

# John Steinbeck

## A biography

a cura di Sarah Gudgeon

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### 1. Read

John Steinbeck, the American author, was born in California in 1902. He was from Salinas, a small farming town. John's father did different jobs to try and make money for the family and John worked on farms in the summer. He often worked with people who came from different parts of America. People moved around to look for work because the Great Depression meant that people were very poor and hungry at that time. John's early experiences gave him lots of ideas for his books. One of the main themes in his stories was social injustice. He decided to become a writer when he was 14 years old. He won the Nobel Peace prize for literature in 1962.

His most famous works include *Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*: both of these novels are about social issues that affect ordinary people. *Grapes of Wrath* was an anti-capitalist story based on a series of newspaper articles that Steinbeck wrote in San Francisco and *Of Mice and Men* was about two migrant farm workers, George and Lennie. Lennie was very big and strong but mentally, he was like a child. Lennie's friend George tried to help him stay out of trouble but things soon started to go wrong.

Unfortunately, many of the same issues of social injustice that Steinbeck wrote about in the 20th century are still here with us in the 21st century. Maybe with the help of today's socially aware writers and artists we can start to make a change, just like Steinbeck did.

### 2. Look at these groups of people. Tick the ones that Steinbeck wrote about.

- a. Farm workers
- b. Landowners
- c. Vulnerable people
- d. Architects
- e. Rich people

**3. Do you think it was right to give John Steinbeck a Nobel Peace Prize?  
Why/Why not?**

**4. Talk to a partner. Who would you write a story about?**

Examples: *Refugees, homeless people...*

## Teacher's Notes

1. Before reading, try and elicit the titles of some of Steinbeck's most famous works (*Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*). If the students don't know them, write them on the board and then ask them to name Italian writers with a social conscience (Benedetto Croce, who condemned fascism in his political roles and literary works and Luca Pirandello, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for literature in 1934).
  
2. Tick the groups of people that Steinbeck wrote about:
  - a. Farm workers ✓
  - b. Landowners ✓
  - c. Vulnerable people ✓
  - d. ~~Architects~~
  - e. Rich people ✓
  
3. Before exercise 3, ask students to think of reasons that you can be awarded a Nobel Peace Prize (charity work, humanitarian aid, etc).

Sample answers:

*Yes, because he highlighted the problems of vulnerable groups in society.*

*No, because his works didn't directly result in social change.*

Play devil's advocate with your students to encourage debate.

4. Exercise 4 could be turned into a class project to raise awareness of social injustice.

### \* Sarah Gudgeon

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