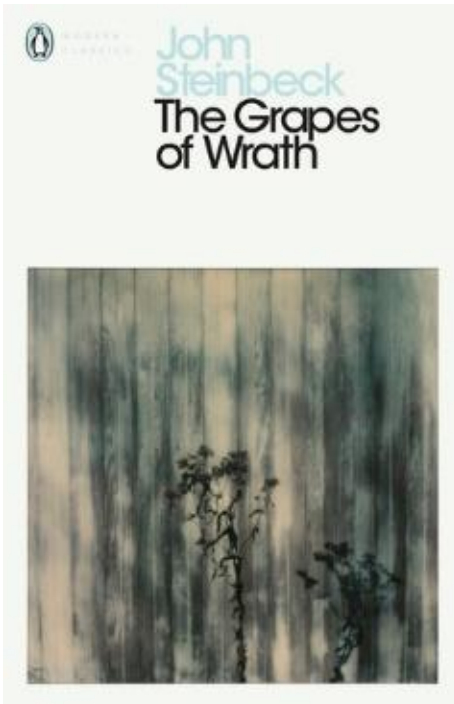


THE GRAPES OF WRATH

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Steinbeck, John (1992) [1939] *The Grapes of Wrath*, London and New York: Penguin Books.



It's a novel about migrant workers escaping environmental catastrophe, being subjected to racist abuse and robbed of their dignity and basic rights by extreme poverty. It has the ingredients of a contemporary narrative of forced migration driven by climate change but *The Grapes of Wrath* was written during the Great Depression and the mass displacement of farming families by drought, flooding and the dust bowl in south-west America in the 1920s and 30s. Data presented by Long and Siu (2016: 8) shows that inter-county migration by male heads of household exceeded 50 per cent within dust bowl states - Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas - between 1930 and

1940. They also show that 33.5 per cent of male heads of household migrated to another state from the dust bowl region in the same period (Ibid.). It was 'one of the greatest environmental and economic catastrophes in U.S. history' (Ibid.: 2) and one that continues to resonate today with 'up to three billion people expected to be displaced by the effects of global warming by the end of the century' (Vince, 2022). While climate change migrants are living more than a century on from

the Great Depression, they share with the dust bowl migrants the shock of a lost livelihood and forced displacement with a very uncertain future.

John Steinbeck immersed himself in the migrant experience and had already published two books, *In Dubious Battle* (2011 [1936]) and *Of Mice and Men* (2011 [1937]), about the labouring class in California. But *The Grapes of Wrath* became his towering achievement with the physical toll of writing 260,000 words in a year nearly finishing him as a writer (De Mott, 1992: xxxviii). During one of his long trips along migration routes he witnessed deplorable conditions in migrant camps in the valley of Visalia, California, where he tried to assist starving workers marooned by floods, knee deep in mud and lacking basic sanitary facilities. He invested the seething anger induced by these experiences into his writing and said ‘I’ve done my damndest to rip a reader’s nerves to rags’ (Ibid.: xiv). In his introduction to the book, academic Robert De Mott describes its mission to expose:

“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’s civil and human rights and ensured their continuing peonage, their loss of dignity through threats, reprisals and violence...” (Ibid.: xxiii).

The market as ‘monster’

The Grapes of Wrath tells the story of the Joad family who are lured to the fruit valleys of California by a handbill calling for labour to pick the harvest on farms across the state. California becomes a kind of Eden in the minds of the migrants with its promise of swollen, bountiful crops and ample labour opportunities. When the story opens, the Joads have already left their home and are living with an uncle in preparation for the journey West. Tenant farmers are being dispossessed of their land across Oklahoma by representatives of the bank and their clients in the corporate farming associations. A combination of mechanisation in the form of tractors and dust storms caused by drought and over-farming have left them without income or land to cultivate. In one of the book’s most powerful chapters, bank officials arrive to evict tenants from their land:

“We’re sorry. It’s not us. It’s the monster. The bank isn’t like a man”.
“Yes, but the bank is only made of men”.

“No, you’re wrong there – quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It’s the monster. Men made it, but they can’t control it” (Steinbeck, 1992 [1939]: 35-36).

This chapter brilliantly anticipates how today the markets are often discussed in ethereal terms – akin to temperamental gods – leaving us to speculate as to how they might ‘react’ to human-made crises and what measures are needed to ‘placate’ or ‘steady’ them (Cox, 2016). The social conditions of the farmers are irrelevant to the bank and its client ‘because those creatures don’t breathe air...they breathe profits’ (Steinbeck, 1992 [1939]: 34).

The migrant experience

Three generations of the Joad family load their possessions on to a Hudson Super Six sedan and their journey to California forms the book’s narrative arc. The mater familias, Ma Joad, is the family’s anchor and dispenser of wisdom. Her son Tom Joad undertakes a journey of political awakening under the guidance of a former preacher, Jim Casy, who joins their odyssey to the West. All of the characters are convincingly etched in a structure that combines the family’s narrative with short ‘interchapters’ that provide exposition and detail on the predicament facing migrants at the time. They include: a race to the bottom in terms of wages and conditions; the plight of indebted small farmers unable to pick their crops and forced to torch their harvests; and the virulent racism directed by ‘men of property’ in the West at ‘dirty and ignorant’ Okies (Ibid.: 296). Readers today will think of migrant children from Latin America being pushed into the Rio Grande by Texas troopers (Oladipo, 2023) or the thousands of migrants who have drowned in the Mediterranean while seeking sanctuary in Europe (IOM, 2022).

For large parts of their journey, the Joads are forced to take shelter on the roadside, cooking meals on camp fires and lacking facilities to care for the

sick, elderly and children in their family. They finally find relief in a government camp offering sanitation and refuge from corrupt police officers complicit with large farmers in cracking down on organised labour. But the need to find employment, and their dream of having their own home, drive the family into the clutches of unregulated employers paying a pittance for a day's labour. The book's climax is based on the flooding of migrant camps in Visalia that Steinbeck witnessed in 1938, where desperate workers clung to life in the most miserable of conditions and he 'worked day and night for nearly two weeks' trying to provide relief (De Mott, 1992: xxvii). By this stage, Tom Joad is a fugitive from the law having challenged the oppression of workers: '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' (Steinbeck, 1992 [1939]: 439).

Book's reception

The Grapes of Wrath became a publishing sensation, sold 14 million copies and has been translated into nearly thirty languages (De Mott, 1992: xi). It 'speaks to the universal experience of human disenfranchisement', argues Robert De Mott, and 'still holds hope for human advancement' (Ibid.: xv). The driving force behind the book was Steinbeck's first wife Carol, a more committed political activist than John who was 'not much interested in doctrinaire political theories at this point in his career' (Ibid.: xvii). Indeed, it was Carol who found the title of the book in Julia Ward Howe's 1862 'Battle Hymn of the Republic': 'Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored' (Ward Howe, 1862). Carol typed and edited the book and as Steinbeck acknowledged in his dedication, it was Carol 'who willed it'.

The book speaks to urgent themes that we are currently grappling with: trade unions striking for decent pay and conditions, and fighting for the right to strike; the climate emergency which has caused the internal displacement of 26.4 million people since 2008 (Amnesty International, 2022); and the racism, oppression and discrimination directed at migrants across the world (Amnesty International, 2023). Development educators can draw upon this classic work to actively challenge the 'othering' and scapegoating of migrants, champion migrant rights, and offer a voice to migrants as part of their practice. The 'radical voice of

protest' in *The Grapes of Wrath* still resonates loudly today 'wherever human beings dream of a dignified and free society' (De Mott, 1992: xl).

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