

## ANDREA JOHNSON

*Salinas Valley, 2013*  
acrylic on canvas, 24 x 36 in



courtesy: Winfield Gallery

## Living Steinbeck: Dan White in conversation with John Steinbeck scholar Susan Shillinglaw

**T**o mark the 75th anniversary of *The Grapes of Wrath*, I got back in touch with my former colleagues at San Jose State University, where I was a Steinbeck fellow in 2007–2008. Susan Shillinglaw is a scholar in residence of the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas, a recent President's Scholar Award honoree, and a professor of English and comparative literature at SJSU. She marked the anniversary with a new book, *On Reading The Grapes of Wrath*. We talked about the origins of *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the reasons it continues to enchant, infuriate, and inspire generations of readers.

—Dan White

**Dan White:** Any Californian who is reading *The Grapes of Wrath* on its seventy-fifth anniversary can't miss the parallels between the Dust Bowl and our nightmarish drought.

**Susan Shillinglaw:** Steinbeck writes about the uncertainty of moving west, the sense that anyone coming to the west confidence in success, anyone who doesn't take into account weather patterns and cycles of rain and drought, is foolish—like Joseph Wayne in *To a God Unknown*. For Steinbeck, water is part of the story of the West. While migrants are tremendously optimistic, the land doesn't always yield expectations placed upon it. The dreams and visions don't take into account the whole picture.

**DW:** I just finished reading your book about reading *Grapes*, and one new concept for me was the idea of the book having “five layers,” and how this seems to have come from his close friendship and professional relationship with the marine biologist Ed Ricketts. Did Steinbeck own up to that influence? Has he said there's this way of reading and interpreting the book that comes directly from observing the natural world?

**SS:** I'm theorizing a bit, but this idea is based on conversations they had throughout the thirties. Ed Ricketts was always looking, always cataloguing things: invertebrates, approaches to ecology, friends' personalities, poets. What they discussed together was a way of observing the world, which is not top down, not humans dominating

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*Untitled*, 2013  
acrylic on canvas, 42 x 32 in



courtesy: Winfield Gallery

place. Their shared vision was about living in place. To understand humans and their environments you start simply and move to complex interactions—or you start with the concrete and end with the abstract. A lot of authors move from realistic to abstract, of course, but Steinbeck described the reading process as deeper and deeper participation, going outward in patterns.

DW: And this process of “building outward” requires a slow and steady gaze. You’ve spoken of the slowness of pacing in *The Grapes of Wrath*—the readers lose themselves in the details of their lives, in the natural observation, in the attention to detail.

SS: Steinbeck said it obsessively in his journal, “I have to slow down. I have to make sure it flows.” Over and over again.

DW: What about this book makes it a perennial? All these years later, people are buying hundreds of thousands of copies.

SS: Part of it is the relevance—the cycle of banks seizing assets, of drought, of poverty, of power and powerlessness. The issues in the book are still so contemporary. And Steinbeck’s prose is lucid. He connects with readers. I’ve taught Steinbeck a long time. Students start one book and they want to read them all. There’s something in him that causes readers to connect. I think it’s empathy. His style was not Hemingway’s style, but he was interested in what Hemingway was doing, which was to clarify and simplify. He wanted readers to participate in the actuality of what he said. He was a reporter first, before he started *The Grapes of Wrath*. He had that feeling for detail, that sense of truth and getting it right. He wanted it to be accurate. The prose is beautiful, so you luxuriate in the words at the same time the book takes you to uncomfortable places. Chapter 25 is such a lyrical picture. It shows you how beautiful spring is in California, but it turns into the angriest chapter in the book. It’s a diatribe against growers, and so his prose leads you from lyrical to polemic. By the time he wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*, he’d honed his instrument.

DW: You’ve mentioned his sense of humility, and that comes across in the work, too.

SS: He’s not arrogant. He’s approachable. He never thought he was a great writer. He said he wasn’t like Faulkner, who had ideas percolating in his mind waiting to get out, had a hundred stories in mind. Steinbeck didn’t have that kind of brilliance, but I think he had the talent and the love of writing, and he kept working at it.

DW: He was always considering strategies to make the work more impactful. Between the chapters, we pull way back and get this almost bird’s-eye or God’s-eye view of what’s going on.

SS: I think it slows you down, because you’re reading the Joads’ story, and we love narratives, stories, plots; and so we think, “Okay, what’s going to happen next?”—and the narrative will move it along from there too. But I think the inter-chapters, which tend to be experimental in a lot of different ways, pull us out of that narrative and make us look at a broader perspective, as you said—but they also slow you down.

DW: He knew there were going to be people out there who would be so offended by his work—not just the growers, but readers who objected to the language of his characters, the earthiness. One of the famous button-pushing scenes is, of course, the ending with Rose of Sharon in the barn.

SS: I think he knew that people would object. He’d tell his editors it wouldn’t be a popular book, and “Don’t print too many,” etc. Part of his concern was the raw language; he didn’t want to change a word like “shitheels”; he didn’t want to change anything. The editors wanted him to change the final scene, and he said no, he had the final scene in mind about a third of the way through the novel and he knew where he was going. He wanted something to shock, there’s that; but he also wanted a symbol. If you break down, if you lose everything, what do you have left? What kind of existential decision can you make? The Joads have no house, no family, no food, no warmth, no baby. What they lack is so palpable—but, given that, what

can you do in a book that's all about connections, people, and communities? You can reach out to one another. To make that hit hard at the end, you have to have something different from anywhere else in the book, because essentially, *Rose of Sharon* is doing what the Joads do with the Wilsons early on. They help them out when they are in need, and the Wilsons helped them out, so it has to have some kind of punch beyond that. To wrap the book up, it has to have something else for readers to think about, so you're not just repeating what you said before. In the Steppenwolf Theatre Company production, they tried to increase that impact by having the man that *Rose of Sharon* suckles be black.

**DW:** It seemed to me that the *Rose of Sharon* gesture is something that's inclusive of a wider family or wider community.

**SS:** Family isn't just nuclear family; it has to be redefined. It's something larger than the Joads: it's the Joads plus the Wilsons, it's the Joads plus other migrants, it's Tom Joad's "I'll be everywhere." Family has to be not just immediate family, but those you're willing to go to the line for: empathy makes everybody important. This time through, when I was rereading *Grapes*, when I was writing my book, I noticed a passage I hadn't really considered before, about a family that doesn't have money to buy a car. And so they pack up all their stuff in a trailer, and they drag that trailer to the side of the road, and they wait, believing that somebody will pick them up. And somebody does—a guy attaches the trailer to his car and drives the family all the way to California. And Steinbeck says: How did they know to have such faith in their own species? I think that passage suggests what's going on at the end of the book—and that's what I discuss as the importance of "emergence" in the book. But it's in that sense of emergence that you know something will happen—you don't know *what* will happen, but that *something* will happen.

**DW:** Another emotionally loaded character is the Jim Casy fallen preacher. You mentioned in your book how many students inevitably seize upon the "JC" and take him for Jesus, but when Steinbeck created Casy, he distilled so much complex philosophical thought—from

transcendentalists, William James, Whitman, Emerson—all pressed together into this one imperfect man who speaks so clearly.

**SS:** I suppose in part it comes from Ed Ricketts, because that's the way Ed Ricketts's mind worked. Ricketts was obsessed by the notion of breaking through; he was a scientist, and he was studying the intertidal zone and spending his life doing that. But he also listened to music and read about other religions: Buddhism and Taoism. And Whitman.... He believe that somehow you could break through to a sense of the whole... that there's a spiritual vibration in nature, things you can't quantify in the world, ideas you can't necessarily discuss rationally. Spirit. A kind of yearning for connection with something larger. Steinbeck includes many restless, visionary characters in his fiction. Casy is the most well-developed Ricketts-type character, or the kind of person Steinbeck believed saw most broadly and understood people most fully. It was always the person who could detach a little bit and study a situation, and that's essentially what Casy was doing: at the beginning, he was detaching from religion, so he could understand more fully what people were all about.

**DW:** Like the method of observation behind Ricketts's *Between Pacific Tides*.

**SS:** He's a preacher first, but he still says, "I want to go look and see and feel, I want to study things, I want to see what this means."

**DW:** For readers who are unfamiliar with *Pacific Tides*, could you give us just a quick sense of the book, and the way that Ed Ricketts put it together, and the influence of that book and the methodology behind it on Steinbeck?

**SS:** I don't think that book is as much of an influence on *The Grapes of Wrath* as on Steinbeck's next book, *Sea of Cortez*. What Ricketts was studying were communities in the intertidal. Perhaps *Between Pacific Tides* was not as great an influence, per se, on *Grapes* as it was on Steinbeck's next book, *Sea of Cortez*, published with Ricketts as co-author. Rather than classify intertidal animals scientifically—class, phyla, etc., which was the common

practice in the 1930s—Ricketts said, "Let's look at how animals group themselves together and how they interact." So you look at the intertidal and the high rocky intertidal, and you see starfish and hermit crabs, and what do those communities mean, and how do they relate? Ricketts says if you're going to understand the intertidal, you have to look at interconnections: that's ecology, and he was an ecologist before the term was much used. That's why Steinbeck's vision is ecological as well. He had an environmental perspective in looking at humans.

**DW:** The book plays with the classic California, golden-west ideal—the idea of crossing America and there you'll find environmental riches and economic riches, which are often one and the same. You've got the gold out there, you've got the grapes, you've got the fields, you have this vision of wonder that compels people in desperate circumstances, especially, to cross the land and arrive in California. Can you comment on the way that Steinbeck plays on that myth—a legend that never seems to change?

**SS:** I suppose it's just a part of our history—that manifest destiny. We forget other more complex stories of movement westward; but there's that notion that you can start over if you move west, to California in particular. I read something interesting on the power of the iconography of the orange, the orange being on boxes of oranges shipped to the east, and railroads shipping oranges, and how wonderful that California icon is and how important it became. Steinbeck plays on that—oranges and grapes—and whenever anybody thinks of California, they think about it in terms of those images that were in the popular imagination. That vision of California hangs over the book, and in some way, that myth is still a myth we live with.

**Susan Shillinglaw** is a Professor of English at San Jose State University and the SJSU President's Scholar for 2012-13. She is also Scholar-in-Residence at the National Steinbeck Center in Salinas. For eighteen years, Professor Shillinglaw was Director of the Center for Steinbeck Studies at San Jose State University. She has published widely on Steinbeck, most recently *Carol and John Steinbeck: Portrait of a Marriage* (University of Nevada Press, 2013) and the forthcoming *On Reading The Grapes of Wrath* (Penguin, 2014) as well as *A Journey into Steinbeck's California* (2006; 2011).

**Dan White's** second nonfiction book, *Soaked to the Bone*, which he describes as "an embodied history of American camping," is set to be published in 2016 by Henry Holt & Co. His first book, *The Cactus Eaters*, (HarperCollins) was an indie bookstore bestseller and a *Los Angeles Times* "Discovery" selection. He was a Steinbeck Fellow at San Jose State University in 2007-8.