

# Reading *The Grapes of Wrath*

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## Writing

*Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath*, edited by Robert DeMott tells of the March-October, 1938 writing of *Grapes*, a book written in 100 “working days.”

“The new book is going well. Too fast. I’m having to hold it down. I don’t want it to go so fast for fear the tempo will be fast and this is a plodding, crawling book. So I’m holding it down to approximately six pages a day. . . . Anyway it is a nice thing to be working and believing in my work again. I hope I can keep the drive all fall. I like it. I only feel whole and well when it is this way.”

“It must be far and away the best thing I have ever attempted. Slow but sure, piling detail on detail until a picture and an experience emerge. Until the whole throbbing thing emerges.” (June 10, 1938)

## Method

“Throughout I’ve tried to make the reader participate in the actuality, what he takes from it will be scaled entirely on his own depth or hollow-ness. There are 5 layers in this book; a reader will find as many as he can and he won’t find more than he has in himself.”

. . .

“You say the inner chapters were counterpoint and so they were—that they were pace changers and they were that too but the basic purpose was to hit the reader below the belt. With the rhythms and symbols of poetry one can get into a reader—open him up and while he is open introduce—things on an intellectual level which he would not or could not receive unless he were opened up. It is a psychological trick if you wish but all techniques of writing are psychological tricks.” (JS to Herbert Sturtz, 1953)

## Title

From “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” by Julia Ward Howe (1861—appeared first in *Atlantic Monthly* in February 1862). “I should like the whole thing to go in as a page at the beginning. All the verses and the music. This is one of the great songs of the world, and as you read the book you will realize that the words have a special meaning in this book. And I should like the music to be put there in case anyone, any one forgets. The title, Battle Hymn of the Republic, in itself has a special meaning in the light of this book.” (JS to editor Pat Covici)

## Publication: April 14, 1939, \$2.75

By May 6, two weeks after publication, it was at the top of the best seller list. Top best seller of 1939; it was in the top 10 best-sellers of 1940.

Viking had never had sales approaching this rate; books shipped from Viking in first month:

Up to publication:	45,918
Week ending April 21:	10,263
Week ending April 28:	4,738
Week ending May 5:	7,986
Week ending May 12:	8,506
May 15, 16, 17:	5,950

In the 1990s, *The Grapes of Wrath* sold 150,000-200,000 copies in the US annually.

## Banned

By the San Jose Public Library (June 1939) as “unfit for patrons”

By the Kern County Board of Supervisors from schools and libraries (August 1939) for being “filled with profanity, lewd, foul and obscene language unfit for use in American homes. . . . It has offended our

citizenry by falsely implying that many of our fine people are a low, ignorant, profane and blasphemous type living in a vicious and filthy manner.”

By the Kansas City Board of Education (August 1939) from schools.

## Burned

On the curb by the Salinas Public Library  
On the sidewalk in Bakersfield

## Condemned

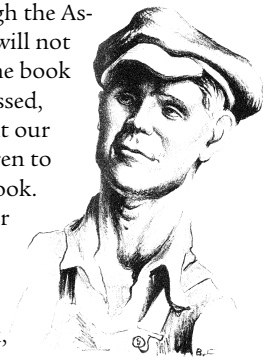
By the Associated Farmers (formed in 1934): “Although the Associated Farmers will not attempt to have the book banned or suppressed, we would not want our women and children to read so vulgar a book.

This is a matter for consideration by public bodies. We deny the statements in the book, so consequently if we were to seek

for a ban, our motive would be attacked. .

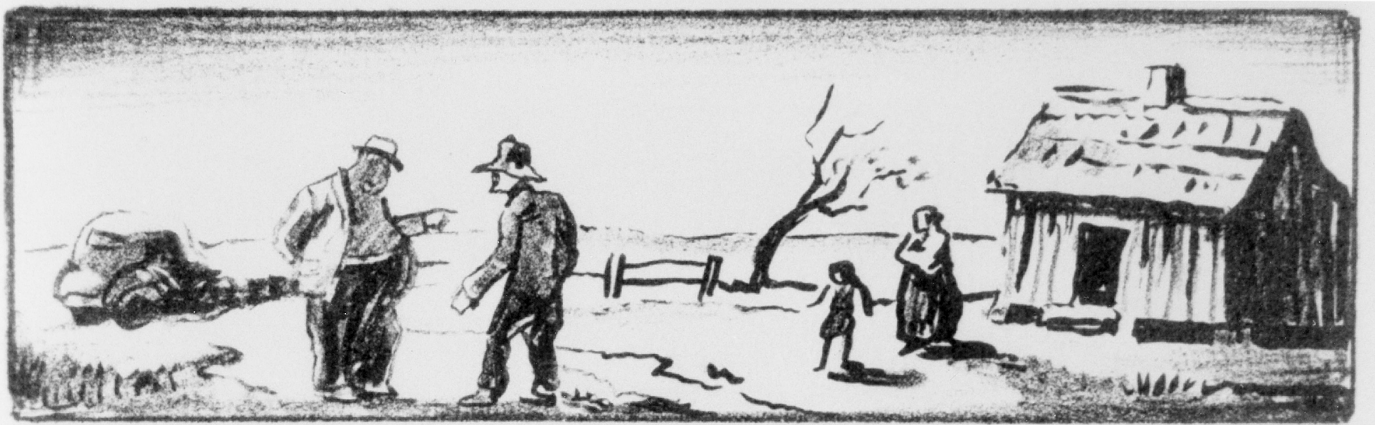
. The only inference that can be obtained from Steinbeck’s book is that he is proposing exactly the same sort of overthrow of the present form of government and the substitution of collective agriculture as did Carey McWilliams in his *Factories in the Fields*. (August 1939)

By the *Oklahoma City Times*: “Any reader who has his roots planted in the red soil will boil with indignation over the bedraggled, bestial characters that will give



Tom Joad

See other side



Continued from front

the ignorant east convincing confirmation of their ideas of the people of the southwest . . . if you have children, I'd advise against leaving the book around home. It has *Tobacco Road* looking as pure as Charlotte Bronte, when it comes to obscene, vulgar, lewd, stable language."

### Provoked political change

The Committee to Aid Agricultural Organization, or the John Steinbeck Committee to Aid Agricultural Organization on Housing Health and Relief for Agricultural Workers in 1938 listed on their letterhead John Steinbeck as their "State Chairman."

### Bestsellers of 1939

The San Francisco *Chronicle*, on April 16, 1939, listed *Grapes* as the number one best seller (two days after publication). In order, other best sellers were *Wickford Point* by J.P. Marquand, *Beware of Pity*, Stefan Zweig; *Seasoned Timber* by Dorothy Canfield, and *Rebecca*, by Daphne du Maurier . . . *Mein Kampf* was #3 in non-fiction.

ABA National Book Awards for 1939 honored *Grapes* as "The Booksellers' Favorite Novel." The ABA honored *Johnny Got His Gun* by Dalton Trumbo as "The Most Original Book of the Year."

*The Grapes of Wrath* received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, May 6, 1940

### Film, 1940

*Gone with the Wind* opened on December 15, 1939 and John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* opened on January 24, 1940

Screenplay by Nunnally Johnson

Directed by John Ford \*

Photography by Gregg Toland

Produced by Darryl F. Zanuck

Twentieth Century Fox

Tom Joad: Henry Fonda

Casy: John Carradine

Muley: John Qyalen

Policeman: Ward Bond

Noah: Frank Sully

Grampa: Charley Grapewin

Uncle John: Frank Darien

Rosasharn: Dorris Bowdon

Winfield: Darryl Hickman

Pa Joad: Russell Simpson

Ruthie Joad: Shirley Mills

Camp Director: Grant Mitchell

Al: O.Z. Whitehead

Ma Joad: Jane Darwell \*

\* Academy Award



Rosasharn

### Translated

Into 43 languages

### Impact

Cesar Chavez:

"And when I read *Grapes of Wrath* . . . that was like reliving my life. Particularly the part where they lived in this Government camp. Because when we were picking fruit in Texas, we lived in a Government place like that. They came around, and they helped the women make mattresses. See, we didn't have anything. And they showed us how to sew and make dresses. And every Saturday night, we'd have a dance. And when I was reading *Grapes of Wrath* this was just like my life. I was never so proud of poor people before, as I was after I read that book." (interview with Studs Terkel)



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