Out of Hours

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The Grapes of Wrath

CALIFORNIAN DISPLACEMENT

The Grapes of Wrath

John Steinbeck

[First edition, 1939.] Penguin Classics
new edition, 2007, PB, 528pp, £7.99, 978-0141185064

Juxtaposed with Noel Streatfeild and Jacqueline Wilson, our childhood bookshelves held a fair amount of rogue adult literature. Aged seven and cluelessly scanning the spines for entertainment, I selected *Animal Farm*. All allegory was lost on me, of course, but I was dumbstruck by the idea of a book without a happy ending, turning the last page repeatedly, sure I must have missed the final chapter.

I first read *The Grapes of Wrath* at a similarly ill-advised stage of development, during the phase of childhood in which displacement and destruction are terrifying concepts. I was still at the stage of sleeping in a stifling pile of toy animals in case a fire should break out and dispatch any of them before I had had time to gather them all and make my speedy escape, and my greatest fear was a visit by some higher authority that would result in the family's eviction. The universal human phobia of exile is epitomised in the opening chapters of this horrifying novel, where faceless 'cat' trucks chase families out of a desiccating Oklahoma landscape. The Joad family's farm is razed to the ground, and they have no choice but to bundle everybody into a flimsy truck and set off to California, led by the promises of a few fliers advertising jobs fruit-picking.

Their journey tells a sweeping story — the death of the cantankerous Granpa in a tent on loan from another family particularises the global human cost of displacement. The family's progress onwards is no more negotiable than that of the tractors which bulldozed furrows through their house,

even as sickness, hunger, and pregnancy fold in upon them. Motifs of wanton cruelty present themselves along the way — the young man who flippantly veers into a turtle on the baking highway, casting it helplessly onto its back, the salesmen who deceitfully swap good car batteries with cracked ones before waving duped families off into the dusty horizon, the death of the family's dog by a nameless vehicle at a nameless service station.

As a child I absorbed an artist's impression of the Joads' final destination, picturing it verdant, lush, and replete. A naïve concept of justice could lead to no other conclusion, yet the wretched scenes the family encounter in the migrant camps offer not the slightest solace. California is indeed prosperous, but the mountains of plump oranges are sanctioned for export and the workers remain starved of food and opportunity. At the time the disappointment was almost more than I could bear.

With an adult perspective, the description of a particular human crisis has obvious relevance to past, subsequent, and present events. Steinbeck's own wrath pervades its pages (the book was denounced as communist propaganda at the time of publication), but through its granular haze of hardship, a flicker of faith in the ability of

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humans to survive and to show beneficence
is just about detectable.

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