



[The Grapes of Wrath](#), by John Steinbeck

In A Nutshell

The Grapes of Wrath is one of the most beloved novels of American literature. Having earned the Pulitzer Prize in 1940, *The Grapes of Wrath* pretty much has a V.I.P. pass to every "Top 100 Books of All Time" list in the universe. It's a big deal. Written by John Steinbeck and published in 1939, this story vividly portrays life during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl in America as it follows a family of Oklahoma tenant farmers traveling westward. It explores the strength and goodness of the human spirit in the face of gruesome, dismal circumstances.

When first published, Americans both embraced and scorned the novel. Some applauded Steinbeck for capturing so honestly the lives of migrant farm workers during the Depression. Others accused him of being a socialist and of championing communist beliefs (i.e., share the wealth, friends). Californian farmers loathed Steinbeck's unsavory depiction of, well, Californian farmers. In short, this novel sent America into a bit of a frenzy. Eleanor Roosevelt took note, and, as a result, she called for congressional hearings on migrant worker camp conditions. Labor laws were changed (source).

The Grapes of Wrath has been banned, burned, and bought over and over again. And that's why we love it. That's why it's still around. The novel has been translated into nearly every language, and approximately 100,000 copies continue to be sold every year (source).

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John Steinbeck is a seriously famous Californian writer. His novels and stories often detail the lives of agricultural communities in central California, particularly in the Salinas Valley (where he grew up). At the time of the Dust Bowl, when tens of thousands of Americans migrated to California in search of a better life, Steinbeck was writing a series of seven articles about migrant worker communities for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. He spent a lot of time getting to know families who lived in various migrant worker camps in towns like Bakersfield, CA and Visalia, CA. He was infuriated and disgusted by the amount of heartbreak and suffering that he witnessed, and he channeled that fury as he wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*. It was not easy going, and he had to scrap many drafts of the novel, but he finally gained momentum after visiting a camp in Bakersfield, CA. He gave himself 100 days to finish the novel.

Steinbeck's publishers lauded *The Grapes of Wrath* as one of the, if not the, greatest work of American Literature. *Time* magazine disagreed in its 1939 review of the novel, saying, "It is not [the greatest work of American literature]. But 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" (source).

Both loathed and loved upon its publication, *The Grapes of Wrath* has firmly lodged itself within American culture, and references to the novel continue to be made in movies, music, art, and TV. Allusions to this epic tale have surfaced in both *South Park* and *The Simpsons*. Many songs have been written and sung about Tom Joad, most notably by Woody Guthrie and Bruce Springsteen. The Joads are a fictional family, and yet they (and what they represent) are part of the American story.

If anything, we should read *The Grapes of Wrath* because it affords us front row seats to one of the darkest chapters in American history. Author T.C. Boyle sums it up beautifully: "You

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can read (about the lives of migrant workers) in your textbook ...but if you read it in Steinbeck's version, you get to live it and breathe it" (source).

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 If you had been in the Joads' shoes, would you have left your home and gone to California?
- 2 Let's say you have to load up your car and move two thousand miles away, never to see your current home again. What items would you bring with you, and why?
- 3 Why does Mae the waitress sell the customer two pieces of candy for a penny?

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