a California cannery and their friends. Its sequel, SWEET THURSDAY, appeared in 1954.

The events of THE RED PONY (1937) take place on the Tiflin ranch in the Salinas Valley, California. The first two sections of the story sequence, "The Gift" and "The Great Mountains", were published in the *North American Review* in 1933, and the third section, "The Promise," did not appear in *Harpers* until 1937. With "The Leader of the People," the four sections are connected by common characters, settings, and themes. Through each story, the reader follows Jody's initiation into adult life, in which the pony of the title functions as a symbol of his innocence and maturation. A movie version, for which Steinbeck wrote the screenplay, was made in 1949. Among Steinbeck's other film scripts is *The Pearl*, the story for Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1944), and the script for Elia Kazan's *Viva Zapata!* (1952), starring Marlon Brando.

OF MICE AND MEN (1937), a story of shattered dreams, became Steinbeck's first big success. Steinbeck adapted it also into a three-act play, which was produced in 1937. George Milton and Lennie Small, two itinerant ranchhands, dream of one day owning a small farm. George acts as a father figure to Lennie, who is large and simpleminded. Lennie loves all that is soft, but his immense physical strength is a source of troubles and George is needed to calm him. The two friends find work from a farm and start saving money for their future. Annoyed by the bullying foreman of the ranch, Lenny breaks the foreman's arm, but also wakes the interest of the ranch owner's flirtatious daughter-in-law. Lenny accidentally kills her and escapes into the hiding place, that he and George have agreed to use, if they get into difficulties. George hurries after Lenny and shoots him before he is captured by a vengeful mob but at the same time he loses his own hopes and dreams of better future. Before he dies, Lennie says: "Let's do it now. Let's get that place now."

For *The Grapes of Wrath*— the title originated from Julia Ward Howe's *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* (1861)—Steinbeck traveled around California migrant camps in 1936. When the book appeared, it was attacked by US Congressman Lyle Boren, who characterized it as "a lie, a black, infernal creation of twisted, distorted mind". Later, when Steinbeck received his Nobel Prize, the Swedish Academy called it simply "an epic chronicle." The Exodus story of Okies on their way to an uncertain future in California, ends with a scene in which Rose of Sharon, who has just delivered a stillborn child, suckles a starving man with her breast. "Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. 'You got to,' she said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. 'There!' she said. 'There.' Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously."

John Ford's film version from 1940, produced by Darryl F. Zanuck, dismissed this ending—the final images optimistically celebrate President Roosevelt's New Deal. "We're the people that live. They can't wipe us out. They can't lick us. We'll go on forever, Pa, 'cause we're the people," says Ma Joad. Steinbeck himself was skeptical of Hollywood's faithfulness to his material. However, after seeing the film he said: "Zanuck has more than kept his word. He has a hard, straight picture in which the actors are submerged so completely that it looks and feels like a documentary film and certainly has a hard, truthful ring." Orson Welles did not like Ford's interpretation because he "made that into a story about mother love."

Fleeing publicity followed by the success of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck went to Mexico in 1940 to film the documentary *Forgotten*

Village. During WW II, Steinbeck served as a war correspondent for the New York *Herald Tribune* in Great Britain and the Mediterranean area. He wrote such government propaganda as the novel *THE MOON IS DOWN* (1942), about resistance movement in a small town occupied by the Nazis. Its film version, starring Henry Travers, Cedric Hardwicke, and Lee J. Cobb, was shot on the set of *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), which depicted a Welsh mining village. "Free men cannot start a war," Steinbeck wrote, "but once it is started, they can fight on in defeat. Herd men, followers of a leader, cannot do that, and so it is always the herd men who win battles and the free men who win wars." Steinbeck had visited Europe in 1937 after gaining success with *Of Mice and Men*, and met on a Swedish ship two Norwegians, with whom he had celebrated Norway's independence day. In 1943 Steinbeck moved to New York City, his home for the rest of his life. His summers the author spent at Sag Harbor. He also travelled much in Europe.

Steinbeck's twelve-year marriage to Carol Henning had ended in 1942. Next year he married the singer Gwyndolyn Conger; they had two sons, Thom and John. However, the marriage was unhappy and they were divorced in 1949. Steinbeck's postwar works include *THE PEARL* (1947), a symbolic tale of a Mexican Indian pearl diver Kino. He finds a valuable pearl which changes his life, but not in the way he did expect. Kino sees the pearl as his opportunity to better life. When the townsfolk of La Paz learn of Kino's treasury, he is soon surrounded by a greedy priest, doctor, and businessmen. Kino's family suffers series of disasters and finally he throws the pearl back into ocean. Thereafter his tragedy is legendary in the town. Thematically [Hemingway's](#) novella *The Old Man and the Sea* from 1952 has much similarities with this work.

A RUSSIAN JOURNAL (1948) was an account of the author's journey to the Soviet Union with the photographer Robert Capa. Steinbeck's idea was to describe the country without prejudices, but he could not move freely, he could not speak Russian, and the Soviet hosts, perhaps by the order of Stalin himself, took care that there were more than enough vodka, champagne, caviar, chickens, honey, tomatoes, kebabs, and watermelons on their guest's table.

The director Elia Kazan met Steinbeck when the author had separated from Gwyn and was drinking heavily. "I don't think John Steinbeck should have been living in New York, I don't think he should have been writing plays," Kazan wrote in his autobiography *A Life* (1988). "He was a prose writer, at home in the west, with land, with horses, or on a boat; in this big city, he was a dupe." Their most famous film project, *East of Eden*, covered the last part of the book. James Dean made his debut in the film. Kazan originally wanted Marlon Brando to play the

role of Cal. He sent Dean to see Steinbeck, who considered him a snotty kid, but said he was Cal "sure as hell". Dean received an Academy Award nomination for Best Actor, but Lee Rogow in the *Saturday Review* was not satisfied (March 19, 1955); "Kazan has apparently attempted to graft a Brando-type personality and set of mannerisms upon Dean, and the result is less than successful... this artful construction of a performance is not, to get Stanislavskian about it, building a character."

In 1950 Steinbeck married Elaine Scott, the ex-wife Randolph Scott, a Western star. Steinbeck's son John had problems in later years with drugs and alcohol; he died in 1991.

EAST OF EDEN (1952), the title referring to the fallen world, is long family novel, is set in rural California in the years around the turn of the century. In the center of the saga, based partly on the story of Cain and Abel, is two families of settlers, the Trasks and the Hamiltons, whose history reflect the formation of the United States, when "the Church and the whorehouse arrived in the Far West simultaneously..." The second half of the story focus on the lives of the twins, Aron and Caleb, and their conflict. Between them is Cathy, tiny, pretty, but an adulteress and murderess. "It doesn't matter that Cathy was what I have called a monster. Perhaps we can't understand Cathy, but on the other hand we are capable of many things in all directions, of great virtues and great sins. And who in his mind has not probed the black water?"

Steinbeck wrote thousands of letters, sometimes several a day. To Pascal Covici, his friend, he confessed that he wanted to write the work to his sons, the story of good and evil, love and hate, to demonstrate to them how they are inseparable. His writing process Steinbeck recorded minutely in JOURNAL OF A NOVEL (1969). "But tell me," he wrote to Covici, "have you ever been this closely associated with a book before? While it was being written."

In 1959 Steinbeck spent nearly a year at Discove Cottage in England, working with *Morte d'Arthur*, the first book he had read as a child. After returning to the United States, he travelled around his country with his poodle, Charley, and published in 1962 TRAVELS WITH CHARLEY IN SEARCH OF AMERICA. His son John wrote in his memoir that Steinbeck was too shy to talk to any of the people in the book. "He couldn't handle that amount of interaction. So, the book is actually a great novel."

THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT (1961), set in contemporary America, was Steinbeck's last major novel. The book was not well received, and critics considered him an exhausted. Not even the Nobel Prize changed opinions. *The New York Times* asked in an editoria, whether the prize committee might not have made a better choice.

Steinbeck took this public humiliation hard. In later years he did much special reporting abroad, dividing his time between New York and California.

For a while, Steinbeck served as an advisor to President Lyndon B. Johnson, whose Vietnam policies he agreed with. At Camp the President asked Steinbeck to go to Vietnam to report on the war. Steinbeck wrote for the newspaper *Newsday* a series of articles, which divided his readers. The *New York Post* attacked him for betraying his liberal past.

John Steinbeck died of heart attack in New York on December 20, 1968. In the posthumously published *THE ACTS OF KING ARTHUR AND HIS NOBLE KNIGHTS* (1976), Steinbeck turned his back on contemporary subjects and brought to life the Arthurian world with its ancient codes of honour. Steinbeck had started the work with enthusiasm but never finished it.

For further reading: *The Wide World of John Steinbeck* by P. Lisca (1958); *John Steinbeck* by W. French (1961); *John Steinbeck* by F.W. Watt (1962); *Steinbeck: The Man and His Work*, ed. by R. Astro and T. Hayashi (1971); *John Steinbeck* by J. Gray (1971); *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* by John Steinbeck, Elaine Steinbeck, Robert Wallsten (1975); *Steinbeck and Covici: The Story of a Friendship* by T. Fensch (1979); *John Steinbeck* by P. McCarthy (1980); *John Steinbeck's Fiction* by John H. Timmerman (1986); *Conversations With John Steinbeck*, ed. by Thomas Fensch (1988); *John Steinbeck* by Jay Parini (1994) *John Steinbeck: A Centennial Tribute* ed. by Stephen K. George (2002)

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- SAINT KATY THE VIRGIN, 1936
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 - THEIR BLOOD IS STRONG, 1938
 - THE LONG WALLEY, 1938 - Pitkä laakso: novelleja (suom. Tuomas Anhava et al.)
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 - A LETTER TO THE FRIENDS OF DEMOCRACY, 1940
 - THE SEA OF CORTEZ, 1941 (with Edward F. Ricketts, who was model for Doc in Cannery Row and Sweet Thursday)
 - THE FORGOTTEN VILLAGE, 1941 - film: 1941, dir. by Herbert Kline, Alexander Hammid, narrated by Burgess Meredith
 - BOMBS AWAY!, 1942
 - THE MOON IS DOWN, 1942 (also play) - film: 1943, dir. by Irving Pichel, starring Henry Travers, Cedric Hardwicke, Lee J. Cobb
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 - CANNERY ROW, 1945 - Hyvien ihmisten juhla (trans. by Jouko Linturi) - film: 1982, dir. by David S. Ward, starring Nick Nolte and Debra Winger
 - THE WAYWARD BUS, 1947 - Oikutteleva bussi (trans. into Finnish by [Alex Matson](#)) - film: 1957, dir. by Victor Vicas, starring Joan Collins, Jayne Mansfield, Dan Dailey, Rick Jason
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- THE CRAPSHOOTER, 1957
- ONCE THERE WAS A WAR, 1958
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