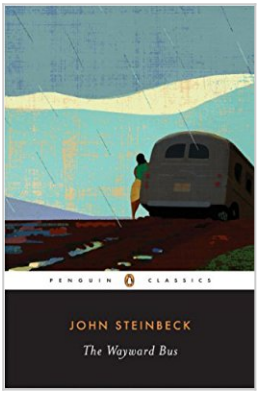

The Wayward Bus (Penguin Classics)

By John Steinbeck

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In his first novel to follow the publication of his enormous success, **The Grapes of Wrath**, Steinbeck's vision comes wonderfully to life in this imaginative and unsentimental chronicle of a bus traveling California's back roads, transporting the lost and the lonely, the good and the greedy, the stupid and the scheming, the beautiful and the vicious away from their shattered dreams and, possibly, toward the promise of the future. This edition features an introduction by Gary Scharnhorst.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

John Steinbeck, born in Salinas, California, in 1902, grew up in a fertile agricultural valley, about twenty-five miles from the Pacific Coast. Both the valley and the coast would serve as settings for some of his best fiction. In 1919 he went to Stanford University, where he intermittently enrolled in literature and writing courses until he left in 1925 without taking a degree. During the next five years he supported himself as a laborer and journalist in New York City, all the time working on his first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929).

After marriage and a move to Pacific Grove, he published two California books, *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933), and worked on short stories later collected in *The Long Valley* (1938). Popular success and financial security came only with *Tortilla Flat* (1935), stories about Monterey's paisanos. A ceaseless experimenter throughout his career, Steinbeck changed courses regularly. Three powerful novels of the late 1930s focused on the California laboring class: *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and the book considered by many his finest, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). *The Grapes of Wrath* won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize in 1939.

Early in the 1940s, Steinbeck became a filmmaker with *The Forgotten Village* (1941) and a serious student of marine biology with *Sea of Cortez* (1941). He devoted his services to the war, writing Bombs Away (1942) and the controversial play-novelette *The Moon is Down* (1942).*Cannery Row* (1945), *The Wayward Bus* (1948), another experimental drama, *Burning Bright*(1950), and *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (1951) preceded publication of the monumental *East of Eden* (1952), an ambitious saga of the Salinas Valley and his own family's history.

The last decades of his life were spent in New York City and Sag Harbor with his third wife, with whom he traveled widely. Later books include *Sweet Thursday* (1954), *The Short Reign of Pippin IV: A Fabrication* (1957), *Once There Was a War* (1958), *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961),*Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962), *America and Americans* (1966), and the posthumously published *Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters* (1969), *Viva Zapata!*(1975), *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (1976), and *Working Days: The Journals of The Grapes of Wrath* (1989).

Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962, and, in 1964, he was presented with the United States Medal of Freedom by President Lyndon B. Johnson. Steinbeck died in New York in 1968. Today, more than thirty years after his death, he remains one of America's greatest writers and cultural figures.

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THE WAYWARD BUS

JOHN STEINBECK was born in Salinas, California, in 1902. He grew up in a fertile agricultural valley about twenty-five miles from the Pacific Coast—and both valley and coast would serve as settings for some of his best fiction. In 1919 he went to Stanford University, where he intermittently enrolled in literature and writing courses until he left in 1925 without taking a degree. During the next five years he supported himself as a laborer and journalist in New York City and then as a caretaker for a Lake Tahoe estate, all the time working on his first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929). After marriage and a move to Pacific Grove, he published two California fictions, *The Pastures of Heaven* (1932) and *To a God Unknown* (1933), and worked on short stories later collected in *The Long Valley* (1938). Popular success and financial security came only with *Tortilla Flat* (1935), stories about Monterey's paisanos. Three powerful novels of the late 1930s focused on the California laboring class: *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and the book considered by many his finest, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Early in the 1940s, Steinbeck became a serious student of marine biology with *Sea of Cortez*. He devoted his services to the war, writing *Bombs Away* (1942) and the controversial play-novelette *The Moon Is Down* (1942). *Cannery Row* (1945), *The Wayward Bus* (1947), *The Pearl* (1947), *A Russian Journal* (1948), another experimental drama, *Burning Bright* (1950), and *The Log from the* Sea of Cortez (1951) preceded publication of the monumental *East of Eden* (1952), an ambitious saga of the Salinas Valley and his own family's history. The last decades of his life were spent in New York City and Sag Harbor with his third wife, with whom he traveled widely. He died in 1968, having won a Nobel Prize in 1962.

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INTRODUCTION

The Wayward Bus, for no good reason, is the most underrated of the major novels of John Steinbeck (1902-1968), the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962. Published in February 1947, “the Bus,” as Steinbeck referred to it in his letters, was his first long and much-anticipated novel after *The Grapes of Wrath* eight years earlier and his last big novel before *East of Eden* five years later. With ten major characters, however, the novel’s unconventional ensemble cast or its unorthodox moral code or its overtly allegorical form may have limited its popularity. But make no mistake: “The Bus” is a major novel by a major American author and it deserves to attract a new generation of readers.

Steinbeck struck on the premise for the story in Mexico in the spring of 1945 while completing *The Pearl*. Originally he thought he would develop the idea in a tale of picaresque adventure “something like the Don Quixote of Mexico” or in a short novel the length of *The Red Pony* (1937). Gradually, however, the story of these pilgrims and their journey swelled into an ambitious novel of more than a hundred thousand words. As he wrote his friend and editor Pascal Covici from Cuernavaca on July 12, 1945, “The more I think of it the better I like it and the better I like it the longer its plan and the wider its scope until it seems to contain the whole world. From the funny little story it is growing to the most ambitious thing I have ever attempted. Not that it still won’t be funny but funny as Tom Jones and Tristram Shandy and Don Quixote are funny. And it isn’t going to take a little time to write but a long time and I don’t care, for my bus is something large in my mind. It is a cosmic bus holding sparks and back firing into the Milky Way and turning the corner of Betelgeuse without a hand signal. And Juan Chicoy the driver is all the gods the father you ever saw driving a six cylinder broken down, battered world through time and space. If I can do it well The Wayward Bus will be a pleasant thing.” What a whaling ship and a man of war were for Herman Melville and Jack London, what a stagecoach was for John Ford, a bus was for John Steinbeck. His wayward bus “Sweetheart” is the lineal ancestor of Ken Kesey’s psychedelic bus “Further,” another conveyance that would backfire into the Milky Way a generation later.

As for the title: The first synopsis of the story, Steinbeck remembered, “was written in Spanish” and “was called El Camión Vacilador. The word vacilador, or the verb vacilar, is not translatable unfortunately, and it’s a word we really need in English because to be ‘vacilando’ means that you’re aiming at some place, but you don’t care much whether you get there. We don’t have such a word in English. Wayward has an overtone of illic itness or illegality, based of course on medieval lore where wayward men were vagabonds. But vacilador is not a vagabond at all. Wayward was the nearest English word that I could find.”

Steinbeck wrote much of the novel at his kitchen table in New York "amid jampots and pieces of cold toast and stale coffee," and he destroyed "about 20,000 words" in January 1946 because he was dissatisfied with them. In May 1946 he reported that "For two months I've been fighting the Bus and only now have I got a start which seems good. I've thrown away thousands of words. But I think it is good now. And at least it is moving." He finished a draft in October 1946. In all, he spent nearly two years crafting the novel. Despite assertions that his writing was uneven, Steinbeck's work on the story was not haphazard. "I haven't any idea as to whether it is any good or not," he admitted to friends. "But the people in it are alive, so much so that sometimes they take a tack I didn't suspect they were going to." "I hope you will like it," Steinbeck wrote his boyhood friend Jack Wagner, "although 'like' is not the word to use. You nor anyone can't *like* it. But at least I think it is effective. It is interesting to me—. . . This book depends on mood, on detail and on all the little factors of writing for its effectiveness. It has practically no story." He elsewhere allowed that "It is what I wanted to say and I think it is in there for anyone who really wants to find it and there's a top story for those who don't." As Steinbeck predicted, "It will be called simple character study and that is only the littlest part of what it is."

Published to great fanfare, *The Wayward Bus* was an immediate bestseller. It enjoyed a first printing of 750,000 copies and was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Two weeks before its formal release on February 15, Steinbeck reported that "The advance sale of the Bus are stupendous. Something near to a million copies. . . . This is completely fantastic. The people who are going to attack it are buying it like mad." Steinbeck's observation was prescient. The novel received contradictory or mixed notices at best. "The reviews of the Bus out today," the author again wrote Wagner. "I should never read reviews, good or bad. They just confuse me because they cancel each other out and end up by meaning nothing. I should let them alone. The book is getting good notices mostly here [New York], although a couple of my congenital enemies are sniping. That is good for a book. The more arguments the better." On the one hand, for example, the novel was hailed by Harrison Smith in the *Saturday Review of Literature*: "It stands by itself, the work of a writer as distinctively American as Mark Twain, who has developed in power and dramatic talent for almost twenty years." It was also saluted by Carlos Baker, professor of English at Princeton University, in the *New York Times*: "This modern version of a medieval palimpsest will provide, for the thoughtful, one more handle to Steinbeck's parable of Everyman." Yet Frank O'Malley scorned the novel in *Commonweal*, a Catholic weekly. O'Malley's hyperbolic review was particularly savage: "Steinbeck's dreary, prurient pilgrimage has no real human or universal significance. It is nothing more than an unusually dismal bus ride—more dismal, depraved and meaningless than any man anywhere has ever taken." Harry Hansen in *Survey Graphic* was even more caustic: "Another load of sleazy characters who deserved oblivion rather than the accolade of a book club." A year later, Steinbeck wrote Covici that he hoped "some time some people will know what the *Bus* was about. Even with the lead, they didn't discover."

The "lead" to which Steinbeck referred, of course, was the epigram to the fable from the late-fifteenth-century English morality play *Everyman*. "The Bus" is a moralizing book, even if its moral is neither obvious nor particularly reassuring. Like a medieval morality play or any drama constructed according to the classical "unities" (including Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*), Steinbeck's story transpires in the course of a single day, opening before dawn in the lunchroom at Rebel Corners and ending after dusk as the bus nears its destination of San Juan de la Cruz (Saint John of the Cross). Moreover, just as the characters in *Everyman* are personifications (for example, Beauty, Strength, Fellowship, Good Deeds), *The Wayward Bus* is a type of allegory temporally set in spring, the traditional season of pilgrimages, with archetypal or representative figures whose names denote their roles. Though Steinbeck had originally set the story in Mexico, he transferred it to his familiar Salinas Valley, where he was born and lived the first eighteen years of his life. Still, none of the place names in the novel, with the notable exceptions of such southern cities as Los Angeles, Hollywood, and San Diego, refer to actual sites. There is a Santa Cruz, California, of course, but no San Juan de la Cruz, as in the novel; and there is a San Ysidro, California, but it is located in San Diego County, nowhere near the San Ysidro of the story. Put another way, Steinbeck moved

his narrative from Mexico to an imaginary central California because the novel is, at its top or most literal level, a commentary on post-World War II America.

Steinbeck establishes the parameters of his topical satire in the opening pages of the novel. The crossroads of Rebel Corners, where Juan and Alice Chicoy run the garage and lunchroom, was established during the Civil War. After the war its founders, Confederate sympathizers named Blankens—ciphers destined to disappear, as their name implies—became "lazy and quarrelsome and full of hatred and complaints, as every defeated nation does." The novel appeared early in the cold war, of course, in the midst of a national debate over policy toward the defeated Axis powers. Only weeks later Secretary of State George C. Marshall would propose the European Reconstruction Act, better known as the Marshall Plan, designed to help European nations recover from the ravages of World War II and to contain Soviet expansion. The novel also contains a number of incidental references to World War II—to the draft, to rationing, to wage and price controls, as well as a subtle allusion in the first chapter to "Atom ites," a new race of people who live in the shadow of a mushroom cloud. As Steinbeck wrote in his last book *America and Americans* (1966), "Under the pressure of war we finally made the atom bomb, and for reasons which seemed justifiable at the time we dropped it on two Japanese cities—and I think we finally frightened ourselves." In the dialogue between Elliott Pritchard and the army veteran Ernest Horton in chapter 9, Steinbeck also glosses the then-current debate over how to integrate the discharged soldiers into a domestic economy most Americans believed was doomed to plunge into recession with the end of the war. In this sense, Steinbeck's novel considers the predicament of the returning soldiers much like William Wyler's movie *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946).

Steinbeck also recognizes other major social changes endemic to the postwar period: increasing commercialization, especially the commercialization of sex, and the new roles available to women. The lunchroom at Rebel Corners is decorated with calendar girls and Coca-Cola posters picturing beautiful women. Despite their brand name, Mother Mahoney's home-baked pies are baked in a factory, and Mother Mahoney, like Aunt Jemima and Betty Crocker, is a figment of an advertiser's imagination. With a sort of rugged realism, Steinbeck insists on specifying the brands of cola drinks, candy bars, and cigarettes and the names of upscale Hollywood restaurants and hotels. Elliott Pritchard's gold nail pick, watch, and key chain and his wife Bernice's "three-quarter-length black fox coat" perfectly illustrate the phenomenon Thorstein Veblen had termed "conspicuous consumption" in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Steinbeck even refers to Bernice's coat as "the badge of their position." Not that the Pritchards are the only culpable consumers. Bernice is no different from the cab driver who "tied a raccoon's tail on his radiator cap" and set a fashion trend. Camille's gold-digging friend Loraine extorts a mink coat from her boyfriend. Pimples sports a gold collar pin on the journey. Even the waitress Norma owns a black coat with a rabbit collar.

But the bourgeois Pritchards are unique in other ways to this jeremiad or chronicle of cultural decline. They maintain the mere façade of a perfect marriage. Bernice epitomizes a certain type of traditional wife, mother, and homemaker; her husband repeatedly addresses her as "little girl" and she replies to him in baby talk. As Steinbeck writes, he "had no idea that the world had changed" with the war. Elliott is the "president of a medium-sized corporation"—the reader never learns exactly what his company produces, though he takes credit for winning the war: "I've had no vacation since the war started. I've been making the implements of war that gave us the victory." While he may seem little more than a caricatured capitalist—the organization man in the gray flannel suit who has wandered into the novel from leftist agitprop of the 1930s—he serves to make the point, as Steinbeck had written in *Cannery Row* (1944), that "All of our so-called successful men are sick men, with bad stomachs, and bad souls." Like Juan's apprentice Pimples, who borrows most of his ideas from movies and radio, and Louie (aka "meat-face"), whose ideas about women are drawn from advertisements in pulp magazines, Elliott's notions about the standards of American success are gleaned from self-help manuals. He explains to Ernest how he can patent his idea to sell accessories for men's suits and then sell the patent to clothing manufacturers who would buy it to keep it off the market. Ernest takes the exact measure of the scheme and refers to it as "very high-class blackmail." On her part, Bernice spends

much of her time on the trip composing imaginary letters to a friend bragging about how much fun she is having. If, as Ralph Waldo Emerson insisted, meretricious travel is a "fool's paradise," Bernice Pritchard is the consummate fool.

The other women characters, however, silhouette the changes in women's status after the war. The Pritchards' daughter, Mildred, is a liberated young woman (or what passes for one in 1947), a type of postwar feminist, an iconoclast and an athlete with a no-nonsense attitude toward sex. At the age of twenty-one, she has experienced "two consummated love affairs which gave her great satisfaction and a steady longing for a relationship that would be constant." Her behavior presages the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Alice, though a slatternly drunk, is not a traditional wife. She manages the lunchroom, just as many American women were employed outside the home during and after the war. To be sure, Juan and Alice maintain "separate spheres": "Just as Juan usually had a succession of young apprentices to help him in the garage, so Alice hired a succession of girls to help her in the lunchroom." When Pimples tries to help out in the kitchen, significantly enough, he burns the eggs. This traditional division of labor explains why Alice does not accompany the pilgrims on the bus, but remains in the café. Initially a pathetic figure, Norma fantasizes about Clark Gable and dreams of starring in movies like Curley's wife in Steinbeck's short novel *Of Mice and Men* (1937). Still, she is not utterly self-deluded. She exhibits "dignity" and "courage," and despite her fantasies she was "not stupid. . . . Her high, long-legged dreams were one thing, but she could take care of herself, too." She plans to work in restaurants and take leftover food home to save on expenses. As Steinbeck notes, the "greatest and best and most beautiful part of Norma lay behind her eyes, sealed and protected." She even has an epiphany during the bus trip: "I can only be a waitress, but . . . I could maybe get to be a dental nurse." In the end, she is ennobled by her ambition and self-knowledge, especially when she fends off Pimples' advances. She harbors the modest dream of an apartment "with a nice davenport and a radio," "a stove and an icebox." Finally, whatever else may be said of her, Camille Oaks is an independent woman. She may suffer the gaze of men, but she does not submit to their lust. She may be a stripper, but she is not a prostitute. She will never again be a "kept woman," as her rebuff of Elliott makes clear. She "knew she was different from other girls, but she didn't quite know how." Nor does she understand why men "fought like terriers" over her. But she is as hardy and sturdy, tall and graceful as the hardwood trees from which she takes her surname.

Steinbeck once told an interviewer that *The Wayward Bus* contained "an indefinite number of echoes" of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the *Heptameron*, and Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*. While not exactly a story cycle like those works, the novel is a multilayered series of interweaving tales told from multiple points of view. Some critics have tried to read the allegory by identifying individual characters with particular characters in the original *Everyman* (for example, Camille with Beauty) or with each of the seven deadly sins (for example, Pimples with gluttony). The scholar Peter Lisca divides the characters into the saved or elected, the damned, and those in purgatory. But such approaches tend to overdetermine Steinbeck's meaning and intention. The story is not fundamentally theological; Juan (like Steinbeck) is no orthodox believer. All of these characters are flawed, though not necessarily sinful, and often they are flawed in similar ways. Most of them are guilty of avarice and lust, for example. None attains self-knowledge alone. They represent a cross-section of types, and Steinbeck is holding up a mirror to the reader.

First among equals on this allegorical pilgrimage is Juan Chicoy, a mechanic and bus driver, a deus ex machina. As he says, "I'm an engine to get them where they are going." Like Al Joad, who is "one with the machine" in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), or Gay, "The little mechanic of god, the St. Francis of all things that turn and twist and explode" who repairs the Model T in *Cannery Row*, Juan is "a magnificent mechanic." His initials, like those of Jim Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath*, underscore his role as an uncertain savior or Christ figure. In the first chapter of the novel, Juan scrapes his knuckles on the undercarriage of the dilapidated bus—once named "el Gran de Jesus" (the great power of Jesus), renamed "Sweetheart" in a more secular age—and anoints it with his blood as he repairs it. Juan suffers vicariously, if not to repair the sins of

the world, then at least to repair the gears of its broken transmission. As he explains, “You can’t finish a job without blood. That’s what my old man used to say.” In effect, Juan/Jesus explains the doctrine of blood atonement, and Steinbeck hoped his readers would understand the joke. In chapter 3, Juan offers to wash Ernest Horton’s “artificial sore foot,” much as Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, not to parody the sacrament but to question its efficacy. Juan’s “religion was practical” and the iconic Virgin of Guadalupe that rides on the dashboard of his bus is a personal indulgence, his “connection with eternity.” Juan is also, as Steinbeck notes in an aside, a genuine man: “There aren’t very many of them in the world, as everyone finds out sooner or later.” He “was not a man who fooled himself very much.” Capable of great tenderness, as in his exchanges with Norma and Mildred, he is also unique among the characters because he is equally competent in the kitchen as in the garage. He not only repairs the bus, he cooks and washes dishes. A mestizo, Juan is a child of two historically despised Catholic ethnicities, the Irish and the Latino, which frees him from middle-class custom and convention. He does not suffer fools like Van Brunt and Elliott Pritchard gladly, and he scorns banality and self-indulgence. According to Harrison Smith’s review, “He is the free man, the man who cannot be held in bonds of any sort, the man who will at any moment leave a woman.” Though half of the ring finger on his left hand has been amputated, he wears a gold wedding band on it for “decoration.” He is not flawless—he has struck Alice in the past, and he is tempted to abandon his passengers before the end of their journey and flee to Mexico. But Steinbeck’s admiration for him is palpable. As the novelist wrote Elizabeth Otis in 1954, “I feel related to Spanish people more than to Anglo-Saxons. Unusual with my blood line—whatever it is. But they have kept something we have lost.”

The gadget salesman Ernest Horton is at first glance a ludicrous character, a first cousin of Arthur Miller’s Willy Loman. But he takes his surname from the Latin root for “talk” or “ex hort” and the German root for “listen”; he is, as his entire name suggests, an “earnest speaker and listener.” In fact an admirable figure, he has been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for military valor. When Camille recognizes the medal in his lapel, he allows that it was pinned on him by “the big boss” or the president of the United States, though he modestly adds that “It don’t buy any groceries.” (In contrast, Elliott Pritchard twice fails to recognize the medal because he never served in the military. He thinks it a lodge pin much like the one he wears. And whereas Bernice expects fresh eggs and room service, Ernest makes his bed “neatly, as though he had done it many times before.”) Ernest has been taught to trust in the efficacy of thrift and honesty, moreover; he twice invokes the standards of honest business in conversation with Elliott. He befriends Norma and defends her from the baseless allegations of Alice. In another age and place he would be a noble and heroic type, but in this time and place he is merely a traveling salesman struggling to make a living by selling trinkets, gadgets, and novelties like the “Little Wonder Artificial Sore Foot” and a whiskey dispenser that resembles a toilet.

Significantly, too, Camille Oaks constructs her identity and assumes a stage name for the occasion. As a professional stripper at stags or smokers, she takes her first name from an advertisement for Camel cigarettes on the wall of the lunchroom. In effect, the name acknowledges that as a sex object she is a mere commodity. In classical myth, however, Camille is a virgin queen, servant to Diana. The name echoes “camomile,” the herb whose flowers may be used as a tonic. And it is also an abbreviated form of “chameleon.” Neither a natural blonde nor the stereotyped dumb blonde, Camille is worldly wise. She has learned to blend into her environment, a strategy that enables her to survive. As she tells Norma, “everybody’s a tramp some time or other. Everybody. And the worst tramps of all are the ones that call it something else.” Significantly, she bonds with Norma (= Normal) and takes her under wing. She helps Norma with her make-up, the protective coloring that will “give her some confidence” and enable her to survive in Los Angeles. In the end, all Camille really wanted, Steinbeck adds, “was a nice house in a nice town, two children, and a stairway to stand on.” She is sufficiently self-reliant that a husband ranks low on her wish list and realistic enough to know she will never realize her dream.

Users Review

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