

Of Mice and Men Background Information

Of Mice and Men is a novel set on a ranch in the Salinas Valley in California during the Great Depression of the 1930s. It was the first work to bring John Steinbeck national recognition as a writer. The title suggests that the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry, a reference to Robert Burns's poem "To a Mouse."

Of Mice and Men was selected for the Book of the Month Club before it was officially published, an honor that encouraged 117,000 copies of the novel to be sold before its official publication on February 25, 1937. Critical response to the novel was generally positive. There were, however, critics who were offended by the rough earthiness of the characters and their lives. By April 1937, the book was on best-seller lists across the country, and it continued to remain a top seller throughout that year. Steinbeck said that he was not expecting huge sales, and he was surprised by the substantial checks he received from his agents. In fact, Steinbeck became a celebrity with the publication of his novel, a status that he feared would negatively affect his work. Steinbeck conceived *Of Mice and Men* as a potential play. Each chapter is arranged as a scene, and each scene is confined to a single space: a secluded grove, a bunkhouse, and a barn.

With the success of the novel, Steinbeck worked on a stage version with playwright George Kaufman, who directed the play. *Of Mice and Men* opened on Broadway in New York City on November 23, 1937, with Wallace Ford as George and Broderick Crawford as Lennie. The reviews were overwhelmingly positive, and the play ran for 207 performances, winning the prestigious New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. The action of the novel occurs over the course of three days. Steinbeck created the novel's two main characters, George Milton and Lennie Small, to portray victims of forces beyond their control. George and Lennie are two migrant agricultural workers on a California ranch who share a dream of owning their own farm someday. They take jobs at a ranch where their hopes are at first raised but

then destroyed by a tragic accident. Steinbeck depicts George and Lennie as two innocents whose dream conflicts with the realities of a world dominated by materialism and greed. Their extraordinary friendship distinguishes them from other hopeless and lonely migrant farm workers. The novel portrays a class of ranch workers in California whose plight had been previously ignored in the early decades of the twentieth century. In fact, George and Lennie are like mice in the maze of modern life. The great friendship they share does not prove sufficient to allow them to realize their dream. As a young man, Steinbeck learned about migrant laborers, usually unmarried men recruited to work during harvest seasons, from his own experience as a worker on company-owned ranches. With *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck became a master craftsman, ready to write his masterpiece *The Grapes of Wrath* the following year.