

John Steinbeck Biography

(1902–1968)



John Steinbeck was an American novelist who is known for works such as the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *'The Grapes of Wrath,'* as well as *'Of Mice and Men'* and *'East of Eden.'*

Who Was John Steinbeck?

John Steinbeck was a Nobel and Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist and the author of *Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden*. Steinbeck dropped out of college and worked as a manual laborer before achieving success as a writer. His works often dealt with social and economic issues. 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 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962.

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

John Ernst Steinbeck Jr. was born on February 27, 1902, in Salinas, California. 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. He 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.

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 returned to California, where he took a job as a caretaker in Lake Tahoe and began his writing career.

JOHN STEINBECK'S BOOKS

Steinbeck wrote 31 books over the course of his career. His most well-known novels include *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and *East of Eden* (1952).

'Of Mice and Men' (1937)

Two poor migrant workers, George and Lennie, are working for the American dream in California during the Great Depression. Lennie, who has a mild mental disability, is steadfastly faithful to his friend George, but he has a habit of getting into trouble. Their goal: to own an acre of land and a shack. After they both secure jobs working the fields of the Salinas Valley — Steinbeck's own hometown — their dream seems more attainable than ever. However, Lennie's inclinations eventually get him into trouble again, spiraling to a tragic conclusion for both men. The book was later transformed into a Broadway play and three movies.

'The Grapes of Wrath' (1939)

Widely considered Steinbeck's finest and most ambitious novel, this book tells 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 Pearl' (1947)

This story, based on a Mexican folktale, explores human nature and the potential of love. Kino, a poor diver who gathers pearls from the ocean floor, lives with his wife Juana and their infant son Coyotito by the sea. On the same day Coyotito is stung by a scorpion and is turned away by the town doctor because they can't afford care, Kino finds the largest pearl he's ever seen on one of his dives. The pearl, which brings the potential of great fortune, ignites the neighbors' jealousy, eventually becoming a dangerous agent of evil.

'East of Eden' (1952)

Once again set in Steinbeck's hometown of Salinas, California, this story follows the intersecting stories of two farming families, the Trasks and the Hamiltons, from the Civil War to World War I, as their lives reenact the fall of Adam and Eve and the rivalry of Cain and Abel. The book was later adapted into a 1955 film directed by Elia Kazan and starring James Dean in his first major movie role. Dean was later nominated for an Academy Award for his performance, which he received posthumously.

Some of Steinbeck's other works include *Cup of Gold* (1929), *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933), all of which 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) and *The Long Valley* (1938), a collection of short stories. He continued to write in his later years, with credits including *Cannery Row* (1945), *Burning Bright* (1950), *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961) and *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (1962).

AWARDS

In 1940, Steinbeck earned a Pulitzer Prize for *The Grapes of Wrath*. 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." Upon receiving the award, Steinbeck said the writer's duty was "dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams for the purpose of improvement."

LATER LIFE

During World War II, Steinbeck served as a war correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*.

Around this same time, he travelled 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.

WIVES AND CHILDREN

Steinbeck was married three times and had two sons. In 1930, Steinbeck met and married his first wife, Carol Henning. Over the following decade, he poured himself into his writing with Carol's support and paycheck, until the couple divorced in 1942.

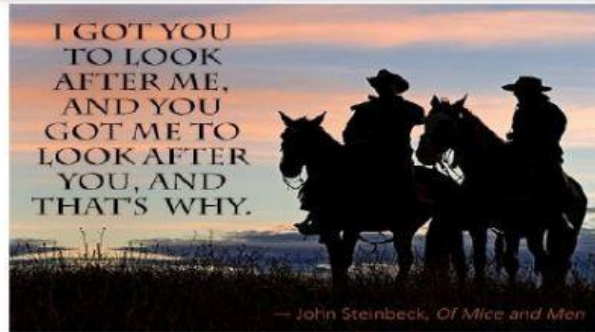
Steinbeck was married to his second wife, Gwyndolyn Conger, from 1943 to 1948. The couple had two sons together, Thomas (born 1944) and John (born 1946). In 1950, Steinbeck wed his third wife, Elaine Anderson Scott. The couple remained together until his death in 1968.

When and How Did John Steinbeck Die?

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

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John Steinbeck

Work and Education

History by Year

Books

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Basic Info

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Gender
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Birthday

Relationships and Family

Awards

Favorite Quotations
