

Biography of John Steinbeck

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John Ernst Steinbeck was born in 1902 in Salinas, California, of German and Irish parentage. His father was of German origin and was variously a bookkeeper, accountant, and manager, and he eventually became the treasurer of Monterey County. The elder Steinbeck was an avid gardener (throughout his life, his son would always have to have a garden wherever he lived) and a somewhat introspective man. Steinbeck's mother was of Irish descent, a woman of energy and determination, emotional and sensitive to art, and fond of stories of fantasy and enchantment. The later dichotomies observed in Steinbeck, between the romantic and the hardheaded naturalist, between the dreamer and the masculine tough guy, may be partly accounted for by inheritance from the Irish and German strains of his parents.

The young Steinbeck had a local reputation as a loner and a bit of a dreamer. He read much on his own, his favorite writings being those of Robert Louis Stevenson, Alexandre Dumas, père, Sir Walter Scott, the Bible, and especially *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), by Sir Thomas Malory. This last would remain an influence throughout his life, with many of his stories displaying Arthurian parallels and influences; the work which occupied much of his time in the last years of his life was a translation or redaction of the Arthurian stories, unfinished at his death.

Steinbeck grew to be a tall, gangly youth with broad shoulders, a barrel chest, and a large head. He early developed a fondness for words and a passion for language that was never to leave him. He was independent-minded, not to say stubborn, and as a freshman in high school determined to be a writer. He was graduated from high school in 1919, at best an average student and athlete. For the next six years, he attended Stanford University on and off but never took a degree. As in high school, he took what interested him and cared little for other courses, even if required; the courses he took were those he thought would help him in his writing.

During his many vacations from Stanford Steinbeck worked for the local sugar company in the field and in the office; he also worked on ranches, on a dredging crew, and in the beet harvest. He came to know well the Mexican-American workers alongside whom he labored. He rather enjoyed working with his hands and was certainly throughout his life never afraid of hard work; he also became a notable handyman and maker of gadgets. After leaving Stanford for good in 1925, he worked sporadically during the next three years at a lodge in the High Sierra near Lake Tahoe as a caretaker and handyman. The job gave him much time, especially in the winter, for writing. Steinbeck briefly sought his fortune in New York, where he worked on construction and as a cub reporter. He returned to California in the summer of 1926.

Since his early years in high school, Steinbeck had been writing. His first published stories were in a Stanford literary magazine; his first paid story, "The Gifts of Iban," was published pseudonymously in 1927. By 1930, his apprenticeship could be said to be over: In that year, his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, was published, he married Carol Henning, and he met Edward F. Ricketts, who was to have a notable effect upon the ideas and content of his further work.

Cup of Gold was not widely noticed, and Steinbeck and his new wife, while not subjected to grinding poverty, did live a rather hand-to-mouth existence. The publication of *Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933) increased his critical reputation in narrow circles but did little for his finances or fame. Finally, the publication of *Tortilla Flat* (1935) made the breakthrough; the book was a best seller and brought Steinbeck fame and money. Though Steinbeck complained about lack of money for the rest of his career, after this date he was never in any financial distress. This book was the first full-length presentation of those themes and characters that have come to be particularly associated with Steinbeck. He turned away from the mythic and legendary materials of *Cup of Gold* and *To a God Unknown* and dealt with contemporary issues, especially the plight of the socially and economically dispossessed. Like the great majority of Steinbeck's

works, *Tortilla Flat* presents familiar, ordinary characters based on his own firsthand acquaintance. His next major works, *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), would continue to exploit these characters and themes.

These works also displayed some of the effects of Steinbeck's friendship with Ed Ricketts (1897-1948), a marine biologist. Steinbeck had earlier been interested, if only haphazardly, in natural science. His naturalistic view of men, especially in groups, was at least reinforced by his friendship with Ricketts. Ricketts was an exponent of non-teleological thinking (seeing what *is* rather than what might be, should be, or could be). This attitude accorded well with Steinbeck's own naturalistic impulses, at least as fictional method; Steinbeck did not always accept the grim conclusions implicit in a naturalistic view of man and maintained his belief in human progress and free will. The most straightforward presentation of such views may be found in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951), by both Steinbeck and Ricketts. The book provides the philosophical and organizational background for a tidepool collecting and survey trip taken by Ricketts and Steinbeck in 1940 in the Gulf of California.

During World War II, Steinbeck produced only a few minor works until *Cannery Row* (1945). He served for a few months as a war correspondent in Europe, was divorced in 1942, and married Gwyndolyn Conger in 1943. He moved to New York and for the remainder of his life traveled frequently with New York as a base. During these years he also spent much of his time writing film scripts and stage plays based on his works. As much as any other American novelist, Steinbeck was attracted to and involved in the stage and the cinema.

After the war, he began the major work that critics and the public were expecting after *The Grapes of Wrath*. The work was eventually to be *East of Eden* (1952), a long generational novel into which Steinbeck poured much of his own personal experience and which he regarded as his major work and expression of whatever he had learned over the years. The public did not share Steinbeck's regard, and the novel is per-

haps best known today in its film version, starring the cult figure James Dean. Before *East of Eden* appeared, however, Steinbeck had published *The Wayward Bus* (1947), which was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, and *Burning Bright* (1950). After *East of Eden*, Steinbeck published only three more novels: *Sweet Thursday* (1954), *The Short Reign of Pippin IV: A Fabrication* (1957), and *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961). The latter is considered to be the best of the three and expresses Steinbeck's view of the malaise into which postwar America had fallen.

Steinbeck had divorced his second wife in 1948 and was remarried, in 1950, to Elaine Scott. In the postwar years he traveled often, seeming unable to settle down in a single place. He went several times to Russia, Europe, and especially England, but when abroad he would frequently long for home. After *East of Eden*, Steinbeck became preoccupied with nonfiction work. He wrote regular editorials for the *Saturday Review*, his wartime dispatches were published (1958), he published *Travels with Charley* (1962, a record of a three-month trip by truck around America with his dog), and he completed the essays that compose *America and Americans* (1966), designed to accompany a series of photographs showing the spirit and diversity of America and its people. In 1967, Steinbeck, who had done some speechwriting for President Lyndon B. Johnson, went to Vietnam at the request of the president and recorded his views and impressions in a series of newspaper reports. His long career as a writer was capped in 1962 with the award of the Nobel Prize in Literature. He died of coronary disease in New York in December, 1968, and his ashes were later scattered with the wind on the California coast.

In the course of his career, Steinbeck was held to be a sentimental romantic and a grim naturalist, a Communist and a Fascist, a mere journalist and the spokesman of a generation. It is a tribute to the man that his work has inspired such varying views; clearly, he has made a mark on American consciousness. Steinbeck was the writer (he disliked the word "author") of at least one major masterpiece—*The*

Grapes of Wrath—and several excellent works of lesser scope: *Tortilla Flat*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Red Pony*, *In Dubious Battle*, and *Cannery Row*. All, except perhaps the last, are standard readings in high school and college English courses, as well as the subject of a large and growing body of critical analysis and opinion.

His particular contribution to the American ethos was to make uniquely his own the portraits of migrant workers, the dispossessed, dirt farmers, and manual laborers. He provided authentic portraits of a class of people seldom seen in fiction before his day. His pictures of stoop laborers, strikes, and the Depression are today the standard images by which those things are known and imagined. *The Grapes of Wrath* has become not only an artistic creation but also an authentic view of many of the plagues of the 1930's. For most people, *The Grapes of Wrath* is what the Depression was, at least in the western United States.

Perhaps the greatest general qualities of Steinbeck's work, qualities which help his works continue to interest, are life and immediacy. Steinbeck was enamored of life and gloried in it. He re-created it vividly in many of his works, with color and accuracy. He took great pains to research most of his works and believed he was thus attaining to some sort of truth, as well as reality. His generally nonteleological view of life led him to concentrate on the moment, on what *is*. At his best, mostly in works before World War II, he re-created authentic American types and characters and placed them in contexts which partook of the great myths and patterns of life and literature: the Bible, the Arthurian myths, the eternal cycles of nature. He had a strong faith in the natural processes of renewal and continuity and thus expanded his tales of the small and the insignificant to give them resonance and universality.

His accuracy and realism can perhaps best be seen in his care for the dialogue of his novels, even to the extent, in his later works, of reading into a tape recorder his own dialogue and playing it back for himself until he felt he had got it right, testing it constantly on the ear. It was

probably this attention to authentic speech which made so many of his novels good candidates for stage and screen. None of his novels made bad films and some were outstanding, notably *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*. With only a few exceptions, his characters and events were equally genuine, dealing as they did with specifically American and specifically contemporary events.

Finally, Steinbeck was a patriot, but not of the flag-waving, jingoist persuasion. He displayed a deep feeling for the American people and the land both early and late in his career. He saw the values—perhaps felt them would be more correct—of family and social cohesion. He saw man as a part of a whole, often against a background of the disintegration of larger social and economic units and systems. At roughly the same time as Sinclair Lewis was skewering the middle class of America, Steinbeck was giving his public an equally authentic view of a very different class of Americans, though with less satire and more affection.

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