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*The Grapes of Wrath*

Born in Salinas, California, in 1902, John Steinbeck grew up in a fertile agricultural valley about twenty-five miles from the Pacific Coast – and both valley and coast would serve as settings for some of his best fiction. In 1919 he went to Stanford University, where he intermittently enrolled in literature and writing courses until he left in 1925 without taking a degree. During the next five years he supported himself as a labourer and journalist in New York City, all the time working on his first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929). After marriage and a move to Pacific Grove, he published two Californian fictions, *The Pastures of Heaven* (1931) and *To a God Unknown* (1933), and worked on short stories later collected in *The Long Valley* (1938). Popular success and financial security came only with *Tortilla Flat* (1935), stories about Monterey's paisanos. A ceaseless experimenter throughout his career, Steinbeck changed course regularly. Three powerful novels of the late 1930s focused on the Californian labouring class: *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and the book considered by many his finest, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Early in the 1940s, Steinbeck became a filmmaker with *The Forgotten Village* (1941) and a serious student of marine biology with *Sea of Cortez* (1941). He devoted his services to the war, writing *Bombs Away* (1942) and the controversial play-novelette *The Moon is Down* (1942). *Cannery Row* (1945), *The Wayward Bus* (1947), *The Pearl* (1947), *A Russian Journal* (1948), another experimental drama, *Burnt Bright* (1950), and *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951) preceded publication of the monumental *East of Eden* (1952), an ambitious saga of the Salinas Valley and his own family history. The last decades of his life were spent in New York City and Sag Harbor with his third wife, with whom he travelled widely. Later books include *Sweet Thursday* (1954), *The Short Reign of Pippin IV: A Fabrication* (1957), *Once There was a War* (1958), *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962), *America and Americans* (1966) and the post-humously published *Journal of a Novel: The 'East of Eden' Letters* (1969), *Viva Zapata!* (1975), *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (1976) and *Working Days: The Journals of 'The Grapes of Wrath'* (1989). He died in 1968, having won a Nobel Prize in 1962.

Robert DeMott is Edwin and Ruth Kennedy Distinguished Professor at Ohio University, where he has received numerous undergraduate and graduate teaching awards, including the Jeanette G. Grasselli Faculty Teaching Award in 1997. He is a former director of the Center for Steinbeck Studies at San Jose State University, and is currently on the Editorial Board of the Center's *Steinbeck Newsletter*. He is Editor (with Elaine Steinbeck as Special Consultant) of the Library of America's three-volume edition of John Steinbeck's writings, of which *Novels and Stories, 1932–1937* (1994) and *The Grapes of Wrath and Other Writings, 1936–1942* (1996) have so far appeared. His annotated edition of John Steinbeck's *Working Days: The Journals of 'The Grapes of Wrath'* was chosen as a *New York Times* Notable Book in 1989, and his *Steinbeck's Typewriter: Essays on His Art* (1996) received the Nancy Dasher Book Award from





JOHN STEINBECK

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# *The Grapes of Wrath*

*With an Introduction by Robert DeMott*



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To **CAROL** who willed it.

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To **TOM** who lived it.



# ***Contents***

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[Introduction by Robert DeMott](#)

[Suggestions for Further Reading](#)

[A Note on the Text](#)

[\*The Grapes of Wrath\*](#)

# Introduction

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“What some people find in religion a writer may find in his craft... a kind of breaking through to glory.”

—Steinbeck in a 1965 interview

I

On June 18, 1938, a little more than three weeks after starting *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck confided in his daily journal (posthumously published as *Working Days*):

If I could do this book properly it would be one of the really fine books and a truly American book. But I am assailed with my own ignorance and inability. I'll just have to work from a background of these. Honesty. If I can keep an honesty it is all I can expect of my poor brain.... If I can do that it will be all my lack of genius can produce. For no one else knows my lack of ability the way I do. I am pushing against it all the time.

Despite Steinbeck's doubts, which were constant during its tumultuous process of composition, *The Grapes of Wrath* turned out to be not only a “fine” book, but the greatest of his seventeen novels. Steinbeck's aggressive mixture of native philosophy, common-sense politics, blue-collar radicalism, working-class characters, folk wisdom, and home-spun literary form—all set to a bold, rhythmic style and nervy, raw dialogue—qualified the novel as the “American book” he had set out to write. The novel's title—from Julia Ward Howe's “Battle Hymn of the Republic”—was clearly in the American grain: “I like it because it is a march and this book is a kind of march—because it is in our own revolutionary tradition and because in reference to this book it has a large meaning,” Steinbeck announced on September 10, 1938, to Elizabeth Otis, his literary agent.

After his arduous march of composition from late May through late October 1938 (“Never worked so hard in my life nor so long before,” Steinbeck told Carl Wilhelmson), *The Grapes of Wrath* passed from his wife's typescript to published novel in a scant four months. In March 1939, when Steinbeck received copies from one of three advance printings, he told Pascal Covici, his editor at The Viking Press, that he was “immensely pleased with them.” The novel's impressive physical and aesthetic appearance was the result of its imposing length (619 pages) and Elmer Hader's striking dustjacket illustration (which pictured the exiled Joads looking out on a lush California valley). And true to Steinbeck's insistence that *The Grapes of Wrath* be “keyed into the American scene from the beginning,” Covici had insured that Viking Press printed words and music from the “Battle Hymn” on the book's endpapers in an attempt (unsuccessfully, it turned out) to deflect accusations of communism against the novel.

Given the drastic plight of the migrant labor situation in California, Steinbeck refused to write a popular book or court commercial success. It was ironic, then, that shortly after its official publication date on April 14, 1939, fueled by the nearly ninety reviews—most positive—that appeared in newspapers, magazines, and literary journals between April and

June, *The Grapes of Wrath* climbed to the top of the best-seller lists for most of the year, selling 428,900 copies in hardcover at \$2.75 each. (In 1941, when the Sun Dial Press issued a cloth reprint for a dollar, the publisher announced that more than 543,000 copies of *Grapes* had already been sold.) *The Grapes of Wrath* won the 1940 Pulitzer Prize (Steinbeck gave the 1000 prize to writer Ritch Lovejoy), eventually became the cornerstone of his 1962 Nobel Prize award, and proved itself to be among the most enduring works of fiction by an American author, past or present. In spite of the flaws its critics perceive (frequent sentimentality, flat characterizations, heavy-handed symbolism, unconvincing dialogue)—perhaps because of them (general readers tend to embrace the book's mystic soul and are less troubled by its imperfect body)—*The Grapes of Wrath* has resolutely entered both the American consciousness and its conscience. If a literary classic can be defined as a book that speaks directly to readers' concerns in successive historical eras, then surely *The Grapes of Wrath* is such a work.

Although Steinbeck could not have predicted this success (and was nearly ruined by the notoriety it achieved), the fact is that, in the past half century, *The Grapes of Wrath* has sold more than 14 million copies. Many of them end up in the hands of students at schools and colleges where the novel is taught in literature and history classes at every level from junior high to doctoral seminars. The book has also had a charmed life on screen and stage. Steinbeck sold the novel's film rights for \$75,000 to producer Darryl F. Zanuck. The Nunnally Johnson scripted a truncated film version, which was nonetheless memorably paced, photographed, and acted (especially by Henry Fonda as Tom Joad, Jane Darwell as Ma, and John Carradine as Jim Casy) under the direction of John Ford in 1940. (A "hard straight picture... that looks and feels like a documentary film and... has a hard, truthfulness ring," Steinbeck reported after seeing its Hollywood preview.) Recently, Frank Galati faithfully adapted the novel for his Chicago-based Steppenwolf Company, whose Broadway production won a Tony Award as Best Play in 1990. *The Grapes of Wrath* has also been translated into nearly thirty languages. It seems that Steinbeck's words continue, in Warren French's apt phrase, "the education of the heart."

Every strong novel redefines our conception of the genre's dimensions and reorders our awareness of its possibilities. Like other products of rough-hewn American genius—Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (three other "flawed" novels that also humanize America's downtrodden by exposing social ills)—*The Grapes of Wrath* has a home-grown quality: part naturalistic epic, part jeremiad, part captivity narrative, part road novel, part transcendent gospel.

Many American authors, often with little in the way of a shared novelistic tradition to emulate, or finding that established fictional models don't suit their sensibilities, manage to forge their own way by synthesizing their personal vision and experience with a variety of cultural forms and literary styles. Steinbeck was no exception. To execute *The Grapes of Wrath* he drew on the jump-cut technique of John Dos Passos's *USA* trilogy (1937), the narrative tempo of Pare Lorentz's radio drama *Ecce Homo!* and the sequential quality of such Lorentz films as *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937), the stark visual effects of Dorothea Lange's photographs of Dust Bowl Oklahoma and California migrant life, the timbre

of the Greek epics, the rhythms of the King James Bible, the refrains of American folk music and the biological impetus of his and Edward F. Ricketts's ecological phalanx, or group-mathematics theory. Steinbeck's imagination transformed these resources (especially biblical themes and parallels, analogies, and allusions) into his own holistic structure, his own individual signature. Malcolm Cowley's claim that a "whole literature is summarized in this book and much of it is carried to a new level of excellence" is especially accurate.

In early July 1938, Steinbeck told literary critic Harry T. Moore that he was improvising what was for him a "new method" of fictional technique: one which combined a suitable elastic form and elevated style to express the far-reaching tragedy of the migrant drama. In *The Grapes of Wrath* he devised a contrapuntal structure, which alternates short lyric chapters of exposition and background pertinent to the migrants as a group (Chapters [1](#), [3](#), [7](#), [9](#), [11](#), [12](#), [14](#), [15](#), [17](#), [19](#), [21](#), [23](#), [25](#), [27](#), [29](#)) with the long narrative chapters of the Joad family's dramatic exodus to California (Chapters [2](#), [4](#), [6](#), [8](#), [10](#), [13](#), [16](#), [18](#), [20](#), [22](#), [24](#), [26](#), [28](#), [30](#)). Just as in *Moby-Dick* Melville created intensity and prolonged suspense by alternating between the temporal chapters of Ahab's driven quest for the white whale and Ishmael's numinous chapters on cetology, so Steinbeck structured his novel by juxtaposition. His "particular" chapters are the slow-paced and lengthy narrative chapters that embody traditional characterization and advance the dramatic plot, while his jazzy, rapid-fire "interchapters" work at another level of recognition by expressing an atemporal, universal synoptic view of the migrant condition. As he wrote Chapters [5](#) and [6](#), for instance, Steinbeck reminded himself that for maximum effect, "I want the reader to be able to keep [the general and particular chapters] separate in his mind." In fact, his "general" or intercalary chapters ("pace changers," Steinbeck called them) were expressly designed 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 a [sic] intellectual level which he would not or could not receive unless he were opened up," Steinbeck revealed to Columbia undergraduate Herbert Sturz in 1953.

*The Grapes of Wrath* is an engaged novel with a partisan posture, many complex voices, and passionate prose styles. ("No other American novel has succeeded in forging and making instrumental so many prose styles," Peter Lisca believes.) Except for its unflinching treatment of the Great Depression's climatic, social, and economic conditions, and those interchapters that serve to halt the emotional slide toward sentimentality, there is nothing cynical or distanced about it, nothing coolly modernist, in the way we have come to understand the elite literary implications of that term in the past seventy-five years. (*The Grapes of Wrath* is in some ways an old-fashioned novel, even down to its curious avoidance of human sexuality.) It is not narrated from the first-person point of view, yet the language has a consistently catchy eyewitness quality about it, and its vivid biblical, empirical, poetic, cinematic, and folk styles demonstrate the remarkable tonal and visual acuity of Steinbeck's ear and eye.

Steinbeck told Merle Armitage on February 17, 1939, that in "composition, in movement, in tone and in scope," *The Grapes of Wrath* was "symphonic." Indeed, his fusion of intimate narrative and panoramic editorial chapters enforces this dialogic concert. Chapters, styles, voices all speak to each other, set up resonances, send echoes back and forth—point and counterpoint, strophe and antistrophe—as in a huge symphony whose total impression for

surpasses the sum of its discrete and sometimes dissonant parts. Steinbeck's novel belongs to that vital class of fictions whose shape issues not from an ideal blueprint of aesthetic propriety but from the generative urgency of its author's experience. ("It *had* to be written," Stanley Kunitz said in 1939.) Steinbeck's direct involvement with the plight of America's Dust Bowl migrants in the latter half of the 1930s created his obsessive urge to tell their story honestly but also movingly. "This must be a good book," he wrote in *Working Days* on June 10, 1938. "It simply must. I haven't any choice. 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."

Making his audience see and feel that living picture was paramount. "I am not writing a satisfying story," he claimed to Pascal Covici on January 16, 1939:

I've done my damndest to rip a reader's nerves to rags, I don't want him satisfied.... I tried to write this book the way lives are being lived not the way books are written.... 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 hollowness. There are five layers in this book, a reader will find as many as he can and he won't find more than he has in himself.

Steinbeck's participatory aesthetic was based on a circle of complicity that linked "the trinity" of writer, text, and reader to ensure maximum affective impact. On June 7, 1938, as he completed [Chapter 5](#), for instance, he kept his eye steadily on target: "Today's work is the overtone of the tractors, the men who run them, the men they displace, the sound of them, the smell of them. I've got to get this over. Got to because this one's tone is very important—this is the eviction sound and the tonal reason for movement. Must do it well."

Steinbeck conceived his novel on simultaneous levels of existence, ranging from social and economic determinism to transcendent spirituality. Louis Owens explains how, for example, biblical parallels in *The Grapes of Wrath* illuminate four of Steinbeck's layers:

On one level it is the story of a family's struggle for survival in the Promised Land.... On another level it is the story of the people's struggle, the migrants'. On a third level it is the story of a nation, America. On still another level, through... the allusions to Christ and those to the Israelites and Exodus, it becomes the story of mankind's quest for profound comprehension of his commitment to his fellow man and to the earth he inhabits.

Thus Steinbeck pushed back the accepted boundaries of traditional mimetic fiction and redefined the proletarian form. Like all truly significant American novels, *The Grapes of Wrath* does not offer codified solutions. Even though it treats with privilege a particular section of the migrant labor scene (Steinbeck ignores the problems of nonwhite migrant workers—Filipinos, Chinese, Japanese, and Mexicans—who made up a significant percentage of California's agricultural labor force, according to Carey McWilliams), his book still speaks to the universal experience of human disenfranchisement, still holds out hope for human advancement. At every level *The Grapes of Wrath* enacts the process of its author's belief and embodies the shape of his faith, as in this ringing synthesis 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 dam, and in the wall and house and dam to put something of Manself, and to Manself take back something of the wall, the house, the dam; to take hard muscles from the 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

II

Behind this most public of American novels stands a reclusive writer. John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, on February 27, 1902, to respectable middle-class parents: John Ernst Steinbeck, Monterey County treasurer, and Olive Hamilton Steinbeck, a former schoolteacher. Steinbeck attended Salinas High School, where he was an undistinguished student, then enrolled sporadically at Stanford University from 1919 to 1925. There, as an English-journalism major, he took a short-story writing class from Edith Mirrielees and was published in Stanford's undergraduate literary magazine, but he never finished his degree. He held a variety of temporary jobs during the next four years (laborer and cub reporter in New York City, resort handyman and watchman in Lake Tahoe), eventually publishing his first novel, *Cup of Gold*, in 1929. The novel scarcely sold, but Steinbeck's choice of vocation was sealed. He never again held a traditional nine-to-five job. Beginning in 1930, with the support and encouragement of his parents and especially of his wife, Carol Henning Steinbeck, whom he had married that year, writing became Steinbeck's daily occupation and continued through lean and flush times for the remainder of his life. When Steinbeck died on December 20, 1968, he had managed to support himself and his families (he was married three times and had two sons and one stepdaughter) exclusively on his writing income, primarily from the thirty books of fiction, drama, filmscripts, and nonfictional prose he published between 1929 and 1966.

*Cup of Gold*, a swashbuckling historical romance based on the life of seventeenth-century Welsh buccaneer Henry Morgan, gave no indication that Steinbeck would eventually be capable of producing a graphic novel with the startling originality, magnitude, compassion, and power of *The Grapes of Wrath*. What transpired in those ten years is as arresting an example of determined, self-willed artistic growth as we have in American letters, for in the nine volumes of prose (mostly fiction) he produced in the 1930s, Steinbeck simply got stronger and stronger as a novelist. His achievement is especially moving because he rarely thought of himself as a natural genius and rarely believed he had ever "arrived" as a writer. This typical self-assessment is recorded in *Working Days* (Steinbeck's journal is the hermetic story behind the making of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the writer's private text behind the reader's public one): "I was not made for success. I find myself with a growing reputation. In many ways it is a terrible thing.... Among other things I feel that I have put something over. That this little success of mine is cheating."

Steinbeck augmented his talent with plain hard work and repeated practice. Where his characters use tools to elevate work to a dignified level, Steinbeck turned to his "comfortable and comforting" pen, an instrument that became an "extension" of the best part of himself. "Work is the only good thing," he claimed on July 6, 1938, in *Working Days*. For Steinbeck, writing was a kind of textual habitation. He wrote books methodically the way other people built houses—word by word, sentence by sentence. His act of writing was a way of fulfilling his dream of finding a home in the architectural spaces created by his imagination. In fact, this creative and interior level of engagement is the elusive, unacknowledged fifth layer of

Steinbeck's novel. Although Steinbeck insisted on effacing his own presence in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the fact remains that it is a very personal book, rooted in his own compulsion. The "plodding" pace of Steinbeck's writing schedule informed the slow, "crawling" movement of the Joads' journey, while the harried beat of his own life gave the proper "feel" and tone to his beleaguered characters. Their unsavory weaknesses and vanities, their struggles for survival, their unsuspecting heroism are Steinbeck's as well. If *The Grapes of Wrath* praises the honorableness of labor and ratifies the obsessive quest for a home, it is because the author himself felt these twin acts called into being the most committed, the most empathetic, the most resourceful qualities of the human psyche.

By nature Steinbeck was not a collaborator. "Unless a writer is capable of solitude he should leave books alone and go into the theatre," he exclaimed years later. Solitude was an increasingly precious commodity in Steinbeck's life because intrusions conspired to paralyze his will and disrupt his concentration. "Every book seems the struggle of a whole life," he lamented in *Working Days*. A grass-growing mood was rarely his, so he managed as best he could within his constraints. Although it didn't always ensure complete solitude, Steinbeck often sequestered himself in the eight-by-eight-foot work room of Arroya del Ajo (Garland Gulch), the house he and Carol built in 1936 on Greenwood Lane in Los Gatos: "Just big enough for a bed and a desk and a gun rack and a little book case. I like to sleep in the room I work in," he told George Albee.

*The Grapes of Wrath's* communal vision began in the fire of Steinbeck's own labor, but the flames were fanned by numerous people, especially Carol Steinbeck and Tom Collins. Carol Steinbeck (1906–1983), his outgoing first wife, was far more politically radical than John and she actively supported northern California's local fugitive agricultural labor movement before he did. (According to his biographer, Jackson J. Benson, Steinbeck was not much interested in doctrinaire political theories at this point in his career.) Carol was an energetic, talented person in her own right, who agreed to relinquish a possible career in favor of helping to manage his. Their partnership and marriage was smoother and more egalitarian than the struggling years of Steinbeck's career; with the enormous success—and pressures—brought first by *Of Mice and Men* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1937), and then by *The Grapes of Wrath*, their situation became more tenuous and volatile. Carol was an extremely strong-willed, demonstrative person, and she was often frustrated, resentful, and sometimes jealous of John, inordinately shy, was frequently beleaguered, confused, and demanding. In the late 1930s, whenever John was writing daily, which was much of the time, Carol handled—but didn't always like—most of the routine domestic duties. She also shielded her husband as much as possible from unwarranted disruptions and intrusions, and she oversaw some of the financial arrangements (an increasingly large job) between Steinbeck and his literary agent. "Carol does so much," Steinbeck admitted on August 2, 1938.

Carol also served as his cultural envoy and stand-in. In January 1938, on a trip to New York City, she met with documentary film-maker Pare Lorentz (1905–1992), arranging between them his first visit to Los Gatos to discuss a joint Steinbeck-Lorentz movie version of *In Dubious Battle* (which was never made) and a private showing of *The River* and *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. These pioneering documentary films, which Lorentz made for President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal-inspired Resettlement Administration (fore-runner of the



Farm Security Administration), dealt with human displacement and natural erosion caused by the Dust Bowl and Mississippi Valley floods. After their initial meeting, Lorentz became an increasingly important figure in the novelist's life, providing everything from practical advice on politics to spirited artistic cheerleading.

Carol left her stamp on *The Grapes of Wrath* in many ways. She typed the manuscript, editing the text as she went along, and she served in the early stages as a rigorous critic and commentator (after typing three hundred pages, she confessed to Elizabeth Otis that she had lost "all sense of proportion" and felt unfit "to judge it at all"). In a brilliant stroke, on September 2, Carol chose the novel's title from Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic," perhaps inspired by her hearing of Pare Lorentz's radio drama, *Ecce Homo!*, which ends with a martial version of Howe's song. Steinbeck was impressed with "the looks of it—marvelous title. The book has been at last"; he considered it "Carol's best title so far." ("Tell Carol she is a whiz at picking titles and she has done it again with the new one," his drama agent, Ann Laurie Williams, exulted.) Her role as facilitator is recorded permanently in one half of the novel's dedication: "To CAROL who willed it." On February 23, 1939, Steinbeck told Pascal Covici that he had given Carol the holograph manuscript of *The Grapes of Wrath*: "You see, I feel that this is Carol's book."

Eventually, however, Steinbeck's heart changed its tune. Carol's brittle efficiency, managerial brusqueness, and violent mood swings seemed to cause more problems than they solved. She, too, was exhausted by the novel's completion and at her wit's end over its histrionic reception: "The telephone never stops ringing, telegrams all the time, fifty or seventy-five letters a day all wanting something. People who won't take no for an answer, sending books to be signed.... Something has to be worked out or I am finished writing." He went south to work and I came back to find Carol just about hysterical. She had been pushed beyond endurance," Steinbeck told Elizabeth Otis on June 22, 1939. His involvement with a much younger woman, a Hollywood singer named Gwyndolyn Conger, whom he met in mid-1939 and who quickly came to represent everything Steinbeck felt romantically lacking in Carol, signaled the beginning of the end of their marriage. They separated rancorously in 1941 and divorced two years later.

The second part of the novel's dedication—"To TOM who lived it"—refers to Thomas Collins (1897?–1961), the novelist's chief source, guide, discussant, and chronicler of accurate migrant information. Collins not only put Steinbeck in touch with the real-life prototypes of the Joads and Jim Casy, but he himself served as Steinbeck's real-life prototype for Jim Rawley, the fictional manager of the Weedpatch government camp. That camp, an accurate rendering of Collins's Arvin camp, became an oasis of relief for the harried Joads and is featured in [Chapters 22 to 26](#) of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck portrayed Collins with photographic accuracy in [Chapter 22](#): "A little man dressed all in white stood behind [Ma Joad]—a man with a thin, brown, lined face and merry eyes. He was as lean as a picket. His white clean clothes were frayed at the seams." Steinbeck also caught Collins's effective interpersonal technique in having Jim Rawley wear frayed clothes and win over Ma Joad by the simple request of asking for a cup of her coffee.

An intrepid, resourceful, and exceptionally compassionate man, Collins was the manager of a model Farm Security Administration camp, located in Kern County at the southern end of



California's Central Valley. The Arvin Sanitary Camp was one of several proposed demonstration camps intended to provide humane, clean, democratic—but temporary—living conditions for the growing army of migrant workers entering California from the lower Middle West and Dust Bowl region. (More than two dozen camps were planned in 1935 by the Resettlement Administration; by 1940, with New Deal budgets slashed by conservatives in Congress, only fifteen were actually completed or under construction.) Collins possessed a natural genius for camp administration. Labor historian Anne Loftis calls Collins a “hands-on administrator; he had the right mix of fanaticism, vision, and tactfulness. He and Steinbeck, both Rooseveltian Democrats, hit it off immediately in the late summer of 1936, when the novelist went south on the first of several grueling research trips with Collins during the next two years to investigate field conditions. (One of the many legends that grew up around *The Grapes of Wrath* purported that Steinbeck traveled with a migrant family all the way from Oklahoma to California; that never happened, though he and Carol did follow Route 66 home on a car trip from Chicago to Los Gatos in 1937.)

Fortunately, Collins was a punctual and voluminous report writer (a plan to publish his reports eventually fell through). His lively weekly accounts of the workers' activities, events, diets, entertainments, sayings, beliefs, and observations provided Steinbeck with a ready documentary supplement to his own research. In a section called “Bits of Migrant Wisdom” noted in Collins's “Kern Migratory Labor Camp Report for week ending May 2, 1936,” he records a discussion with two women about how best to cut down on the use of toilet paper. “One suggested sprinkling red pepper through the roll. The other suggested a wire be attached to the roll so that every time a sheet was torn off the big bell placed on the outside of the building for the purpose would ring and let everyone know who was in the sanitary unit and what she was doing.” Steinbeck saw the humor in the account and utilized some of the original material in [Chapter 22](#): “Hardly put a roll out 'fore it's gone. Come right up to meetin'. One lady says we oughta have a little bell that rings ever' time the roll turns once. Then we could count how many ever'body takes.' She shook her head. ‘I jes' don' know,’ she said. ‘I been worried all week. Somebody's a-stealin' toilet paper from Unit Four.’” Collins guided Steinbeck through the intricacies of the agricultural labor scene, put him in direct contact with migrant families, and permitted Steinbeck to incorporate “great gobs” of information into his own writing. “Letter from Tom.... He is so good. I need this stuff. It's exact and just the thing that will be used against me if I am wrong,” Steinbeck noted in *Working Days* on June 24, 1938.

In 1939, at Steinbeck's suggestion, Collins worked as a well-paid technical advisor to John Ford's Twentieth Century-Fox production of *The Grapes of Wrath*. (“Tom will howl his head off if they get out of hand,” Steinbeck told Elizabeth Otis.) And later—probably spurred by the success of both novel and film—Collins himself (under the pseudonym of Windsor Drake) wrote an autobiographical-fictional memoir, to which Steinbeck, who appears as a character, added a foreword: “Windsor and I traveled together, sat in the ditches with the migrant workers, lived and ate with them. We heard a thousand miseries and a thousand jokes. We ate fried dough and sow belly, worked with the sick and the hungry, listened to complaints and little triumphs.” The book was accepted but never reached print because the publisher reneged on the deal. After that, Collins resigned from the F.S.A., and he and Steinbeck passed out of each other's lives.

Clearly, Steinbeck had a knack for associating himself with gifted, generous people. George West, chief editorial writer for the progressive *San Francisco News*, was the man who instigated Steinbeck's initial investigations of the migrant labor situation for his paper (to be discussed below). Frederick R. Soule, the enlightened regional information advisor at the San Francisco office of the Farm Security Administration, and his assistant, Helen Horn, provided statistics and documents for his *News* reports and otherwise opened official doors for Steinbeck that might have stayed closed. Soule's colleague Eric Thomsen, regional director in charge of management at the F.S.A. office in San Francisco, personally escorted Steinbeck to the Central Valley and introduced him to Tom Collins at the Arvin Camp for the first time (Jackson J. Benson was the first to recognize that, in a convoluted and unintentional way, the federal government underwrote Steinbeck's research.) A continent away, in Manhattan Steinbeck's publisher, the intrepid and irrepressible Pascal Covici (1888–1964), kept up a running dialogue with the novelist. In his literary agents he was triply blessed. Mavis McIntosh, Elizabeth Otis, and Annie Laurie Williams not only kept his professional interests uppermost at all times but did so with the kind of selflessness that made them more like family members than business managers. Of the three women, Elizabeth Otis (1901–1981) became his most trusted confidante.

### III

Steinbeck lived to write. He believed it was redemptive work, a transformative act. Each day, after warming up with a letter to Otis or Covici and an entry in *Working Days*, he created a disciplined working rhythm and maintained what he called a “unity feeling”—a sense of continuity and habitation with his material. “Let the damn book go three hundred thousand words if it wants to. This is my life. Why should I want to finish my own life? The confidence is on me again. I can feel it. It's stopping work that does the damage,” he admitted in *Working Days* on July 7, 1938. Ideally, for a few hours each day, the world Steinbeck created took precedence over the one in which he lived. Because both worlds can be considered “real,” at times during 1938 Steinbeck didn't know where one began and the other left off; walking back into the domestic world from the world of imagination was not always a smooth shift for him (or for Carol). His work demanded his attention so fully that he finally refused to dissipate his energy in extra-literary pursuits: “I won't do any of these public things. Can't. It isn't my nature and I won't be stampeded. And so the stand must be made and I must keep out of politics,” he promised himself.

Steinbeck's doubts about his ability to carry out the plan of his novel surface repeatedly in his working journal, but he rarely questioned the risks involved in bringing his whole sensibility to bear upon it. Like Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, that other populist manifesto of the American spirit, Steinbeck's novel had a complicated growth process. *The Grapes of Wrath* was the product of his increasing immersion in the migrant material, which proved to be a Pandora's box. It required an extended odyssey before he discovered the proper focus and style to do the topic justice. In one way or another, from August 1936, when Steinbeck discovered a subject “like nothing in the world,” through October 1939, when he resolved to put *Working Days* to put behind him “that part of my life that made the *Grapes*,” the migra-

issue, which had wounded him deeply, remained his central preoccupation. He produced a seven-part series of newspaper articles, "The Harvest Gypsies," an unfinished novel, "The Oklahomans," a completed but destroyed satire, "L'Affaire Lettuceberg," and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Each version shared a fixed core of elements: on one side, the entrenched power, wealth, authority, and consequent tyranny of California's industrialized agricultural system (symbolized by Associated Farmers, Inc.), which produced flagrant violations of the migrant civil and human rights and ensured their continuing peonage, their loss of dignity, through threats, reprisals, and violence; on the other side, the powerlessness, poverty, victimization, and fear of the nomadic American migrants whose willingness to work, desire to retain their dignity, and enduring wish to settle land of their own were kept alive by their innate resilience and resourcefulness and by the democratic benefits of the government sanitation camps. From the moment he entered the fray, Steinbeck had no doubt that the presence of the migrants would change the fabric of California life, though he had little foresight about what his own role in that change would be. His concern was humanitarian: he wanted to be an effective advocate, but he did not want to appear presumptuous. "Every effort I can bring to bear is and has been at the call of the common working people to the end that they may eat what they raise, use what they produce, and in every way and in completeness share the works of their hands and their heads," he declared unequivocally to San Francisco *New* columnist John Barry.

Not counting the scotched plan to edit and publish Collins's reports, an abandoned play set in a squatters' camp in Kern County, or a warm-up essay (in the September 12, 1936, issue of *The Nation*), Steinbeck's first lengthy excursion into the migrants' problems was published in the liberal, pro-labor San Francisco *News*. "The Harvest Gypsies" formed the foundation of Steinbeck's concern for a long time to come, raised issues and initiated forces, gave him a working vocabulary with which to understand current events, and furthered his position as a reliable interpreter. This stage resulted from the notoriety caused by his recently published strike novel, *In Dubious Battle* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1936), after which Steinbeck found—often against his will—that he was fast being considered a sympathetic spokesman for the contemporary agricultural labor situation in a state that was primarily pro-management. There was a profound irony, because while *In Dubious Battle* exposed the capitalist dynamics of corporate farming, it took no side for or against labor, preferring instead to see the fruit strike as a symbol of "man's eternal, bitter warfare with himself."

At George West's invitation, Steinbeck produced "The Harvest Gypsies." These articles, peppered with Dorothea Lange's graphic photographs of migrants, appeared from October 1 to 12, 1936. Steinbeck's gritty reports detailed the plan of California's feudal agricultural labor industry. The pieces introduced the antagonists, underscored the anachronistic rift between the Okie agrarian past and the mechanized California present, explained the economic background and insidious effects of the labor issue, examined the deplorable migrant living conditions, and exposed the unconscionable practices of the interlocking conglomerate of corporation farms. (These elements remained central to the core and texture of *The Grapes of Wrath*.) Primarily, though, Steinbeck's eye was on the migrants, who were "gypsies by force of circumstance," as he announced in his opening piece: "And so they move frantically, with starvation close behind them. And in this series of articles we shall try to see

how they live and what kind of people they are, what their living standard is, what is done for them, and what their problems and needs are. For while California has been successful in its use of migrant labor, it is gradually building a human structure which will certainly change the state, and may, if handled with the inhumanity and stupidity that have characterized the past, destroy the present system of agricultural economics.”

Written mostly in a measured style to promote understanding and intelligent solutions, Steinbeck's articles are full of case studies, chilling factual statistics, and an unsettling catalogue of human woes (illness, incapacitation, persecution, death) observed from close contact with field workers he had met. In the spirit of advocacy journalism, Steinbeck concluded with prophetic recommendations for alleviating the conflict with federal aid and local support; this in turn would create subsistence farms, establish a migratory labor board to encourage unionization, and punish terrorism. When they were published in 1936 (and again when they were reprinted as *Their Blood Is Strong*, a pamphlet by the nonprofit Simon and Schuster Lubin Society that sold 10,000 copies), Steinbeck's articles solidified his credibility—both from the migrant camps and out of the migrant camps—as a serious commentator in a league with Dorothea Lange, her husband, Paul Taylor, and Carey McWilliams, two other influential and respected social investigators.

Steinbeck understood that the migrants wouldn't vanish from sight, even though officials in California hoped they would. He also knew that the subject reached further than he had first imagined. Consequently, Steinbeck built on his *News* pieces and made at least one more monthlong field trip with Tom Collins in October and November of 1937. They started from Gridley, where Collins was managing a new camp, but then roamed California from Stockton to Needles, wherever migrants were gathered to work. His purpose was to gather more research for his next version, the “big” book of fiction that had been in his mind for most of that year. (A letter to Elizabeth Otis, written on January 27, 1937, indicates that he had been wrestling with this version since the previous winter: “The new book has struck a bad snag. The subject is so huge it scares me to death.”) In an interview with Dorothy Steel on November 4, 1937, in the *Los Gatos Mail News*, Steinbeck told of starting a book whose topic was the Dust Bowl refugees, the “Oklahomans.” Though he was “reluctant to discuss the characters and plot,” he said it was “one third complete and will be about 1000 pages in length.” Given his comment to Otis, and the fact that Steinbeck traveled a good deal that year, three hundred pages of completed manuscript may have been wishful thinking on his part, or it may have represented the total number of pages of reports and research notes he had accumulated thus far.

In a second interview two months later, with journalist Louis Walther on January 8, 1938, in the *San Jose Mercury Herald*, he apparently had not progressed much, if at all. After hitting several “snags,” he was working on a “rather long novel” called “The Oklahomans,” which was “still a long way from finished.” Steinbeck, generally guarded with interviewers, revealed enough to Walther to indicate that his novel's focus was the salutary, irrepressible character of the “southern dust bowl immigrants” who, he believed, would profoundly alter the tenor of life in California. “Their coming here now is going to change things almost as much as did the coming of the first American settlers.” Furthermore, “the Californian doesn't know what he does want. The Oklahoman knows just exactly what he wants. He wants a piece of land. And he goes after it and gets it.” (In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck did not

relinquish his land-hunger theme, or his belief that the migrants formed a specific phalanx group within the large national mass movement of the 1930s, but he certainly dropped his imperious tone.)

Quietly, as nearly as can be determined, between January and March of 1938, Steinbeck stopped work on "The Oklahomans." He never mentioned it again by name, the manuscript has never been found, and—his boasts of three hundred completed pages aside—it is doubtful that he had actually written a substantial amount at all on it. In the first entry of *Working Days*, on February 7[?], 1938, he mentioned having written "ten pages" of an otherwise unidentified book. And six weeks later, on March 23, 1938, he again told Elizabeth Otis: "I've been writing on the novel but I've had to destroy it several times. I don't seem to know anything more about writing a novel than I did ten years ago. You'd think I would learn. I suppose I could dash it off but I want this one to be a pretty good one. There's another difficulty too. I'm trying to write history while it is happening and I don't want to be wrong." These comments in February and March 1938 have long been thought to refer to the beginnings of "L'Affaire Lettuceberg" (discussed below), but they could as easily refer to one (or more) avatars of "The Oklahomans," the *Ur-Grapes of Wrath*, which had not yet found its proper impetus or creative urgency. But in mulling over, rehearsing, and living with this big subject for so long, Steinbeck was staking his claim to its imaginative territory and experimenting with a way to fictionalize material that was, until then, the stuff of journalistic reportage.

The migrant situation had worsened, and along with it, Steinbeck's capacity for anger and his need for direct involvement had grown. The misery of the workers' condition was increasing in the winter of 1938, especially in Visalia and Nipomo, where thousands of families were marooned by floods. From Los Gatos, Steinbeck wrote to Elizabeth Otis in February:

I must go over into the interior valleys. There are about five thousand families starving to death over there, not just hungry but actually starving. The government is trying to feed them and get medical attention to them with the fascist group utilities and banks and huge growers sabotaging the thing all along the line.... In one tent there are twenty people quarantined for smallpox and two of the women are to have babies in that tent this week. I've tied into the thing from the first and I must get down there and see it and see if I can't do something to help knock these murderers on the heads.... They think that if these people are allowed to live in camps with proper sanitary facilities, they will organize and that is the bugbear of the large landowner and the corporation farmer. The states and counties will give them nothing because they are outsiders. But the crops of any part of this state could not be harvested without these outsiders. I'm pretty mad about it.

In late February and early March, Steinbeck witnessed these deplorable conditions firsthand at Visalia where, after three weeks of steady rain, "the water is a foot deep in the tents and the children are up on the beds and there is no food and no fire, and the county has taken off all the nurses because 'the problem is so great that we can't do anything about it. So they do nothing,'" he again informed Elizabeth Otis on March 7, 1938. In the company of Tom Collins, *Life* photographer Horace Bristol (whose work appears on the cover), and other F.S.A. personnel, Steinbeck worked day and night for nearly two weeks, sometimes dropping in the mud from exhaustion, to help relieve the people's misery, though of course no aid seemed adequate. Steinbeck was supposed to be doing an article for *Life* magazine, but when he encountered what was so devastating, he told Otis, that he was utterly transfixed by the

“staggering” conditions; the “suffering” was so great that objective reporting would only falsify the moment. Suddenly, Steinbeck realized that the issue was not as simple as portraying the “naive directness” of the migrants’ desire for land. Indeed, the cauldron of his own soul was beginning to boil with frustration and impotence. Apparently neither “The Oklahomans” nor the proposed magazine article could adequately redress the injustices he had recently witnessed. “When I wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*,” he declared in a 1952 Voice of America radio interview, “I was filled... with certain angers... at people who were doing injustices to other people.”

As a novelist, Steinbeck often experienced a delayed reaction to piercing events. Perhaps as early as February—but certainly no later than early April (“New book goes very fast but I am afraid it is pretty lousy. I don’t care much,” he said to Otis on April 26, 1938)—throughout approximately mid-May 1938, Steinbeck worked at the third stage of his effort and produced “L’Affaire Lettuceberg.” With this abortive—but necessary—side-track venture, Steinbeck’s migrant subject matter took its most drastic turn, inspired by an ugly event in Salinas, California, his home town. Earlier, in September 1936, Steinbeck had encountered the vicious clash between workers and growers in a lettuce strike: “There are riots in Salinas and killing in the streets of that dear little town where I was born,” he told novelist George Albee. The strike was smashed with “fascist” terrorism, and recollections of the workers’ defeat festered in Steinbeck for more than a year. “I am treasonable enough not to believe in the liberty of one man or a group to exploit, torment, or slaughter other men or groups. I believe in the despotism of human life and happiness against the liberty of money and possessions,” he said in a 1937 statement for the League of American Writers.

Perhaps as early as the first week of February 1938—and no later than the first week of April—galvanized by reports of the worsening conditions in Visalia and Nipomo, he felt the urgent need to do something direct in retaliation. John Steinbeck never became what committed activists would consider fully radicalized (his writings stemmed more from his own feelings and humane sensibility than from the persuasiveness of the left’s economic and social ideas), but by putting his pen to the service of his cause, he was as close to being a firebrand as he ever would. He launched into “L’Affaire,” a vituperative satire aimed at attacking the leading citizens of Salinas, who put together a cabal of organizers called “the committee of seven” to foment the ignorant army of vigilantes (assembled from the common populace of Salinas—clerks, service-station operators, shopkeepers). “L’Affaire Lettuceberg” was a detour from his main concern for the migrant workers, already recorded in “The Harvest Gypsies” and adumbrated in “The Oklahomans” rehearsals. In fact, “L’Affaire” wasn’t “literary” at all, but a “vulgar” tract concocted to do a specific job. Around mid-May 1938 Steinbeck, who had already written approximately 60,000 words (and was aiming for 10,000 more), confessed to Annie Laurie Williams: “I’ll have the first draft of this book done in about two weeks.... And it is a vicious book, a mean book. I don’t know whether it will be any good at all. It might well be very lousy but it has a lot of poison in it that I had to get out of my system and this is a good way to do it.”

Within days, however, Steinbeck wrote to Otis and Covici (who had already announced the publication of “L’Affaire”) to inform them that he would not be delivering the manuscript they expected:

This is going to be a hard letter to write.... This book is finished and it is a bad book and I must get rid of it. It can't be printed. It is bad because it isn't honest. Oh! these incidents all happened but—I'm not telling as much of the truth about them as I know. In satire you have to restrict the picture and I just can't do satire.... I know, you could sell possibly 30,000 copies. I know that a great many people would think they liked the book. I myself have built up a hole-proof argument about how and why I liked it. I can't beat the argument but I don't like the book. And I would be doing Pat a greater injury by letting him print it than I would by destroying it. Not once in the writing of it have I felt the curious warm pleasure that comes when work is going well. My whole work drive has been aimed at making people understand each other and then I have deliberately written this book the aim of which is to cause hatred through partial understanding. My father would have called it a smart-alec book. It was full of tricks to make people ridiculous. If I can't do better I have slipped badly. And that I won't admit, yet.

The final stage of writing culminated in *The Grapes of Wrath*. His conscience squared, his integrity restored, Steinbeck quickly embarked on the longest sustained writing job of his early career. Ridding himself of poison by passing through a "bad" book proved beneficial, he told Otis on June 1, 1938: "It is a nice thing to be working and believing in my work again. I hope I can keep the drive.... I only feel whole and well when it is this way." Naturally, his partisanship for the workers and his sense of indignation at California's labor situation carried over, but they were given a more articulate and directed shape.

From late May 1938, when he put the first words of the new novel to paper ("To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth"), through the winter of 1939, when the last of the corrections and editorial details were settled ("I meant, Pat, to print *all all all* the verses of the Battle Hymn. They're all pertinent and they're all exciting. And the music if you can"), *The Grapes of Wrath* was a task that fully commanded his artistic energy and attention. Everything he had written earlier—from his 1936 *Nation* article, "Dubious Battle in California," through "Starvation Under the Orange Trees," an April 1938 essay that functioned as the epilogue to *Their Blood Is Strong*, and even a poignant short story called "Breakfast" that he included in *The Long Valley* (New York: The Viking Press, 1938)—became grist for his final attempt. "For the first time I am working on a book that is not limited and that will take every bit of experience and thought and feeling that I have," he wrote in *Working Days* on June 11, 1938. From his numerous field travels with Tom Collins, and from countless hours spent talking to migrant people, working beside them, listening to them, and sharing their problems, Steinbeck summoned all the concrete details of human form, language, and landscape that ensured artistic verisimilitude, as well as the subtler imaginative nuances of dialect, idiosyncratic tic habits, and gestures that animate fictional characterization. "Yesterday it seemed to me that the people were coming to life. I hope so. These people must be intensely alive the whole time. I was worried about Rose of Sharon. She has to emerge if only as a silly pregnant girl now. Noah I think I'll lose for the time being and Uncle John and maybe for a while Cas. But I want to keep Tom and Ma together. Lots of people walking along the roads in the next season. I can hear their voices," he wrote in *Working Days* on July 8.

From the outset, in creating the Joad family to occupy the narrative chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck endowed his novel with a specific human context, a felt emotional quality, and a dramatic dimension his earlier versions lacked: "Begin the detailed description of the family I am to live with. Must take time in the description, detail, detail, look

clothes, gestures.... We have to know these people. Know their looks and their nature," he reminded himself on June 17. By conceiving the Joads as "an over-essence of people" Steinbeck elevated the entire history of the migrant struggle into the realm of art, and he joined the mythic western journey with latently heroic characters, according to this key notation on June 30: "Yesterday... I went over the whole of the book in my head—fixed on the last scene, huge and symbolic, toward which the whole story moves. And that was a good thing, for it was a reunderstanding of the dignity of the effort and the mightyness of the theme. I feel very small and inadequate and incapable but I grew again to love the story which is so much greater than I am. To love and admire the people who are so much stronger and purer and braver than I am."

At times during that summer, though, his task seemed insurmountable, because he kept losing the "threads" that tied him to his characters. "Was ever a book written under greater difficulty?" Nearly every day brought unsolicited requests for his name and his time, including unscheduled visitors, unanticipated disruptions, and reversals. Domestic and conjugal relations with Carol were often strained. House guests trooped to Los Gatos all summer, including family members and long-time friends Carlton Sheffield, Ed Ricketts, Rita and Tal Lovejoy, plus new acquaintances Broderick Crawford, Charlie Chaplin, and Pare Lorentz. As if that weren't enough to erode the novelist's composure, the Steinbecks' tiny house on Greenwood Lane was besieged with the noise of neighborhood building, which nearly drove them to distraction. By midsummer, hoping for permanent sanctuary, they decided to buy the secluded Biddle Ranch, a forty-seven-acre spread on Brush Road in the Santa Cruz Mountains above Los Gatos. Even though it was the most stunning location they had seen, its original homestead was in disrepair, so besides buying the land they would also have to build a new house, and that too became a source of added distractions. The Steinbecks didn't move in until November 1938, a month after the novel was finished (final typing of the manuscript and corrections of the typescript and galley proofs took place at the Biddle Ranch from November 1938 to early February 1939), but preparations for its purchase ate a great deal of Steinbeck's time and energy from mid-July onward.

August proved the most embattled period. Early in the month Steinbeck noted in his journal: "There are now four things or five rather to write through—throat, bankruptcy, Pare ranch, and the book." His litany of woes included Carol's tonsil operation, which incapacitated her; the bankruptcy of Steinbeck's publisher, Covici-Friede, which threatened to end their only source of income and posed an uncertain publishing future for the novel he was writing; Pare Lorentz's arrangements for making a film version of *In Dubious Battle*; the purchase of the Biddle Ranch, which Carol wanted badly and Steinbeck felt compelled to buy for her (they argued over the pressure this caused); and the book itself, still untitled (and therefore without "being"), which seemed more recalcitrant than ever. By mid-August he was roughly halfway through the novel, Steinbeck took stock of his situation: The Viking Press had bought his contract, hired Pat Covici as part of the deal, and planned a first printing of 15,000 copies for Steinbeck's collection of short stories, *The Long Valley*; a string of famous house guests had either just departed or were about to arrive; and he and Carol had closed on the Biddle property for \$10,500. "Demoralization complete and seemingly unbeatable. So many things happening that I can't not be interested.... All this is more excitement than our whole lives put together. All crowded into a month. My many weaknesses are beginning



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