About the Author

When John Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1962, only five Americans, among them Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, had won it before him. His themes of social injustice, the pursuit of the American dream, and the dignity of the workers of rural America touched the hearts of his readers.

Born in Salinas, California, on February 27, 1902, John Ernst Steinbeck grew up amid the vineyards, orchards, ranches, fishing villages, and canneries of coastal California. His parents were both public servants; Steinbeck’s father served for many years as treasurer of Monterey County; his mother was a public school teacher.

During summer vacations in high school, Steinbeck worked on local ranches. He entered Stanford University in 1919 to study marine biology, attending classes intermittently before leaving without a degree in 1925. When he was not in school, Steinbeck worked at a variety of jobs, including one on a ranch. These experiences later helped him to write realistically about American workers such as the ranch workers in Of Mice and Men. Steinbeck’s first published stories appeared in the Stanford Spectator in 1924.

In 1925 Steinbeck went to New York City, hoping to start a career as a writer. While in New York, he earned a living as a reporter and construction worker. After less than a year he returned to California, having failed to publish any work. For the next three years, Steinbeck continued to take on various jobs, including caretaker at a Lake Tahoe estate, deck hand on a ship, and worker at a fish hatchery.

In 1930 Steinbeck married Carol Henning and moved to Pacific Grove. There they lived in a house given them by his father, who also gave Steinbeck twenty-five dollars a month so that he could devote himself to writing. In Pacific Grove Steinbeck met Edward Ricketts, a marine biologist who became his close friend and later his collaborator on Sea of Cortez (1941), a book about sea life in the Gulf of California. Ricketts also was the model for a hero in several later Steinbeck novels, notably Cannery Row.

Steinbeck’s first novel, a romantic story about a pirate entitled Cup of Gold, received little attention when it appeared in 1929. Returning to subjects closer to home in 1931, he published The Pastures of Heaven, a collection of stories that portrayed the people in a farming community: To a God Unknown, about a California farmer who sacrifices himself on a primitive altar to end a drought, appeared in 1933.

Nevertheless, Steinbeck was not widely read until the publication of Tortilla Flat in 1935. Tortilla Flat, a richly drawn and humorous picture of life among the unemployed drifters in and around Monterey, won Steinbeck an award, a Hollywood contract, and fame.

With In Dubious Battle (1936) the tone of Steinbeck’s work changed as he turned to issues of social injustice and poverty. This novel, about a strike among migrant workers in the California fruit orchards, was a critical success.

Of Mice and Men (1937), Steinbeck’s poignant story about two itinerant ranch workers who dream about finding a home and farm of their own, was an immediate national success. Following its publication, Steinbeck went to Europe for the first time, traveling through England, Ireland, Sweden, and Russia. On his return to the United States in mid-1937, Steinbeck worked on a stage version of Of Mice and Men with the playwright George S. Kaufman. The play, which opened on Broadway in November 1937, received the Drama Critics’ Circle Award “for its direct force and perception in handling a theme genuinely rooted in American life....” Of Mice and Men was also made into a touching film.
In the next year Steinbeck published *The Long Valley*, a collection of thirteen stories that included the novella *The Red Pony*. This was followed in 1939 by his masterpiece, *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel about a family of migrant farmers who flee the sterile Dust Bowl of Oklahoma to try to find work in the fertile fields of California. This powerful portrayal of the grim worlds of the impoverished and rootless migrant workers of the 1930s received a Pulitzer Prize. It also was made into a popular movie.

In 1941, shortly after the publication of *Sea of Cortez*, America entered World War II. Steinbeck immediately became involved in the war effort. *Bombs Away*, a nonfiction work about the men and equipment of the American Air Force, appeared in 1942. In the same year he published *The Moon Is Down*, a novel about resistance to the German occupation of Norway. Steinbeck's articles as a special war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune* from June to December 1943 were published as a collection in *Once There Was a War* (1958).

Divorced in 1942, Steinbeck married the dancer Gwen Verdon in 1943, with whom he had two sons. In 1944 he published *Cannery Row*, a generally lighthearted novel about the workers in a cannery in Monterey, California, and their relationship with a sympathetic biologist modeled after his friend Edward Ricketts.

Other major works of fiction written by Steinbeck in the 1940s include *The Pearl* (1947), a story about a fisherman who finds a huge pearl that brings evil to his family, and *The Wayward Bus* (1947), a novel about a group of bus passengers stranded in the middle of nowhere in California.

In 1952 Steinbeck published perhaps his greatest popular success since *The Grapes of Wrath*, the novel *East of Eden*. Set mainly in Salinas, California, it is the saga of a family from the period of the Civil War to World War I.

In 1960, now married to Elaine Scott, Steinbeck took a three-month tour of rural America with his dog, Charley. This odyssey resulted in *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962), one of Steinbeck's most widely read books. Steinbeck also received the Nobel Prize for literature that year. Two years later President Johnson awarded him the United States Medal of Freedom. Steinbeck died in New York City on December 20, 1968.

### About the Work

The title of Steinbeck's moving novel comes from an eighteenth-century pastoral poem by Robert Burns called "To a Mouse on Turning Her Up In Her Nest with the Plow, November, 1785." Burns mourns the senseless destruction of this innocent creature, saying "The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft agley" (go often astray). Similarly, circumstances beyond George and Lennie's control wreck their dream of a home of their own and end their friendship with violence. They are defeated by "something that happened," which was Steinbeck's original title for the novel.

Although the novel's setting grew out of Steinbeck's experiences while he worked on a California ranch in the early 1920s, the mood of *Of Mice and Men* reflects the Depression-era despair of the 1930s, when the novel was written. It is at once the symbolic tragedy of rootless, impoverished people who yearn for an economic and social stability they lack, and a realistic portrayal of the daily struggle for survival of American rural workers in the bleak years of the 1930s. From this faceless mass of hardworking, struggling people, Steinbeck created two characters, Lennie and George, whose devotion to each other and to their dream of independence and security raises the novel from mere social criticism to poignant and compelling literature.

Stylistically, Steinbeck conceived of *Of Mice and Men* as a "play-novelle," a play "in the physical technique of the novel." Steinbeck actually intended to produce the novel as a play after its publication. He limits the action to a single
sequence of time, Thursday to Sunday, and to a limited locale to intensify the reader's or viewer's emotional experience. Also, much of the action is portrayed through dialogue.

A great popular success, *Of Mice and Men* was a Book-of-the-Month Club choice and an immediate best sellers after its publication in February 1937. The play, which opened on Broadway in November 1937, received the prestigious Drama Critics' Circle Award. The film version of *Of Mice and Men*, directed by Lewis Milestone, was nominated for an Academy Award for best picture in 1939.

**Cultural Context of the Work**

Like all great novels, *Of Mice and Men* is both steeped in its time and a novel for all time. The following details about the 1930s provide useful background.

- Reckless spending and unbridled financial speculation in the post-World War I decade of the 1920s led to the collapse of the stock market in 1929. The decade following the crash was an era of severe economic depression across the United States.
- By 1932 thirteen million American workers were unemployed (one out of four workers); banks had failed; mortgages were foreclosed; factories shut down; and the prices of wheat, cotton, copper, oil, and other commodities sank. One-fourth of the nation's farmers had lost their farms. Years of drought compounded the disaster. The nation was paralyzed, and intense poverty was widespread.
- Under President Roosevelt's New Deal policies, numerous government agencies were established, and laws were passed to revive the economy, develop natural resources, and give work to the many unemployed. Programs were established to work out codes of fair practices between workers and employers, and the development of union organization was encouraged.
- The fact that the poor and unemployed who suffered the greatest hardships during this difficult time led to an increased awareness of class differences and social inequities. Even while President Roosevelt's New Deal policies were going forward, some politicians called for more radical methods to redress social and economic inequities. For example, Huey P. Long, the popular governor of Louisiana, proposed that the government tax great fortunes out of existence in order to redistribute the resulting funds to the poor.
- Artists and writers of the 1930s began producing art that focused on the experiences of the worker and on social injustice. In this art, often called "proletarian art" at the time, they examined the American dream in relation to those to whom it seemed most inaccessible—the rural laborer who worked for a boss.
- To be better able to describe the lives of the struggling rural workers from firsthand observation, a number of artists and writers traveled to isolated areas across the United States to live and work with the migrant workers, ranch hands, fishermen, factory workers, and miners. Out of this concern came many powerful works of social protest, including Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*.

**Critical Overview**

The 1930s. Although the novel was an immediate bestseller, critical response to *Of Mice and Men* was mixed. Many critics seemed confused about how to deal with some of the moral issues raised by the story. Some felt uncomfortable with Lennie, one critic complaining that the novel was a "glorification of idiocy." Other critics dismissed the work as sentimental. But Burton Rascoe argued that Steinbeck had succeeded in the difficult task of humanizing a character alien to
the reader and showing how Lennie and George's hopes and dreams raise them and other characters above the dull round of daily life.

**The 1940s and 1950s.** Critics praised Steinbeck as a "proletarian" and "naturalistic" writer. Steinbeck's reputation, however, suffered a decline following Edmund Wilson's influential view that Steinbeck writes about "human beings so rudimentary that they are almost on the animal level" and that the work dealt with moral issues on a "primitive" level only. Frederic Carpenter, in contrast, saw Steinbeck as the heir of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and William James, in the sense that he wrote about the loss of the American dream to the lust for possession. Steinbeck's reputation continued to fluctuate through most of the 1950s.

**Since the 1960s.** In recent years Steinbeck's reputation has risen significantly. Critics now praise his powerful yet sensitive treatment of such universal themes as loneliness, social injustice, and the pursuit of the American dream. *The Steinbeck Quarterly* publishes articles that also deal with such subjects as Steinbeck's regionalism and his use of idiom. The periodical also deals with specific issues, such as the relationship between the forms of the novel and play in *Of Mice and Men.*