

THE
CONNELL SHORT GUIDE
TO JOHN STEINBECK'S



**OF MICE
AND MEN**

“If you want to understand great literature, these
guides are perfect.”

RUPERT EVERETT

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Stephen Fender

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What does the title mean?

The phrase “Of Mice and Men” comes from a poem by the Scottish romantic poet Robert Burns (1759 – 96), called “Tae a Moose” [“To a Mouse”]. Written in 1785, it is a farmer’s address to a mouse whose nest he has turned up with his plough. The farmer apologises for breaking into the natural cycle in which the mouse is preparing for winter:

*I'm truly sorry man's dominion
Has broken Nature's
social union,*

but observes that

*Mouseie, thou art no thy lane [not alone],
In proving foresight may be vain: The best-laid
schemes o' mice an' men Gang aft a-gley [Go oft
awry],
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain, For promis'd
joy!*

What happens in the story?

George and Lennie, two itinerant farm workers in the 1920s, are on their way south to join the workforce on a grain ranch near Soledad, California. They are on the run from some trouble they got into in Weed, at the far north of the state, when the simple-minded Lennie tried to stroke a

girl's red dress, and was accused of rape. In the late afternoon, as they try to get to their new place of work, the bus driver leaves them off nearly four miles from the ranch, so they decide to bed down for the night by the Salinas river.

It soon becomes clear that George does the thinking for the two of them. Lennie is huge but mentally slow. He likes to pet small furry animals, and indeed is hiding a dead mouse in his pocket, having killed it by his over-attentive stroking. George throws it across the river.

As they prepare a supper of beans cooked in their cans over a fire, Lennie urges George to tell the story that soothes and pleases him whenever he hears it: how one day they are going to have their own house with a couple of acres and a cow and some pigs, a vegetable patch, some chickens and — this is what Lennie most likes to hear — rabbits for him to feed and pet.

The next day, when they turn up at the ranch, George tells Lennie to let him do the talking. Though the boss wonders about their relationship, George convinces him that Lennie is very strong, and that they will both work hard. After they are hired, Candy, the old caretaker who has lost one hand in a farm machine, invites them to select their beds in the bunkhouse. Curley, the aggressive son of the boss, comes in looking for his wife. Soon after Curley's wife visits the bunkhouse asking for her husband, George tells Lennie to have nothing to do with her.



Toward Los Angeles, California by Dorothea Lange

As the field hands come in for lunch, the new employees meet Slim, the tall jerkline skinner who drives the combine harvester, and Carlson, who totes the grain bags. Slim's bitch has just "slung" five pups. Carlson suggests he give one to Candy, whose old dog is nearly blind, and smells and is so lame that it can hardly walk.

The next day discussion returns to dogs old and new. Carlson persuades an unwilling Candy to let him shoot the old one, suggesting that he take one of Slim's new-born pups. Slim offers Lennie a pup too, though cautions him to leave it with its

mother until weaned. Curley comes in again looking for his wife, then, hearing voices in the barn, rushes out thinking he'll find Slim and his wife together. Slim faces him down. Curley returns to the bunkhouse and, full of displaced anger, picks a fight with Lennie. Unwilling to fight, Lennie is eventually goaded to catch Curley's hand, then crush it until the bones are broken. The other men take Curley to Soledad for treatment, after warning him to say that he caught his hand in a machine, unless he wants his humiliating defeat to become common knowledge.

When Candy overhears George and Lennie talking about their little dream farm, he reveals that he has a sizeable stake saved up, which he offers to add to their much more meagre savings if they will let him join them. Since George already knows of a place going for what they can afford, it begins to look as though the dream may come true.

The next night is Saturday, when most of the men go off to the brothel in town — George just to drink. Left behind are Lennie, Candy and Crooks, the black stable hand. They meet in Crooks's room in the stable, where they are not normally invited by the lonely but proud inhabitant. Lennie and Candy tell Crooks about their plan to buy a farm with George. Crooks ridicules the idea, saying that he has seen hundreds of itinerant workers with the same dream — a dream that never comes true. But when he hears that they really have the money, he

asks if can come along, doing odd jobs, not for a salary but for room and board alone.

Just then Curley's wife comes in. She admits to being lonely, and says she knows where the other men have gone. "They left all the weak ones here," she says. Lennie is entranced by her, but Candy tells her they don't want her there, and boasts of having "our own ranch house to go to". She mocks the idea. When she notices the bruises on Lennie's face she realises that Curley's hand is more likely to have been caught in Lennie's fist than in a machine.

The next day Lennie has taken his new puppy out of its mother's nest into the barn, in order to coddle it unobserved. The more he pets the little animal the harder his strokes get, until finally he breaks its neck. Curley's wife comes in. When she sees the dead puppy and notes Lennie's distress, she consoles him. "He was jus' a mutt," she says. She tells Lennie that she doesn't really like Curley, and says she could have gone to Hollywood to be in the movies. When Lennie confesses that he likes to pet soft things, she allows him to touch her hair. As his strokes get stronger and more urgent, she begins to scream and then to struggle. Terrified that George will discover that he "done a bad thing", Lennie tries to shut her up and hold her down, finally breaking her neck.

George has told Lennie that in case of trouble, or if they get separated, they should meet back at the river where they camped out that first night. So Lennie takes off for the river bank. When the

others discover the body, Curley forms them into a lynching party. Carlson reveals that his pistol has been stolen, so Curley and the other ranch hands assume that Lennie has it. Knowing where to find Lennie, George heads for the river camp. When he arrives, Lennie is surprised that he's not angry. Instead George tells him the story once again of the now impossible dream of their little farm. As he encourages Lennie to look across the river and the sound gets louder of the others crashing through the undergrowth, George uses Carlson's pistol to shoot Lennie in the back of the head.

What made *Of Mice and Men* different?

Of Mice and Men came out in 1937, shortly after Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* and before his *The Grapes of Wrath*. *In Dubious Battle* was an ambitious attempt to analyse the struggles of California farm labour in the light of a dubious bio- psychological theory, developed by a friend of Steinbeck's, which held that men behave differently when in large groups, or phalanxes, than they do when alone or in small groups. The novel, like the theory, has not stood the test of time: the characters are two-dimensional, the authorial voice over-didactic and intrusive.

Of Mice and Men was something of a reaction to *In Dubious Battle*. It was a return to material that the author knew first-hand. He now wanted to create a "little novel", he wrote in his journal, for which he must "find the beauty" (a quality missing from *In Dubious Battle*) and that would avoid the cause-and-effect movement towards a pre-determined theoretical position that drove the preceding book. In fact, says the biographer, Jackson Benson, his first working title for the manuscript was "Something that Happened", in order to suggest an accident, and thus establish a "non-teleological approach" to his new work. In its quiet way, however, *Of Mice and Men* was also an experiment. As Steinbeck's novels began to sell, so did the chances of their being adapted into plays, or even films. He had already sold the film rights to an earlier novel, *Tortilla Flat* – they would be sold again before the movie finally came out in 1942, starring Hedy Lamarr and Spencer Tracy – and he was becoming interested in the process by which fiction is converted into a film script. Besides, he seemed to want to get away from the excessive authorial comment and sign-posting of *In Dubious Battle*.

The solution was to write a novel as much like a play as possible: a narrative made up largely of dialogue accompanied by only enough description to set the scene, and with no passages of editorialising. That's just what *Of Mice and Men* is: a "play-novelette", as one critic called it.

With its action conveyed mainly through its dialogue and with just four locations – the river bank, the bunkhouse, Crooks’s room and the barn where Lennie kills Curley’s wife – it was easily adapted for the theatre, so easily that a version was appearing on Broadway within a year of publication. Other adaptations followed, including a successful 1939 film with Lon Chaney Jr. as Lennie and Burgess Meredith as George.

From the start the book was a hit. It was taken up by the Book-of-the Month Club, which meant guaranteed sales of more than 350,000 even before the book came out. Critics praised the simple, unassuming realism of the new work. It is “not a ‘proletarian novel’ in the sense in which the arm-wavers currently use the term”, said Joseph Henry Jackson in the San Francisco *Chronicle*, but rather a “simple story” about men “as human beings who think and do and desire the many and various things that men have always thought and done and longed for”. “The theme is not, as the title would suggest, that the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley,” said Fred T. Marsh in the *New York Times Book Review*, “but a play on the immemorial theme of what men live by besides bread alone. In sore, raucous, vulgar Americanism, Steinbeck has touched the quick in his little story.”

An English critic, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, called the book “a small masterpiece” in the “tough-tender” school of American fiction. The reviewer for the London Mercury, however,

was less generous: calling the final scene, in which George shoots Lennie to save him from being lynched, was “a triumph of the sentimental macabre” he said, while Dorothea Brande Collins, a New York critic – and wife of the self-styled fascist Seward Collins – wrote in the magazine edited by her husband that “surely no more sentimental wallowing ever passed for a novel, or had such a welcome, as this sad tale of a huge half-wit and his cowboy [sic] protector!” The reason why we might not notice the sentimentality, Brande Collins continued, is that “masculine sentimentality, particularly when it masquerades as toughness”, is harder to spot than the feminine kind, but it can be recognised by “the romantic overestimation of the role of friendship, the wax-figure woman, bright, hard, treacherous, unreal... from whom it is a virtue to flee to masculine companionship” (*American Review*, April, 1937).

Though determined not to follow the liberal intelligentsia in liking the novel, Brande Collins did hit upon aspects of *Of Mice and Men* that even they would come to question once the dust had settled. In *On Native Grounds* (1942), his classic survey of modern American prose before World War II, the New York liberal Alfred Kazin would write of “the calculated sentimentality of *Of Mice and Men*”, while Mark Spilka, writing in *Modern Fiction Studies* (Summer 1974), would follow Brande Collins’s lead in connecting male sentimentality to the fearful vision of the predatory woman.

What sort of ranch is Steinbeck describing?

A common – indeed, virtually universal – misreading of the novel is that *Of Mice and Men* is about migrant farm workers.* The book is almost always written and talked about as one of Steinbeck's three novels about migrants in the Great Depression. Even Jackson Benson, Steinbeck's most authoritative biographer, refers to the author's "concern with migrant farm labor" that led him to "three of his greatest novels, *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*", and the three books are commonly referred to as Steinbeck's "Dust Bowl novels".

This is understandable. Not only did Steinbeck publish his work at the height of the Great Depression, in 1937, but his book foreshadows the suffering experienced by agricultural workers during it. In its story of broken dreams and a desperate hunt for work, it reflects the mood and atmosphere of America in the 1930s even if Steinbeck was in fact depicting a slightly earlier world, the world of the 1920s, and, for the details of the action, locale and characters drawing on his experience – during holidays from school and college – working on hay and grain ranches.

* A distinguished exception to this misconception is Anne Loftis's "A Historical Introduction to *Of Mice and Men*", in Jackson Benson, ed., *The Shorter Novels of John Steinbeck*

Surprisingly, perhaps (given the degree to which the novel is associated with the Depression), this comes out vividly in the 1992 film of the novel, directed by Gary Sinise and starring John Malkovitch. According to the *New York Times*, the 1992 film "remains faithful in almost every way to the stark Steinbeck tale" – more so than the darker, more melodramatic 1940 film – and "emphasizes something in the original work that never before seemed of foremost importance: *Of Mice and Men* is a mournful, distantly heard lament for the loss of American innocence. This has always been in the Steinbeck novella, but it is the dominant mood of the film."

But for all that, if we are properly to understand *Of Mice and Men* it is essential to grasp that the novel is set before the Depression, in the 1920s, not in the 1930s. George and Lennie are not from out of state; they are native-born Californians. They are not migrants; they are itinerants. Unlike the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath*, they are not a family; they are lonely individuals. They never had their own small farm to lose and leave, though they dream vainly of having one in the future.

Another difference between the 1920s and 1930s was the farm labour situation. In the depression of the 1930s, the families driven off their mid-western farms by hostile nature and economics flooded into California. With the supply of labour vastly exceeding demand for it, wages plummeted – that is, if there were any jobs