



John Steinbeck: A Biography

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Born in a small town in northern California in 1902, Steinbeck refused from the outset to fit himself to any mold, digging ditches and washing dishes while intermittently attending Stanford University. Failing to take a degree, he struggled for more than a decade to establish himself as a writer, always putting his work first. Eventually he enjoyed an extraordinary period of creativity during which he summoned a powerful vision of the Depression. Books such as *Of Mice and Men*, *The Long Valley*, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Grapes of Wrath* became battle cries that aroused international indignation and brought Steinbeck a world audience.

Jay Parini explores Steinbeck's love-hate relationship with Hollywood and Broadway, his career as a war correspondent, his difficult first and second marriages, and his often tempestuous associations with numerous celebrities, among them Joseph Campbell, Charlie Chaplin, Lyndon Johnson, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner. Drawing on interviews with dozens of people who knew Steinbeck intimately - including his beloved third wife, Elaine - and on published and unpublished letters, diaries, and manuscripts, *John Steinbeck* is both an important reassessment and a masterful portrait of one of the greatest American novelists.

Includes bibliographical references (p. [489-506]) and index

John Steinbeck: A Biography Details

Date : Published March 28th 1994 by Heinemann (first published 1994)

ISBN : 9780434574926

Author : Jay Parini

Format : Hardcover 614 pages

Genre : Biography, Nonfiction, Literature, American

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Cws says

92S

Kristin Huston says

Fabulous read. Steinbeck is one of my favorite authors and after reading this book my admiration has not been diminished. Sure he had issues but don't we all. He felt passionately about America and the less fortunate and was so eloquent in writing about their lives. There is no other author that I have re-read as frequently as John Steinbeck. I just wish more high schools would use his books.

Chris says

Spoiler alert: Steinbeck dies at the end.

Stasha says

Ed Ricketts influenced Steinbeck by introducing him to the works of William E Ritter and John Eloy Boodin and J.S. Haldane. The thought that "the living body and its physiological environment form an organic whole, the parts of which cannot be separate from one another (cannot be understood in separation from one another." Steinbeck's thesis is that man in groups, like all units made up of individual parts, appear to connect to a larger spirit or will that exists somewhere beyond individual response. This is explored in In Dubious Battle, Tortilla Flat, the stories that would eventually make up "The Long Valley."

Refused to accept an award for best novel of 1935, he said: "The whole early part of my life was poisoned with egotism.." In the last few books he identified "in most real way with people who were not me..the work has been the means of making me feel that I am living richly, diversly..even heroically."

Like so many writers of this era, he considered it a part of writer's responsibility to bear witness, to address a social crisis with the hope of affecting some kind of change.

Gore Vidal on Steinbeck: "...Steinbeck was really a journalist at heart. All of his best work was journalism in that it was inspired by daily events, current circumstances. He did invent things. He found them."

Psychological profile of human development suggests that we are perpetually in a state of growth, or should be...Steinbeck's intellectual growth had certainly not ceased...from the naive swashbuckling view of the individual in history..(in) Cup of Gold, through the grand 'social' novels of the 30s where his focus on the individual in relationship to the group dominated In Dubious Battle and The Grapes of Wrath...(later work was influenced by) non-teleological thinking with the holistic emphasis on the relations among all living creatures and their place in a complex biosphere... The individual is seen in the later works Viva Zapata!, East of Eden, Travels with Charley, the Winter of Our Discontent as a separate integer within the larger

context of the group and the environment...Writing, for Steinbeck, continued to be a process of self-discovery and personal growth.

Having read the biography in entirety I can say it gave me a good picture of Steinbeck both as a writer and as a person and opened up my reading appetite for more of his works. Being a relentless thinker and writer, Having tried his hand at so many different genre of writing from war reportage to novel to musical comedy (!) to travelogue, I bow down in front of him in admiration - here is a man who lived for writing.

Gabriel says

fascinating biography--have been in a steinbeck phase lately--and parini does a wonderful job of both telling his life and exploring his writing.

Marjorie says

Read as part of study group on Grapes of wrath but lots of other readings I would love to get to

Yeti says

The best of Parini's three biographical works. Steinbeck is not the man I thought he was ... Parini set me straight. Parini's research is meticulous, his prose is sharp, insightful, and well tuned to the subject matter. Steinbeck is a worthy subject for Parini.

Kim says

This has given me everything I could have wanted from a biography of Steinbeck. In clear and accessible prose, Parini sets out Steinbeck's family and personal history and an analysis of the writer's various works in context. In some senses, the book is also a social history of the US in the first 2/3 of the 20th century, as it traces Steinbeck's relationship with his favourite subject, the American people. The Steinbeck of Parini's biography is the Steinbeck I imagine from the relatively few of his novels I've read: compassionate, humane, a caring friend and generally observant and insightful. Parini also reveals Steinbeck's darker side: insecure about his ability as a writer, emotionally volatile and prone to episodes of severe depression.

This is a not a short book. However, I found it utterly engaging. It has inspired me to read some of Steinbeck's lesser-known works, as well as his letters. It has also made me wonder why I don't read more literary biographies. When they're as good as this effort, they make rewarding reading.

Lynn says

This is an amazing biography! One of the best I have read. Steinbeck was an interesting man. I did not know that he had been a reporter in Vietnam. He so loved the whole Salinas Valley and Monterey and Carmel, CA. His writing showed how much he loved the area. He loved to travel and he loved to meet people. If you are a fan of his novels, you should definitely read this book. Great book!!

Christopher Athey says

hard going from what I recall...

Nelson says

Neither hagiography nor hate, Parini's biography is an even-handed life in extremely readable prose, that situates the books within the life. Parini is a sympathetic reader of Steinbeck's work who nevertheless has his eyes wide open to the excesses and faults that marred even the best of Steinbeck's novels. Because Parini avoids the beatification of Steinbeck's best work (*Grapes of Wrath*), he is free as well to avoid the excessive overreaction many critics lavished on the later writing. This judiciousness makes Parini an ideal guide to the merits and demerits of the fiction. If Parini is to be trusted (and on the basis of this book, he ought to be), both *Tortilla Flat* and *Winter of Our Discontent* deserve better than they have gotten from critics over the years. Parini is equally good on the life. He doesn't go in for heavy Freudian readings of Steinbeck's family background; at the same time, he is persuasive at locating Steinbeck's own failures as a husband and father in Steinbeck's own sometimes fraught upbringing. In other words, Parini goes light on the psychology without ignoring the obvious links between Steinbeck's remote father and Steinbeck's occasional inability to connect to his own sons. Though the book is long, it clips along, offering an intelligent and much-needed reappraisal of the life and the works.

Tom Walsh says

I have been a fan of Steinbeck's for a long time. I've read most of his novels, but never a bio. I was instantly surprised he was from Salinas, the town of "East of Eden." Steinbeck led me to Zola, where I discovered Naturalism, a genre I have tried to read much about, but still have more to learn. I was not disappointed. Parini did a thorough job on Steinbeck. I was surprised the critics were so harsh. I never suspected he was so depressed with his reviews. His writing, to me, is superb! Good bio!!
