



Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath

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John Steinbeck wrote **The Grapes of Wrath** during an astonishing burst of activity between June and October of 1938. Throughout the time he was creating his greatest work, Steinbeck faithfully kept a journal revealing his arduous journey toward its completion. The journal, like the novel it chronicles, tells a tale of dramatic proportions—of dogged determination and inspiration, yet also of paranoia, self-doubt, and obstacles. It records in intimate detail the conception and genesis of **The Grapes of Wrath** and its huge though controversial success. It is a unique and penetrating portrait of an emblematic American writer creating an essential American masterpiece.

Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath Details

Date : Published December 1st 1990 by Penguin Books (first published January 1st 1989)

ISBN : 9780140144574

Author : John Steinbeck , Robert DeMott (Editor)

Format : Paperback 240 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Language, Writing, Biography, Autobiography, Memoir

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M. Sarki says

<http://msarki.tumblr.com/post/1093374...>

The most private of men writes a diary, keeping it current on each day he actually sits down to work on a novel which would become *The Grapes of Wrath*. Keeping a journal was something John Steinbeck had attempted in the past to no avail. But it is our great fortune that he succeeded at the most important time of his life to practice the discipline that not only earned him great literary rewards but also secured his memory in our American consciousness.

This journal is one of the best literary works I have ever read as Steinbeck's truth rings loud and clear, his desperation both real and imminent, and the personal frustrations of being a writer not only presented in fact but written upon us with his blood. What initiated two summers ago for me in my first reading of *Travels with Charley* was a new interest in the person John Steinbeck, more so than even his fictions. Though extremely controversial and outspoken, Steinbeck valued his privacy and solitude. He kept few friends, but those he did have were close and of like mind. The emotional pain he suffered in his amorous relationships is made all too clear in this journal written at a time of both great literary achievement and the impending failure of a marriage between two people seemingly highly suited to one another's goals in life. It is unfortunate that the physical and passionate side of this relationship could not be redeemed and saved. But Steinbeck left this wife for another ill-fated lover who became his second wife and ultimately the mother of his children.

The journal takes place at a time in the world of beating war drums, fascism, and Hitler's rise for world dominance and destruction. Meanwhile Steinbeck was struggling with fame and the pressure coming from the needy of every stripe. And as he was attempting to write what would become his greatest novel, his new neighbors were irritating the life out of him with their hammering and radios being played so loudly he could not think. But as disagreeable as this was to him it all helped to shape his diary into a fascinating window for peering into the life of a most interesting man of letters. I truly hated for this book to end. But it did, and what was finally and forcefully gleaned from this exercise was his firm belief in the importance discipline plays to any writer of note.

Twila Newey says

I coupled this with my reading of *The Grapes of Wrath*, which was fascinating and supports my theory that something prophetic was going on with Steinbeck. There was a drive to write the book, to make it visceral and real, to preach his sermon on the greatness and failure of America as an ideal. Here is what stuck out for me:

1. one day at a time, 2 pages a day
2. the over all sweep and separate movements of the book all existed in Stienbeck's mind prior to writing
3. the way he often laid out the work for the next day.
4. that he wrote in chaotic life conditions (noise, moving, calls for publicity, use of his name, etc.)
5. the fluctuation between self-doubt and confidence in his ability as a writer
6. his thoughts/feelings on the rise of fascism and the effect on the country so similar to current feeling of our country

As an interesting aside, I also happened to be reading *The Kaizen Way* simultaneously and see Steinbeck

intuitively using the ideas behind that small step method to some degree.

"Yesterday the work was short and 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." (#28)

"This family [the Joads] must live...And there is this frightful fear that I won't be able to do it, that it is too much for me." (#59)

"I did it but it may not be good. I don't know." (entry #35)

"This is a hell of a time to be writing a book. Everything in the world is happening and I must sit here and write. Well, if I ever finish it will be some kind of triumph". (entry #34)

"Just work a certain length of time and it will get done poco a poco. Just do the days work." (entry #40)

"Well, two pages a day will do it in time. And the time slips by. Just a matter of doing the daily stint" (#46)

Tyler Weaver says

Five stars for the diaries, three for the editor's commentary.

Kris says

For writers, this book is REALLY good.

Steinbeck wrote this journal alongside his writing of *The Grapes of Wrath*. He used the journal as way of keeping himself honest. He required of himself that he write almost daily, around 2,000 words per day. He had already written "Of Mice and Men" and "Tortilla Flats" without the journal concept, and maybe he developed this journal idea as a way to start his writing every day, but also as a way to keep track of the time he began working each day, and partially as a way to plan out which characters or plot selections he would develop.

What is inspirational about the book is that he constantly shows a lack of faith in his writing -- as I would guess many writers feel about their own writing. He was consistently faced with distractions -- noise from building going on outside of his small house, requests from people needing money or other writers looking for advice, or the demands of the theatrical world. "Of Mice and Men" was currently a theatrical production, and there was talk of a movie in the works at the time. Steinbeck also had a variety of friends that he regularly spent time with -- Charlie Chaplin was not the least of these friends. All of these distractions conspired to keep him away from his work -- but for the most part, Steinbeck managed to stay on schedule (helped along, of course, by his devoted wife who acted as typist and editor).

In spite of it all, Steinbeck took a solid five months to write this 600+ novel that would help him receive the Nobel prize in literature. I was impressed with his work ethic, and less than impressed with his health complaints and neediness. Having said that, reading the book proves that although incredibly talented, Steinbeck was a mere mortal who had the guts to stick with his goal against all odds.

Margaret Madden says

His wonderful to have access to the inner thoughts, and insecurities, of one of the most talented writers of the 20thC...

Bonnie says

I found this a very interesting read. I think that all authors, would-be-authors, and readers wondering about the process of creating a novel, would agree with me. Note: Some parts of Steinbeck's journal entries are slightly repetitious, but each entry is short enough that I found it easy, and not at all distracting, to skim through such passages.

The book begins with a 57 page "Introduction" – lengthy, but with some interesting points to make:

- *The Grapes of Wrath has been less judged as a novel than as a sociological event, a celebrated political cause, or a factual case study. If the past fifty years have seen little consensus about the exact nature of the novel's achievement, there has been plenty of proof that elicits widely divergent responses from its audience.*
- *As she did with all her husband's manuscripts, Carol typed and edited The Grapes of Wrath, served in the early stages as a rigorous critical commentator... and, in a brilliant stroke, chose the novel's title from Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic"....*
- *Contrary to popular belief, Steinbeck never traveled with a migrant family all the way from Oklahoma to California.*
- *Although he published prolifically after The Grapes of Wrath, it would be twelve years before Steinbeck summoned the resources to attempt, in East of Eden, another "big" book with a similarly exalted conception and theme.... A prophetic post-modernist, Steinbeck's real subject in Cannery Row, East of Eden, Sweet Thursday, The Winter of Our Discontent, and the Journal of a Novel was the creative process itself.*

PART II: THE DIARY OF A BOOK (May-October 1938):

The following are a few snippets to give you an idea of what these (100+) journal entries are like. (I have omitted the actual dates and time of each entry: for the most part, Steinbeck wrote daily, usually beginning at around 11:00 a.m.)

- *Entry #10: Now to the day's work and now Muley comes in and the reason for the desertion becomes apparent. Also, the night comes in with sleeping in the darkening plain and stars [ed. – Chapter 6:]. And after that I think a small inter chapter or maybe a large one dealing with the equipment of migration. Well here goes for Muley. Well that is done. I like Muley. He is a fine hater. Must write a few letters now.*
- *Entry #12: Today Tommy Joad tells about prison and I don't know whether the chapter will finish or not. That's not the problem. Rob and Mary write they want to come down. They can't. I am well into this now and nothing is going to be allowed to interfere. When I am all done I shall relax but not until then. My life isn't very long and I must get one good book written before it ends....*
- *Entry #13 The failure of will even for one day has a devastating effect on the whole, far more important than just the loss of time and wordage. The whole physical basis of the novel is discipline of the writer, of his*

material, of the language. And sadly enough, if any of the discipline is gone, all of it suffers....

- Entry #14 Yesterday was a bust. I could have forced the work out but I'd lost the flow of the book and it would have been a weak spot....

- Entry #15 Not an early start today but it doesn't matter at all because the unity feeling is back. That is the fine thing. That makes it fun and easy to work...

- Entry #16 Yesterday the used car lot and today Tom and Casy go home to the family, if they get there [Ed.—beginning of Chapter 8:]. Must go slowly and introduce these people fully and carefully for I will be with them for a long time...

- Entry #18 This is a huge job. Mustn't think of its largeness but only of the little picture while I am working. Leave the large picture for planning time...But I am assailed with my own ignorance and inability...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...

- Entry # 40 ... I wonder if I will ever finish this book. And of course I'll finish it. Just work a certain length of time and it will get done poco o poco. Just do the day's work. Some days I think I am getting sour but I don't know. Some days I think I am getting sour but I don't know. Then comes a good day and I am lifted again. And I can't tell from the opening. Often in writing these beginning lines I think it is going to be all right and then it isn't. Just have to see...

- Entry #42 Only 8 days to finish half. And today I cut out another section.

In Part III: AFTERMATH (1939-1941), twenty-three more irregular entries follow a short commentary.

“Following its official publication date on April 14, 1939, *The Grapes of Wrath* remained atop the best-seller lists for most of the year, selling roughly 428,900 copies in hard cover at \$2.95 apiece. (In 1941, when The Sun Dial Press issued a hard-back reprint selling for \$1.00, the publisher announced that over 543,000 copies of Steinbeck's novel had already been sold.)”

The last section, NOTES AND ANNOTATIONS a Bibliographical Preface, includes interesting clarifications of many of the entries in the two parts that comprise John Steinbeck's journal entries.

Steinbeck's diary entries actually total only one hundred pages. The rest of the book contains background information by the editor, Robert Demott. To say that the book should be dismissed because of this would be a mistake. At the same time, I expected to discover more insights into the day-to-day working mind of the author who wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*. If I were to read this the novel again, I would definitely have *Working Days* at my side as I read. At the same time, I can say that I recommended this book as a compelling read on its own merits.

Devin Murphy says

This is a really fascinating book as it reveals how down on himself he was during the writing of his masterpiece. It showed me the nature of all artistic endeavors being married to self-doubt.

Victoria Mixon says

Again, Steinbeck's daily record of his struggles to sit down and write his novel is a gift to all writers. Obviously, he worked from a plan he'd previously spent a great deal of time and energy forming, and obviously his manuscript later went through editorial development with his editor and close friend Pat Covici. But the day-to-day professional attitude toward his job, toward the process of his craft---that's

something no aspiring writer can ever hear enough about.

It takes a long time to become a writer. It takes years and years to write a single good book. And life interferes.

We need to know this in our bones.

Plus, it turns out Steinbeck referenced my hometown in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Who knew?

Corinne says

I read 'The Grapes of Wrath' first when I was a teenager. Recently, I re-read it, along with 'Working Days: the journal of the Grapes of Wrath', and I could understand this novel a lot better through the perspective of the author.

For example, I saw why Steinbeck separated the General Chapters from the Specific ones and why he alternated them, what was the role of the rain in the story, and why he built Ma Joad the way he did. I found reading the two books together moved me a lot more than before.

Tom's encounter with Casey at the beginning of the story laid the foundation for the transformation of their lives: for Tom, resurrection of his spirituality; for Casey, the resurrection of his practicality. A great complementary role, portrayed subtly and progressively.

The symbol of the tortoise is significant: Tom moving on a perilous ground, being hit by hostilities that throws him off balance, but then he finds his direction again, just like the tortoise. The novel is full of such effective parallels.

For me, it's one of the rare American novels where I could have access to the inner thoughts of the characters, which makes the novel intimate.

The construction of the micro-society is certainly Steinbeck's vision of the ideal society, but he didn't keep his characters in that illusive security. He did just enough to pull them out of the misery, and then left the readers to imagine the end.

The final act of Rose of the Sharon seems so much more powerful because Steinbeck had set her up from the beginning as just the opposite!

But, for me, the most powerful character in the story remains Ma Joad, for her maturity, wisdom, patience, and resilience. Rarely, have I come across a feminine character like her.

Claire says

There is no better way to disabuse people of the notion that writing is easy than to hand them this book. Steinbeck fans will appreciate the journal's insights into his personal life, but any reader should come away from this with some sense of the determination and grinding discipline that writing projects demand.

Nicky Penttila says

A writer who talks about his feelings! Doubt, confidence, joy, worry, and the push to keep working as the world collides into him. I've had this book on my shelf for a decade, at least, always intending to re-read *The Grapes of Wrath* with it but never actually buying that book. Reading it the first time on its own, though, helped me concentrate on the writing process, without the distraction of the novel's tough content.

"I have the laziness and reluctance that is always present in the beginning." (p. 62)

"The trouble with being too casual about a manuscript is that you don't do it. In writing, habit seems to be a much stronger force than either willpower or inspiration. Consequently there must be some little quality of fierceness until the habit pattern of a certain number of words is established. One never feels like awaking day after day. In fact, given the smallest excuse, one will not work at all. The rest is nonsense. Perhaps there are people who can work that way, but I cannot. I must get my words down every day whether they are any good or not. And I am a little afraid that they are not much good. However, down they go." (p. 118-19)

"Here is a strange thing -- almost like a secret. You start out putting words down and there are three things-- you, the pen, and the page. Then gradually the three things merge until they are all one and you feel about the page as you do about your arm. Only you love it more than you love your arm." (p. 121)

(from the commentary) " 'Why do they think a writer, just because he can write, will make a good after-dinner speaker, or club committeeman, or even a public speaker? I'm no public speaker and I don't want to be. I'm not even a finished writer yet, I haven't learned my craft,' he admonished an AP interviewer in 1939." (p. 98)

One disappointment is that except for mentioning trouble with a side-story's timeline, he doesn't go much into specific detail of sections and characters in the story. So don't look for deep analysis here. My *Grapes* copy is due to arrive this week, and I'm going to re--read this as I roll through it, which is what earned this book the 5th star.

Krys says

How did he do it? Steinbeck gave himself 6 months to write *Grapes of Wrath* (after several years of research), then sat down and penned the whole Pulitzer-winning manuscript in one concentrated burst--in two drafts mind you. How did he begin each day? What was he thinking? What obstacles did he face (plenty) & how did he deal with them? For a writer struggling through a manuscript, this diary is pure inspiration. Even Steinbeck had days when he felt like the world was about to discover what a loser he was as a writer. (He won a Nobel Prize in 1962.) Given fascinating context by editor Robert DeMott, a prominent Steinbeck scholar.

The controversy surrounding the release of *Grapes of Wrath* makes me wonder about some of the reviews on GoodReads.com--everybody likes to dislike a lot of books (including me) but what truly endures?

Kim says

Steinbeck wrote his Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Grapes of Wrath* in an exhausting period of intense creativity from June to October 1938. During that period and for some time thereafter, he kept a journal in which he wrote before he started work each day. Steinbeck set out what he expected to achieve on that day and recorded his hopes, dreams and frustrations. He repeatedly expressed his determination to make the book a good one, but also his fear that it wouldn't be. Steinbeck reported on bouts of depression and anxiety and his deep feeling of inadequacy about his writing. In the aftermath of publication of the book, he recorded the disturbing effect its extraordinary success had on his life. This book includes a comprehensive introduction and each of Steinbeck's journal entries, annotated by editor Robert Demott.

Steinbeck sent the journal to his editor and friend Pat Covici in 1950. He wrote:

Very many times I have been tempted to destroy this book. It is an account very personal and in many instances purposely obscure. But recently I reread it and only after this time did the unconscious pattern emerge. It is true that this book is full of my own weaknesses, of complaints and violence. These are just as apparent as they ever were. What a complainer I am. But in rereading these became less important and the times and the little histories seemed to be more apparent ... I had not realized that so much happened during the short period of the actual writing of *The Grapes of Wrath* - things that happened to me and to you and to the world.

Steinbeck asked that the journal not be published during his lifetime and that it be made available to his children if they should ever want "to look behind the myth and hearsay and flattery and slander a disappeared man becomes and to know to some extent what manner of man their father was."

This book provides an amazing insight into the creative process and into Steinbeck's mind. It is a testament to his steadfast determination to make *The Grapes of Wrath* the best book it could be. Highly recommended for Steinbeck fans.

Falina says

I love reading people's journals and I love John Steinbeck, so that explains the four stars. I hate that people can't or won't talk about the struggles they go through much of the time -- I know it can be depressing or considered selfish, but it's so alienating to feel something inside and see no traces of it in others. It's particularly fascinating to see inside the mind of someone who went on to become a Pulitzer and Nobel Prize winning author, and to discover he is just as unsettled, petty, whiny, and confused as I am most of the time. I don't think while he was writing this journal he intended for it to be read by anyone, unlike his *East of Eden* journal, which is less emotional and more structured. This might be the most "real" writing by Steinbeck I've encountered so far (and I've read nearly all of it at this point).

Stephanie Ricker says

Anyone who doesn't think writing is hard work should read this collection, taken from Steinbeck's daily writing notes. The poor man sweats bullets the whole time and pours blood, sweat, and tears into his manuscript. Even though Steinbeck had quite a few published works by this point, he angsts constantly about how he's not a real writer, and soon everybody is going to find it out. He alternates between thinking his work is crap and hoping that it's brilliant. He has to psych himself up to write each day and most of the time ends up bullying himself into cranking out a page even though he doesn't feel like it. In short, he expresses

the rollercoaster of emotions that every writer seems to go through during the writing process, and I felt tremendously encouraged by that. His excitement when his wife came up with the perfect title for the manuscript he'd been slaving over for months was touching and so...relatable. Hey, I know that feeling! This is a great read for fans of Steinbeck, or for any writer, regardless of whether they enjoy Steinbeck's works.
