

The Big Read: Ridgefield Reads “The Grapes of Wrath”

Materials supplied by the National Endowment for the Arts through The Big Read include numerous discussion questions, as do several of the websites and books listed on our resource page. Below are a few others that came out of our selection process earlier in the year. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list. Combined with the hints in the “General Guidelines for Facilitating a Reading Group,” we are sure these will serve as a stimulus for you to come up with your own ideas.

Different groups have different dynamics and may wish to approach the material in their own way. Some groups may have an interest in reading additional background information in advance, such as biographical material about the author. Others may wish to address the relationship between the book and the movie. We have included several questions that would be helpful in these situations.

Core questions to be asked of all groups

Discussions are taking place all over town during the course of 2 months. To try to forge some common ground among these different groups, we are asking that all facilitators include the following two questions in their session. We will attempt to record and compile some of the varying responses to share.

The Grapes of Wrath was originally published in 1939. Why does it still appeal to readers over 60 years later?

What other works of literature, music, art can you think of that seem to have been influenced by this book or that carry on its themes?

Icebreaker Questions (to get the discussion off the ground)

Have you ever been to a book discussion group before?

When did you first read this book? If you had read it before doing so for this discussion, did your reaction change when you read it again now?

General Questions

The Grapes of Wrath is often described as “the great American novel.” What does that phrase mean to you, and do you think it deserves that appellation?

The Grapes of Wrath has been controversial ever since its publication in 1939. Why do you think it has generated such controversy (themes, language, style)? See Rick Wartzman’s book *Obscene in the Extreme* for a detailed account of some of this history.

Steinbeck, particularly in this novel, is noted for his “naturalistic” style, i.e. “a type of literature that attempts to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human being” (Dr. Martha M. Campbell). What factors contribute to this characterization? How does this affect your experience as a reader? Does it draw you in or distance you?

To what extent are the main characters (Ma, Tom, etc.) depicted as distinct individuals and to what extent do they serve as symbols?

The structure of the novel is distinctive, with chapters of lyrical exposition alternating with more plot-driven sections. How does this affect you as a reader? Do you have a preference?

Which factors of the novel contribute most strongly to your experience of it as a reader? Story/plot/narrative? Characters? Relationships between characters? Setting? Broad themes? Why and how?

Despite the particular societal/historical/political framework of the novel, would you agree that at heart this is essentially the story of a family? How does this family define itself? How important is the family to each of the main characters? How do they each struggle to keep the family together, or learn to move on?

Both the opening and the ending sequences in this novel have become iconic. Talk a little about how the beginnings and endings of books (and this one in particular) affect you as a reader.

Are you moved at the end of the book to further action? Study? Reflection? Are you inspired by Tom’s speech to do anything to fulfill his (and Steinbeck’s) vision?

Do you find this book dated or archaic, or does it work for you as a reader in 2010? Discuss in terms of language and style as well as themes.

Steinbeck’s language in this novel is sometimes described as being Biblical, in tone and in subject matter. Do you agree? How so? Can you cite any examples? Does this appeal to you or do you find it off-putting?

What does Steinbeck have to say about religion in this novel? What do you think of the character of Preacher Casey?

When Steinbeck wrote this book, the circumstances he describes were the present day, truly current events for his first readers. Decades later, these events and situations have become part of the historical record. Do you experience this as a “historical novel” or does the real-time immediacy remain? How does this differ from reading something written today, with hindsight, about an earlier era?

The Grapes of Wrath is a work of fiction, but it contains many individuals, events and situations that are based on or drawn from real life. How does Steinbeck's treatment of this material as fiction differ from a non-fiction treatment of the same topic? Does this novel feel at times like a documentary?

Describe and discuss Steinbeck's politics, as expressed in the book and in his life. Do you find his views and prescriptions for change realistic, naïve or what?

What does Steinbeck have to say about the relationship between man and nature, and how does he say it?

What character do you most identify with? Why?

What themes in the novel relate to today's society? Environmentalism, social justice, politics of food production, class divisions are just a few topics you might discuss.

How does this portrait of migrant workers of the 1930s relate to the current national discourse on immigration?

How do recent economic instabilities affect your reading of this story of the Great Depression?

How can people in a relatively well-to-date community like Ridgefield relate to what poor migrant workers in California experienced? How does Steinbeck help the reader make the connection?

If you are familiar with Steinbeck's life, do you see any similarities between the author himself and any of the characters (Tom Joad, for example)?

Has this novel held up well over time? Is it still relevant? Why or why not? What about Steinbeck's work as an author makes this so?

Moving Beyond the Book

Good literature often makes us contemplate our own lives as well as those of the characters. We have found that books set in the last 60-100 years often prompt a desire on the part of readers to relate how they lived through similar experiences. With the agreement of your group, you may wish to allow some or all of your session to be devoted to oral history – the sharing of personal reminiscences prompted by the reading material. The role of the facilitator is to keep one or two people from dominating the conversation and to ask leading questions to keep discussion moving, such as “How did the Depression affect your family? Did you have any experiences similar to those of the Joad family?”

Questions Relating to the Book and the Movie

NB Establish early on whether the group as a whole has seen the movie. Otherwise, you may wish to ask folks to put off discussion of the film to the end of the session, so those who have not seen it are not left out.

Which members of the group have seen the 1939 film version, starring Henry Fonda and Jane Darwell? How does your familiarity with the movie influence your reading of the book?

What were the major changes from the book to the movie? Why do you think these were made?

Which do you like best, the book or the movie? Why?

Any adaptation from book to film is likely to result in cutting out something to condense and focus the action. Often other details are changed for technical or other reasons. What elements of this book that are not present in the movie did you like most? Are there characters or scenes you now know that you would leave in or emphasize more if you were making the film today?

Wrap-Up/Evaluation Questions

Would you have read this book on your own, for pleasure, if it were not “assigned” as part of this project?

Would you recommend this book to someone else? Who and why?

Did you enjoy reading and discussing this book? What was the best part for you? What didn't you like?

Do you have any suggestions for other books to consider if Ridgefield should do a one book, one community project again another year?