

THE PRACTICING DEMOCRACY PROJECT



We the People Book Club

THE GRAPES OF WRATH

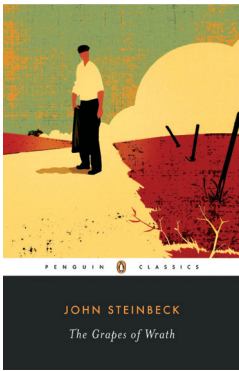
Reading Guide



P E N G U I N  C L A S S I C S

JOHN STEINBECK

The Grapes of Wrath



THE GRAPES OF WRATH is the ideal selection to inaugurate the **We the People Book Club**: it is equally about democracy and spirituality. In fact, as John Steinbeck explores them in this novel, the soul and a democracy are made of the same stuff: people working together, recognizing themselves in one another, and treating that interdependence as a “sacred honor.”

With *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939, John Steinbeck used fiction to intervene in one of the twentieth century’s worst environmental, economic, and social crises. With urgency and insight, he captured the plight of the “Okies,” refugees from the Dust Bowl and capitalism run amuck. The novel has become an American classic, taught in classrooms from junior high to college as essential reading for anyone interested in exploring themes that run deep not only in American literature but American life.

The Grapes of Wrath received the National Book Award for Fiction and a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1940; it was cited when John Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962.

About This Book Club Reading Guide

This guide was researched and written by Julia Davis, a 2018 - 2019 Practicing Democracy Fellow. It includes background on how Steinbeck came to write *The Grapes of Wrath*, an overview of the story, and observations on the literary structure of the novel. For your personal exploration and/or discussion with others in your book club, we include commentary on three themes. Questions within each will facilitate three approaches to the work: (1) your interpretation of the text, (2) your personal reflections inspired by your reading, and (3) practices for you to try that animate the novel’s democratic values. The guide also includes ideas for further exploration; you might decide to engage these resources before or after your discussion.

Background

After years of research, study, and first-hand experience, John Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* in a 100-day burst of creative energy. In the years leading up to the writing and publication, Steinbeck lived and worked among the migrants in California, befriended Tom Collins (the camp manager to whom the book is in part dedicated), and advocated for the workers by writing newspaper and magazine articles. He was determined to make visible the ways in which the migrants were abused and dehumanized by the powerful monied interests of the California farming establishment. The book was published in 1939 and immediately banned — and even burned — in many California cities.

Overview

The Grapes of Wrath tells the story of the Joad family, forced off their land in Oklahoma after the Dust Bowl made sharecropping not just a debtors' game but a losing proposition. At the same time, the invention of the tractor, far more efficient than the human body, allowed land companies and their banks to make a bigger profit off of the land by amassing it into large holdings. This technological change left farming families like the Joads dispossessed, bullied, and scrambling to survive.

As the novel begins, Tom Joad is headed home from a stint in prison for killing a man in self-defense. When he returns to the family farm, he finds his folks packing for California, having seen handbills advertising jobs picking fruit. They join thousands of other migrants going west through Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona on Route 66, everyone hopeful for new life in California. After crossing a punishing desert, the Joads behold the verdant orchards and fields of California. However, elation turns quickly to worry and more hardship than they left behind them as they realize that all of this beautiful land, even the fallow acres, is owned, work is scarce, and migrants are unwanted, hated, and exploited. The Joads work hard where they find a wage, create community with their fellow migrants, and persevere through the monumental changes and challenges taking hold of the world they once knew.

Meanwhile, the preacher Jim Casy and Tom, who becomes a sort of prophet-hero, listen carefully to the people, study the great change, and give themselves over completely to what is now the most crucial work in sustaining democracy: labor organizing.

Genre, Language, and Structure

The Grapes of Wrath was essentially an act of journalistic advocacy: it supported migrants' rights in a national crisis that had hardly resolved. And yet for a novel "ripped from the headlines" and full of detail influenced by camp manager Tom Collins' weekly reports from the 1930s, *The Grapes of Wrath* has maintained relevance both as a text about American democracy and as a text about the human condition. This is in part due to Steinbeck's language, which draws out of the materiality of the here and now the spirituality of transcendent truth.

The novel's lasting relevance and beauty are also due to Steinbeck's structure: he alternates between narrative chapters about the Joads' journey and "interchapters" that offer a wider historical context and more concentrated theme development. The interchapters often foreshadow an event in the novelistic chapters; this technique allows Steinbeck to focus on the Joads' story *and* suggest that the Joads' experiences are representative. In this way, structure mirrors theme: The particular is but part of the universal.

Themes

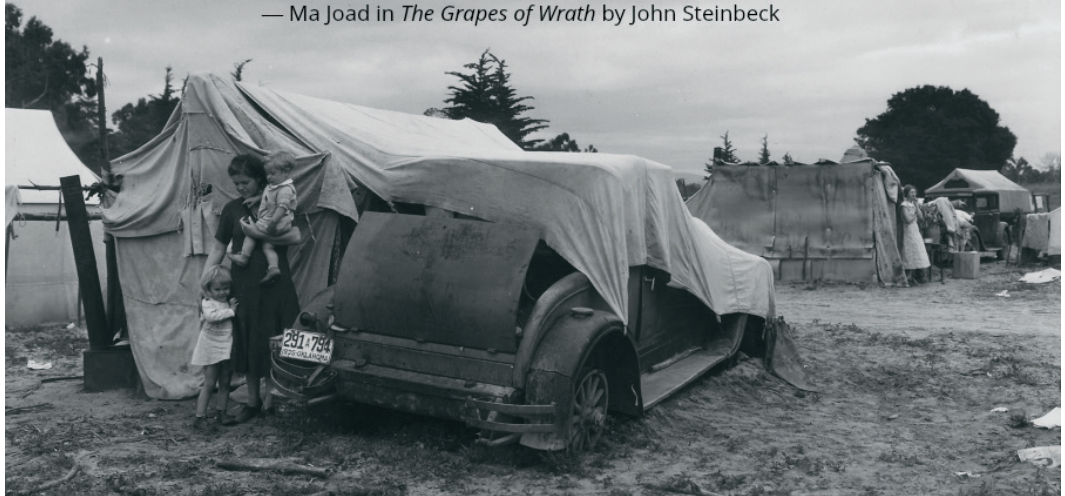
The Necessity of Connection

This theme suffuses *The Grapes of Wrath* from beginning to end — connection to the land and the fruits of labor, to one another and the universal soul. This is *Grapes'* great warning, that when alienation replaces connection and exploitation trumps relationship, everyone loses. We lose the feeling of the earth sifting through our hands, the feeling of dignity from honest work, the feeling of another's pain, and the feeling that we are more than matter.

The Joads' greatest antagonists are not hunger, thirst, weather, and the law; they are self-interest, ownership, greed, and fear of strangers. The story of the Joads is a story of a family that confronts these antagonists and chooses connection: they open their family unit to the Wilsons and to hungry kids other than Ruthie and Winfield; Casy begins by theorizing about the universal soul and ends by putting this spiritual belief into practice as a union organizer, with Tom following in his footsteps; and, finally, Rose of Sharon dramatically crosses the boundaries of family, sexuality, age, privacy, and her own grief to give the milk of life to a dying stranger.

If you're in trouble or hurt or need — go to
poor people. They're the only ones
that'll help — the only ones.

— Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck



THINK

1. Consider the pair of passages below about the universal soul, holiness and organizing, and bring in other quotes relating to the necessity of connection as they come to the group. They are from chapter 7 and chapter 28, respectively.

“ ‘An’ I got thinkin’, on’y it wasn’t thinkin, it was deeper down than thinkin’. I got thinkin’ how we was holy when we was one thing, an’ mankin’ was holy when it was one thing.

An' it on'y got unholy when one mis'able little fella got the bit in his teeth an' run off his own way, kickin' an' draggin' an' fightin'. Fella like that bust the holiness. But when they're all workin' together, not one fella for another fella, but one fella kind of harnessed to the whole shebang—that's right, that's holy. An' then I got thinkin' I don't even know what I mean by holy.'"

"Tom laughed uneasily, 'Well, maybe like Casy says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one — an' then —'

"'Then what, Tom?'

"'Then it don' matter. Then I'll be all aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where — wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an' — I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build — why, I'll be there. See? God, I'm talkin' like Casy. Comes of thinkin' about him so much. Seems like I can see him sometimes.' "

How do you understand Casy's ideas about wholeness and holiness? Based on this view, what is holy in the novel?

Were you surprised Tom did not reappear in the novel? Why do you think Steinbeck made these words Tom's last and did not write him into the ending of the novel? What does Tom mean when he says "I'll be there"?

Casy is adamant about not being a preacher anymore, but sometimes slips into what seems to him like a sermon. What are some ways to understand Casy's transformation from preacher to activist/union organizer?



REFLECT

2. Consider this passage from the last chapter: "For a minute Rose of Sharon sat still in the whispering barn. Then she hoisted her body up and drew the comfort about her. She moved slowly to the corner and stood looking down at the wasted face, into the wide, frightened eyes. He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. 'You got to,' she said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. 'There!' she said. 'There.' Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously."

Rose of Sharon crosses many divides to connect with another human. She bares herself to a stranger, an elder, a man. Steinbeck presents this gesture like a beautiful painting and ends his novel there, with many questions unanswered. One of the questions the ending inspires is this: What are the differences that really test your commitment to life, to community and unity? What divisions seem utterly natural to you? Under what circumstances might you be willing to cross those divides in the service of life and connection? Perhaps you have crossed them before. Share that story with the group.

3. Tom Collins was a camp manager tasked with setting up each new migrant camp in California. A genius social worker, Collins understood the dehumanization the migrants had endured and believed that participating in representative democracy — being heard and useful — could help to restore the migrants' dignity. His managerial philosophy was to let the people lead; he was beloved for it, and it worked.

His real-life models of democracy were the basis for Steinbeck's representation of the government camp in chapter 22, an oasis of democratic cooperation in a sea of exploitation and fear. The health and order within the camp are testament to what folks can do together when they feel connected to one another, to a common purpose, and to the land.

Upon arrival at the camp, Tom is astounded to hear the manager talk about the camp's self-government, which is local, representative, and independent from the corrupt local authorities: "You mean to say the fellas that runs the camp is jus' fellas — campin' here?" The camp manager replies, "Sure. And it works."

Think about the many small communities you belong to — families, offices, churches, service clubs, professional organizations, etc. Commit to surveying the members of these communities and finding out who feels disconnected, unheard, or invisible. Have a conversation with them. Talk with them about how this community could be more democratic. Perhaps authority seems concentrated, leading to silence and passivity. Perhaps the community seems too large, leading to anonymity and apathy.

Then start a larger conversation within the community to clarify that organizations of all kinds work better when everyone has responsibility, accountability, voice, and opportunity.

Technological Change

Technological changes antique the Joads' way of making a living and constructing meaning. For them, intimacy with the land is life itself. The land feeds the family and gives them spiritual food, sustaining a sense of purpose. Knowing the soil and caring for the land correspond with knowing and caring for loved ones. The Joads read their family's history and identity in the acreage they've farmed for generations.

The tractor and the bank, Steinbeck's two "monsters," change all of that. Land is machined not handled. Crops are profits not food. Drought, rain, and harvest are spreadsheet columns. And the Joads are forcibly separated from all of it — the land itself, the fruits of it, and the new system of meaning.

With new technology come new social relations, specifically family structure and gender roles. Pa Joad loses his place when the family loses land and work; these sources of authority are replaced by the car, driven by Al, and the tent, governed by Ma. As the novel and the journey progress, Ma makes the decisions, keeping the family together and tending to its emotional needs.

The great changes work on a grander scale as well. They make the generational divides more significant: Grandpa dies away from the land, heartbroken, while the children, Ruthie and Winfield, embrace adaptation as an adventure.

Most importantly for Steinbeck, technological change widens the gap between owners and wage laborers; this gap is not just economic but spiritual. The great innovation, the tractor, renders the Joads and the owners more vulnerable, the Joads in a material sense and the owners in a spiritual sense. Steinbeck is at pains to point out that, while the owners have gained monetarily in the short-term, they have invested in loss and will accrue in kind. Alienated from the preciousness and holiness of life itself and what gives it, they spoil oranges with kerosene, drown potatoes, and bury pigs.

The social separation between wage-earners and owners traps the owners in *I* and *mine* and draws the laborers into the *we* and *ours* of a counter-revolution, which begins with unionizing. While Steinbeck did not identify as a socialist, he felt something coming based on the patterns of history: the owners' revolution sowing the seeds of the peoples': Food destroyed to preserve profit grows *the grapes of wrath* "heavy for the vintage."

We've got a bad thing made by men,
and by God that's something we can change.

— A tenant in *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck



THINK

1. Consider this passage from chapter 21: "There in the Middle and Southwest had lived a simple agrarian folk who had not changed with industry, who had not farmed with machines or known the power and danger of machines in private hands. They had not grown up in the paradoxes of industry. Their senses were still sharp to the ridiculousness of the industrial life."

What does Steinbeck mean by the "paradoxes of industry" and "the ridiculousness of industrial life?"

Critics have accused Steinbeck of romanticizing the Joads as these "simple agrarian folk." Were there moments in the novel that made you feel this way? Do you think Steinbeck oversimplifies a complex set of historical forces as he sets the Joads up as

heroes and sets the owners up as antagonists? How so? And if so, does this make the novel more or less successful? What was Steinbeck trying to achieve?

REFLECT

2. Technological changes can shape our relationships and shift our sense of security. As you discuss these questions, keep in mind the various levels at which technological change can impact us: personal, familial, communal, professional, national, etc.

Think about the technological changes that occurred while you were growing up, ones strong enough to create a vivid sense of “before” and “after.” How did those changes impact you?

Now think about the technological changes that have occurred later in your life, perhaps after the onset of adulthood and midlife. How is the quality of “before” and “after” different once you have more years behind you? What color is “before” in your mind? What color is “after”?

If it has not come up already, concentrate discussion on the impact of social media and smartphones. How have these innovations changed your relationships with your family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors? How have they changed your relationship to *yourself*?

As a group, reflect how differences in age, experience, and socioeconomic status influence your varying reactions to technological change (vulnerability, adaptation, power).

PRACTICE

3. Consider this passage from chapter 25: “The decay spreads over the State, and the sweet smell is a great sorrow on the land. Men who can graft the trees and make the seed fertile and big can find no way to let the hungry people eat their produce. Men who have created new fruits in the world cannot create a system whereby their fruits may be eaten. And the failure hangs over the state like a great sorrow.”

The word “can” in this passage is not about ability but rather about the artificial limits placed on what’s possible by systems that we either expressly or tacitly agree to. One of these systems is capitalism, which makes profit a rule, even though profit is not a “natural rule,” that is, not a rule that actually governs what is possible. Sometimes, in order to serve the common good, it is necessary to release our thoughts and actions from the limits of these systems. This is easier said than done. It will take practice.

Begin by identifying a limit — in some system of government, economics, religion, etc. — that you live by that does not serve the common good. Perhaps it was designed to, but in reality does not. Perhaps it provides you security but does not align with your own sense of values. Speak about that limit with the group.

As a We the People Book Club, you are a nucleus of incremental change. Imagine how you might revise a system so that it meets a common need. (Some might think of this as a “hack.”) Innovate a way to redirect power and resources away from the few’s desire or convenience and towards the many’s necessities. Commit to an achievable goal and report at the next meeting.

Resilience and Creativity

These two qualities within the human spirit allow the Joads and other migrants to meet technological and sociological changes with hope and integrity. From the perspective of this theme, *The Grapes of Wrath* is as much about what *does not* change as what *does*. There is a spirit that will not be killed, a curiosity to know that will not be dampened, an impulse to act that cannot be intimidated. The Joads continue not only to struggle for survival but to believe in life.

When the Okies' communities are destroyed by the banks and the tractor, they lose no time improvising different kinds of communities, new ways to sustain life based on their changed circumstances and needs. Steinbeck describes these communities in Chapter 17: "Every night a world created, complete with furniture — friends made and enemies established; a world complete with braggarts and with cowards, with quiet men, with humble men, with kindly men. Every night relationships that make a world, established; and every morning the world torn down like a circus."

When the Joads' dream meets with disappointment in California, their resilience becomes more, not less, fixed. Despite the deprivations, exploitation, and dehumanization, they are driven by their desire for work. Digging ditches and picking peaches — these become the family's new dream, the simple opportunity to work replacing their American Dream of a little house and a piece of land in California. The new dream sustains them just as the old one had because they continue to adapt in body and spirit. With work in short supply, the greater significance of laboring surfaces: it is purpose, which is part of survival.

Jim Casy and Tom Joad both emerge as heroes because of their refusal to allow technological changes to dehumanize and disempower the people. They are creative in their resistance. Casy sets out to study the great changes, the deep causes and effects which are as yet inchoate and ungraspable. On the road, he listens. In the jail, he has an epiphany. Released from jail, he turns union organizer, leading the struggle against all that would dehumanize the migrants or any wage laborer. He dies, like Jesus, a martyr, and Tom, apostolically, takes up the cross.

The rehearsal of biblical story, itself a trope of resilience, continues in Steinbeck's last image: Rose of Sharon nursing a life not from her body, an echo of Mary's virgin birth. This is simultaneously an image of resistance, persistence, and creation: a protest that speaks of her refusal to let the great changes take away her role as mother. So much destruction, but life wins.

'Why, Tom — us people will go on livin' when all them people is gone. Why, Tom, we're the people that live. They ain't gonna wipe us out. Why, we're the people — we go on.'

— Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck



THINK

1. Consider this passage from chapter 20:

"Ma asked timidly, 'Where we goin', Tom?'

"'Goin' south,' he said. 'We couldn' let them bastards push us aroun'. We couldn'. Try to get aroun' the town 'thout goin' through it.'

"'Yeah, but where we goin'?' Pa spoke for the first time. 'That what I want ta know.'

"'Gonna look for that gov'ment camp,' Tom said. 'A fella said they don' let no deputies in there. Ma — I got to get away from 'em. I'm scairt I'll kill one.'

"'Easy, Tom.' Ma soothed him. 'Easy, Tommy. You done good once. You can do it again.'

"'Yeah, an' after a while I won't have no decency lef'.'

"'Easy,'" she said. 'You got to have patience. Why, Tom — us people will go on livin' when all them people is gone. Why, Tom, we're the people that live. They ain't gonna wipe us out. Why, we're the people — we go on.'

"'We take a beatin' all the time.'

"'I know.' Ma chuckled. 'Maybe that makes us tough. Rich fellas come up an' they die, an' their kids ain't no good, an' they die out. But, Tom, we keep a-comin'. Don' you fret none, Tom. A different time's comin'.'"

Steinbeck repeatedly uses the very vague term "the people," and, therefore, this vagueness seems intentional, even conspicuous. What might he mean by "the people," given that both the migrants and their antagonists could be included under that umbrella term? How could you argue that he meant a specific sort of people? What defines that people? Why do you think he left the language so vague?

 REFLECT

2. Consider this passage from Chapter 14:

“The last clear definite function of man — muscles aching to work, minds aching to create beyond the single need — this is man. To build a wall, to build a house, a damn, and in the wall and house and damn to put something of Manself, and to Manself take back something of the wall the house the damn; to take hard muscles from lifting, to take the clear lines and form from conceiving. For man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up the stairs of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments.”

The tone of this beautiful passage associates triumphant feelings with building, creating — working. How do your feelings about your current work compare to the tone of this passage? Share with the group a time when you felt passionate about a project.

 PRACTICE

3. In “The American Scholar” (suggested under “Further Resources” below), Ralph Waldo Emerson laments how often we lose touch with the “ideal worth” of the work we do. We become absorbed in busyness and profit and lose sight of how our efforts can or do connect us to others, contribute to a common good, and promote values and practices related to peace, kindness, hospitality, freedom, or equality.

Put together an IWOW (ideal worth of work) small group. You can meet up in your kitchen, in the conference room, over the phone, video chat, text — wherever. Commit to reflect with one another for just 10 to 15 minutes at the end of each day. Share with one another your answers to these simple questions: How did my efforts today promote an ideal that I believe in? How did my work decrease the separation among people?

Alternately, meet before your day begins and replace “did” with “will” to set your *intentions*.

Further Resources

Explore these related resources if your group wants to take a deeper dive into works inspired by or thematically related to *The Grapes of Wrath*.

1. View *The Grapes of Wrath*. Hollywood quickly adapted the novel for John Ford’s 1940 film starring Henry Fonda as Tom Joad. Your book club might enjoy comparing the ending of the book to the ending of the film and discussing how the different tones affect the interpretation of Steinbeck’s message.
2. Read Ralph Waldo Emerson’s speech “The American Scholar”: Discuss the connections between Emerson’s transcendental philosophy and Jim Casy’s ideas about the soul. Pay particular attention to the beginning of the address where Emerson distinguishes “Man on the farm” from farmer and illustrates his ideas through the metaphor of the hand. Recall Jim Casy’s words, “Maybe all men got one big soul ever’body’s a part of.”
3. Listen to Bruce Springsteen’s song “The Ghost of Tom Joad” sung by Bruce himself and also by Rage Against the Machine. What kind of hope does Tom Joad symbolize? The two singers chose very different tones: which one better captures the spirit of Tom Joad?

Other Reading Guides for the We the People Book Club:

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead

A Good Man Is Hard to Find by Flannery O'Connor

Poetry

Tenth of December by George Saunders

Gilead by Marilynne Robinson

Puddnhead Wilson by Mark Twain

The Fire Next Time by James Baldwin and

Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko

The Sympathizer by Viet Thanh Nguyen

The Partly-Cloudy Patriot by Sarah Vowell

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston

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The Practicing Democracy Project offers resources to strengthen and deepen the way we live out democracy. These spiritual practices help us do the work both in ourselves and in relationship with our neighbors and communities.

Some practices enhance or support the essential civic virtues and qualities of American democracy, such as respect and service. Others help us deal with problems and obstacles that depress democracy, such as anger and rigid thinking.

The Project offers spiritual practices and resources for all of us — from advocacy and civic organizations to congregations and companies.

For more information on the Project, visit [PracticingDemocracy.net](https://www.PracticingDemocracy.net).

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