



## JOHN STEINBECK

**Born:** John Ernst Steinbeck, February 27, 1902 (Salinas, California, USA); died December 20, 1968 (Sag Harbor, New York, USA).

**Style and genre:** Naturalistic novels often about agricultural laborers; the Great Depression; symbolic structures; themes from myth and the *Old Testament*.

One of the great American writers and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Steinbeck's social novels perfectly captured the hardships endured by workers during the Great Depression. He studied at Stanford University but left for New York before graduating, trying to establish himself as a freelance writer. He returned to California, writing short stories and working as a manual laborer, witnessing firsthand those people who would later become the subject of his most successful works. Such experiences lent authenticity to Steinbeck's documentary intensity and depiction of agricultural laborers who would later brave starvation and unemployment.

In 1929 he had his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, published, but it was not until the release of *Tortilla Flat* in 1935 that Steinbeck received critical and commercial success. The novel dealt sympathetically with illegal Mexican immigrants in California with an earthy humor interwoven with the story of the knights of King Arthur from British myth. The mood in the trio of works that followed became markedly darker. *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck tackled the



ABOVE: John Steinbeck photographed in the 1960s, toward the end of his life.

RIGHT: Dock along Cannery Row, Monterey; Steinbeck used real places in his 1945 novel.



issues of displaced workers searching in vain for a slice of the American Dream while battling the unjust working conditions they were subjected to. *The Grapes of Wrath*, arguably Steinbeck's greatest literary feat, tells the story of Oklahoma tenant farmers unable to make a living in the dust bowl, who are forced to migrate to California and their subsequent exploitation at the hands of the plantation owners and harassment from the police. The aggressive mixture of proletarian characters and political radicalism caused uproar upon its release as Conservative observers criticized the Socialist theorizing and anti-capitalist messages that emanated from the novel. Despite the banning of the book in several parts of the country it became a bestseller and a celebrated Hollywood film.

Steinbeck withdrew from writing to explore his fascination with marine life before serving as a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune* in the Second World War. His postwar works became less harsh in their social criticism, but in *East of Eden* he delivered a novel of staggering ambition that draws many parallels with the biblical story of Cain and Abel. His books continue to be key texts in American schools. **SG**

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ABOVE LEFT: The cast of the acclaimed movie *The Grapes of Wrath*.

ABOVE: Original dust jacket for the bestselling novel *Of Mice and Men*.

### Steinbeck on Screen

Steinbeck's work received numerous Hollywood treatments:

- *The Grapes of Wrath*—Directed by the legendary John Ford, for which he won an Academy Award for Directing, and starring a young Henry Fonda, John Carradine, and Jane Darwell, who won Best Supporting Actress.
- *Of Mice and Men*—The 1939 adaptation starring Lon Chaney Jr. and Burgess Meredith received four Oscar nominations.
- *East of Eden*—Directed by Elia Kazan and forever immortalized as one of the few screen appearances by James Dean.
- *O. Henry's Full House*—Five separate screenplays all narrated by Steinbeck who made a rare appearance in front of the camera to introduce each film.