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John Steinbeck was an American novelist whose Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, portrayed the plight of migrant workers during the Great Depression.

Synopsis

Born on February 27, 1902, in Salinas, California, John Steinbeck dropped out of college and worked as a manual laborer before achieving success as a writer. His 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, about the migration of a family from the Oklahoma Dust Bowl to California, won a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award. Steinbeck served as a war correspondent during World War II, and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. He died in New York City in 1968.



Early Years

Famed novelist John Ernst Steinbeck Jr. was born on February 27, 1902, in Salinas, California. His books, including his landmark work *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), often dealt with social and economic issues. Steinbeck was raised with modest means. His father, John Ernst Steinbeck, tried his hand at several different jobs to keep his family fed: He owned a feed-and-grain store, managed a flour plant and served as treasurer of Monterey County. His mother, Olive Hamilton Steinbeck, was a former schoolteacher.

For the most part, Steinbeck—who grew up with three sisters—had a happy childhood. He was shy, but smart, and formed an early appreciation for the land, and in particular California's Salinas Valley, which would greatly inform his later writing. According to accounts, Steinbeck decided to become a writer at the age of 14, often locking himself in his bedroom to write poems and stories. In 1919, Steinbeck enrolled at Stanford University—a decision that had more to do with pleasing his parents than anything else—but the budding writer would prove to have little use for college.

Over the next six years, Steinbeck drifted in and out of school, eventually dropping out for good in 1925, without a degree.

Early Career

Following Stanford, Steinbeck tried to make a go of it as a freelance writer. He briefly moved to New York City, where he found work as a construction worker and a newspaper reporter, but then scurried back to California, where he took a job as a caretaker in Lake Tahoe. It was during this time that Steinbeck wrote his first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929), and met and married his first wife, Carol Henning. Over the following decade, with Carol's support and paycheck, he continued to pour himself into his writing.

Steinbeck's follow-up novels, *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933), received tepid reviews. It wasn't until *Tortilla Flat* (1935), a humorous novel about paisano life in the Monterey region, was released that the writer achieved real success. Steinbeck struck a more serious tone with *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Long Valley* (1938), a collection of short stories.

Widely considered Steinbeck's finest and most ambitious novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* was published in 1939. Telling the story of a dispossessed Oklahoma family and their struggle to carve out a new life in California at the height of the Great Depression, the book captured the mood and angst of the nation during this time period. At the height of its popularity, *The Grapes of Wrath* sold 10,000 copies per week. The work eventually earned Steinbeck a Pulitzer Prize in 1940.

Later Life

Following that great success, John Steinbeck served as a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune* during World War II. Around this same time, he traveled to Mexico to collect marine life with friend Edward F. Ricketts, a marine biologist. Their collaboration resulted in the book *Sea of Cortez* (1941), which describes marine life in the Gulf of California.

Steinbeck continued to write in his later years, with credits including *Cannery Row* (1945), *Burning Bright* (1950), *East of Eden* (1952), *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961) and *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (1962). Also in 1962, the author received the Nobel Prize for Literature—"for his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humour and keen social perception"

Steinbeck died of heart disease on December 20, 1968, at his home in New York City.