

# *Of Mice and Men*

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## *Of Mice and Men*



First edition cover

<b>Author(s)</b>	<a href="#">John Steinbeck</a>
<b>Cover artist</b>	Ross MacDonald
<b>Country</b>	United States
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Genre(s)</b>	Novella
<b>Publisher</b>	<a href="#">Covici Friede</a>
<b>Publication date</b>	1937
<b>Pages</b>	107

*Of Mice and Men* is a [novella](#) written by [Nobel Prize](#)-winning author [John Steinbeck](#). Published in 1937, it tells the tragic story of George Milton and Lennie Small, two displaced [migrant ranch](#) workers during the [Great Depression](#) in [California](#), USA.

Based on Steinbeck's own experiences as a [bindlestiff](#) in the 1920s (before the arrival of the [Okies](#) he would vividly describe in *The Grapes of Wrath*), the title is taken from [Robert Burns](#)' poem "[To a Mouse](#)", which read: "The best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft agley." (The best laid schemes of mice and men / Often go awry.)

Required reading in many schools,<sup>[1]</sup> *Of Mice and Men* has been a frequent target of [censors](#) for vulgarity and what some consider offensive language; consequently, it appears on the [American Library Association](#)'s list of the *Most Challenged Books of 21st Century*.<sup>[2]</sup>

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## [\[edit\]](#) Plot summary

Two migrant field workers in [California](#) on their plantation during the [Great Depression](#)—George Milton, an intelligent yet cynical man, and Lennie Small, a man of large stature and great strength but limited mental abilities—are on their way to another part of California. They hope to one day attain their shared dream of settling down on their own piece of land. Lennie's part of the dream is merely to tend to (and touch) soft rabbits on the farm. This dream is one of Lennie's favorite stories, which George constantly retells. They are fleeing from their previous employment in [Weed, California](#), where they were run out of town after Lennie's love of stroking soft things resulted in an accusation of attempted rape when he touched a young woman's dress, and would not let go. It soon becomes clear that the two are close friends and George is Lennie's protector.

At the ranch, the situation appears to be menacing and dangerous, especially when the pair are confronted by Curley—the boss's small-statured aggressive son with an [inferiority complex](#) who dislikes larger men—leaving the gentle giant Lennie potentially vulnerable. Curley's flirtatious and provocative wife, to whom Lennie is instantly attracted, poses a problem as well. In sharp contrast to these two characters, the pair also meets Slim, the kind, intelligent and intuitive jerkline skinner whose dog has recently had a litter of puppies. Slim gives a puppy to Lennie and another to an old ranch hand named Candy.

In spite of the potential problems on the ranch, their dream leaps towards reality when Candy, the aged, one-handed ranch hand, offers to pitch in with George and Lennie so that they can buy a farm at the end of the month in return for permission to live with them on it. The trio are ecstatic, but their joy is overshadowed when Curley attacks Lennie. He then, urged on by George, catches Curley's fist and crushes it, reminding the group there are still obstacles to overcome before their goal is reached.

Nevertheless, George feels more relaxed, since the dream seems just within their grasp, to the extent that he even leaves Lennie behind on the ranch while he goes into town with the other ranch hands. Lennie wanders into the stable, and chats with Crooks, the bitter, yet educated stable buck, who is isolated from the other workers because he is black. Candy finds them and they discuss their plans for the farm with Crooks, who cannot resist asking them if he can hoe a garden patch on the farm, despite scorning the possibility of achieving the dream. Curley's wife makes another appearance and flirts with the men, especially Lennie. However, her spiteful side is shown when she belittles them and is especially harsh towards Crooks because of his race, threatening to have him [lynched](#).

Lennie accidentally kills his puppy while stroking it. Curley's wife enters the barn and tries to speak to Lennie, admitting that she is lonely, how her dreams of becoming a movie star crashed, revealing the reason she flirts with the ranch hands. After finding out that Lennie loves stroking soft things, she offers to let him stroke her hair, but panics and begins to scream when she feels his strength. Lennie becomes frightened, and in the scuffle, unintentionally breaks her neck. When the other ranch hands find the body, George unhappily realizes that their dream is at an end. George hurries away to find Lennie, hoping he will be at the meeting place they designated at the start of the novel in case Lennie got into trouble, knowing that there is only one thing he can do to save Lennie from the painful death that Curley's [lynch mob](#) intends to deliver.

George meets Lennie at the designated place, the same spot they camped in the night before they came to the ranch. The two sit together and George retells the beloved story of the bright future together that they will never share. He then shoots Lennie in the back of the head, so that his death will be painless and happy. Curley, Slim, and Carlson find George seconds after the shooting. Only Slim realizes that George killed Lennie out of love, and gently and consolingly leads him away, while Curley and Carlson look on, unable to comprehend the subdued mood of the two men.

## [\[edit\]](#) Characters

“ I was a bindlestiff myself for quite a spell. I worked in the same country that the story is laid in. The characters are composites to a certain extent. Lennie was a real person. He's in an insane asylum in California right now. I worked alongside him for many weeks. He didn't kill a girl. He killed a ranch

”

foreman. Got sore  
because the boss  
had fired his pal  
and stuck a  
pitchfork right  
through his  
stomach. I hate to  
tell you how many  
times I saw him do  
it. We couldn't  
stop him until it  
was too late.

—[John Steinbeck](#), interview by [The New York Times](#), 1937<sup>[3][4]</sup>

- **George Milton:** A quick-witted man who is Lennie's guardian and best friend. His friendship with Lennie helps him to sustain his dream of a better future, but it ends with the death of his friend.
- **Lennie Small:** A [mentally disabled](#), but physically strong man who travels with George and is his constant companion.<sup>[4]</sup> He dreams of "*living off the fatta' the lan*" and being able to tend to rabbits. His love for soft things conspires against him, mostly because he doesn't know his own strength, and eventually becomes his undoing.
- **Candy:** An aging ranch handyman, Candy lost his hand in an accident and worries about his future on the ranch. Fearing that his age is making him useless, he seizes on George's description of the farm he and Lennie will have, offering his life's savings if he can join George and Lennie in owning the land. The fate of Candy's ancient dog, which Carlson shoots in the back of the head in an alleged act of mercy, foreshadows the manner of Lennie's death.
- **Slim:** A "jerkline skinner," the main driver of a [mule](#) team and the "prince of the ranch". Slim is greatly respected by many of the characters and is the only character that Curley treats with respect. His insight, intuition, kindness and natural authority draw the other ranch hands automatically towards him, and he is significantly the only character to fully understand the bond between George and Lennie.
- **Curley:** The boss' son, a young, pugnacious character, once a semi-professional boxer. He is described by others, with some irony, as "handy", partly because he likes to keep a glove filled with [vaseline](#) on his left hand, and partly because of Steinbeck's use of foreshadowing. He is very jealous and protective of his wife and immediately develops a dislike toward Lennie. At one point, Curley goes berserk after he sees Lennie appear to laugh at him, and ends up with his hand horribly damaged after Lennie fights back against him, crushing his hand.
- **Curley's wife:** A young, pretty woman, who is mistrusted by her husband. The other characters refer to her only as "Curley's wife". This lack of personal definition underscores this character's purpose in the story: Steinbeck explained that she is "not a

person, she's a symbol. She has no function, except to be a foil – and a danger to Lennie."<sup>[4]</sup> Curley's wife's obsession with herself and selfishness eventually turns out to be her downfall: She allows Lennie to stroke her hair in a self-affirming fashion, only for her to upset Lennie when she yells at him to stop him 'mussing it'. Lennie tries to stop her yelling and eventually kills her by accidentally breaking her neck.

- **Crooks:** Crooks, the black stable-hand, gets his name from his crooked back. Proud, bitter, and caustically funny, he is isolated from the other men because of the color of his skin. Despite himself, Crooks becomes fond of Lennie, and though he derisively claims to have seen countless men following empty dreams of buying their own land, he asks Lennie if he can go with them and hoe in the garden.
- **Candy's dog:** A blind dog who is described as "old", "stinky", and "crippled", and is killed by Carlson. The death of Candy's dog foreshadows Lennie's fate.
- **Carlson:** A "thick bodied" ranch hand, he kills Candy's dog with little sympathy.
- **Whit:** A ranch hand and blacksmith; "hell of a nice fella and as clean guy as you want to meet." page 39 in Chapter 2.
- **The Boss:** Curley's father, the superintendent of the ranch. The ranch is owned by "a big land company" according to Candy.
- **Aunt Clara:** Lennie's Aunt, who raised Lennie; she is recently deceased. She talks to Lennie in his head when he can't decide what to do, after killing Curley's wife and the pup, while sitting at the river.

## [\[edit\]](#) Themes

In every bit of honest writing in the world there is a base theme. Try to understand men, if you understand each other you will be kind to each other. Knowing a man well never leads to hate and nearly always leads to love. There are shorter means, many of them. There is writing promoting social change, writing punishing injustice, writing in celebration of heroism, but always that base theme. Try to understand each other.

— [John Steinbeck](#) in his 1938 journal entry<sup>[5]</sup>

Steinbeck emphasizes dreams throughout the book. George aspires to independence, to be his own boss, to have a homestead, and most importantly to be "somebody". Lennie aspires to be with George on his independent homestead, and to quench his [fixation](#) on soft objects. Candy aspires to reassert his responsibility lost with the death of his dog, and for security for his old age — on George's homestead. Crooks aspire to a small homestead where he can express self-respect, acceptance, and security. Curley's wife dreams to be an actress, to satisfy her desire for fame lost when she married Curley.

Loneliness is a significant factor in several characters' lives. Candy is lonely after his dog is gone. Curley's wife is lonely because her husband is not the friend she hoped for — she deals with her loneliness by flirting with the men on the ranch, which causes Curley to increase his abusiveness and jealousy. The companionship of George and Lennie is the result

of loneliness. Crooks states the theme candidly as "A guy goes nuts if he ain't got anybody. Don't make any difference who the guy is, long's he's with you."<sup>[6]</sup> The author further reinforces this theme through subtle methods by situating the story near the town of [Soledad](#), which means "solitude" in Spanish.<sup>[7]</sup>

Despite the need for companionship, Steinbeck emphasizes how the nature of his family is depressed and suffered from loneliness is sustained through the barriers established from acting inhuman to one another. The loneliness of Curley's wife is upheld by Curley's jealousy, which causes all the ranch hands to avoid her. Crooks's barrier results from being barred from the bunkhouse by restraining him to the [stable](#); his bitterness is partially broken, however, through Lennie's ignorance.

Steinbeck's characters are often powerless, due to intellectual, economic, and social circumstances. Lennie possesses the greatest physical strength of any character, which should therefore establish a sense of respect as he is employed as a ranch hand. However, his intellectual handicap undercuts this and results in his powerlessness. Economic powerlessness is established as many of the ranch hands are victims of the [Great Depression](#). As George, Candy and Crooks are positive, action-oriented characters, they wish to purchase a homestead, but because of the Depression, they are unable to generate enough money. Lennie is the only one who is basically unable to take care of himself, but the other characters would do this in the improved circumstances they seek. Since they cannot do so, the real danger of Lennie's mental handicap comes to the fore.

Fate is felt most heavily as the characters' aspirations are destroyed as George is unable to protect Lennie (who is a real danger). Steinbeck presents this as "something that happened" or as his friend coined for him "non-teleological thinking" or "is thinking", which postulates a non-judgmental point of view.<sup>[5]</sup>

## [\[edit\]](#) Development

*Of Mice and Men* was Steinbeck's first attempt at writing in the form of novel-play termed a "play-novelette" by one critic. Structured in three acts of two chapters each, it is intended to be both a novella and a script for a play. He wanted to write a novel that could be played from its lines, or a play that could be read like a novel.<sup>[8]</sup>

Steinbeck originally titled it *Something That Happened* (referring to the events of the book as "something that happened" because nobody can be really blamed for the tragedy that unfolds in the story), however, he changed the title after reading [Robert Burns](#)'s poem [To a Mouse](#).<sup>[9]</sup> Burns's poem tells of the regret the narrator feels for having destroyed the home of a mouse while plowing his field.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

Steinbeck wrote this book and [The Grapes of Wrath](#) in what is now [Monte Sereno, California](#). An early draft of the novel was eaten by Steinbeck's dog.<sup>[10]</sup>

## [\[edit\]](#) Reception

Attaining the greatest positive response of any of his works up to that time, Steinbeck's novella was chosen as a [Book of the Month Club](#) selection before it was published. Praise for the work came from many notable critics, including Maxine Garrard (*Enquirer-Sun*),<sup>[11]</sup>



[Christopher Morley](#), and Harry Thornton Moore (*New Republic*).<sup>[12]</sup> *New York Times* critic Ralph Thompson described the novel as a "grand little book, for all its ultimate melodrama."<sup>[13][14]</sup>

The novella has been banned from various US public and school libraries or curricula for allegedly "promoting [euthanasia](#)", "condoning racial slurs", being "anti-business", containing profanity, and generally containing "vulgar" and "offensive language".<sup>[15]</sup> Many of the bans and restrictions have been lifted and it remains required reading in many other American, Australian, Irish, British, New Zealand and Canadian high schools. As a result of being a frequent target of censors, *Of Mice and Men* appears on the [American Library Association's](#) list of the *Most Challenged Books of 21st Century* (number 4).<sup>[16]</sup>

## [\[edit\]](#) Adaptations

### [\[edit\]](#) Cinema

*Of Mice and Men* was adapted for the screen several times.

The [first adaptation](#) was in 1939, two years after the publication of the novel, and starred [Lon Chaney Jr.](#) as Lennie, with [Burgess Meredith](#) as George, and was directed by [Lewis Milestone](#).<sup>[17]</sup> It was nominated for four [Oscars](#).<sup>[17]</sup>

A TV version, produced by [David Susskind](#) in 1968, starred [George Segal](#) as George, [Nicol Williamson](#) as Lennie, [Will Geer](#) as Candy, [Moses Gunn](#) as Crooks, and [Don Gordon](#) and [Joey Heatherton](#) as Curley and his wife.<sup>[18]</sup>

In 1981 a [TV movie](#) version was made, starring [Randy Quaid](#) as Lennie, and [Robert Blake](#) as George, and directed by [Reza Badiyi](#).<sup>[19]</sup>

Another [theatrical film version](#) was made in 1992, directed by [Gary Sinise](#), who was nominated for the [Palme d'Or](#) at [Cannes](#).<sup>[20]</sup> Sinise also played George in the film, and the role of Lennie was played by [John Malkovich](#). For this adaptation, both men reprised their roles from the 1980 [Steppenwolf Theatre Company](#) production.<sup>[21]</sup>

### [\[edit\]](#) Theater

The first stage production was written by Steinbeck, produced by [Sam H. Harris](#) and directed by [George S. Kaufman](#). It opened on November 23, 1937, in the [Music Box Theatre](#) on Broadway.<sup>[22]</sup> Running for 207 performances, it starred [Wallace Ford](#) as George and [Broderick Crawford](#) as Lennie.<sup>[22]</sup> The role of Crooks was performed by [Leigh Whipper](#), the first African-American member of the [Actors' Equity Association](#).<sup>[23]</sup> Whipper repeated this role in the 1939 film version.<sup>[17]</sup>

The production was chosen as Best Play in 1938 by the [New York Drama Critics' Circle](#).<sup>[24]</sup>

In 1939 the production was moved to Los Angeles, still with Wallace Ford in the role of George, but with Lon Chaney, Jr., taking on the role of Lennie. Chaney's performance in the role resulted in his casting in the movie.

The play was revived in a 1974 Broadway production in the [Brooks Atkinson Theatre](#) starring [Kevin Conway](#) as George and [James Earl Jones](#) as Lennie.<sup>[25]</sup> Noted stage actress [Pamela Blair](#) played Curley's Wife in this production.

In 1970 [Carlisle Floyd](#) wrote an [opera](#) based on this novel. One departure between Steinbeck's book and Floyd's opera is that the opera features The Ballad Singer, a character not found in the book.<sup>[26]</sup>

## [\[edit\]](#) Radio

*Of Mice and Men* was adapted by [Donna Franceschild](#) as a [radio play](#) directed by [Kirsty Williams](#) starring [David Tennant](#) broadcast on [BBC Radio 4](#) on 7 March 2010.<sup>[27]</sup>

## [\[edit\]](#) Other references

Main article: [Of Mice and Men in popular culture](#)

Numerous works have referred to or parodied aspects of the book, perhaps most notably the [Looney Tunes](#) and [Merrie Melodies](#) cartoons, which often had one character asking another, à la Lon Chaney's characterization of Lennie, "which way did he go, George; which way did he go?",<sup>[28]</sup> or the abominable snowman, referring to Bugs Bunny, saying, "I will name him George, and I will hug him and pet him and squeeze him." The line "Tell me about the rabbits" has also been frequently parodied.

## [\[edit\]](#) See also



[Novels portal](#)

- [East of Eden](#)
- [The Grapes of Wrath](#)
- ["To a Mouse"](#)
- [Of Mice & Men \(band\)](#)

## [\[edit\]](#) References

### [\[edit\]](#) Notes

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8. [^](#) [Burning Bright](#) – in the foreword Steinbeck states that *Of Mice and Men* and [The Moon Is Down](#) were his first two 'play yo man Shillinglaw|title=John Steinbeck, American Writer|date=January 18, 2004|publisher=The Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies|url=<http://www.steinbeck.sjsu.edu/biography/briefbiography.jsp%7Caccessdate=December 28, 2006> |archiveurl = <http://web.archive.org/web/20060908113639/http://steinbeck.sjsu.edu/biography/briefbiography.jsp> |archivedate = September 8, 2006 } }
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### Works by John Steinbeck

#### Novels and novellas

- [Cup of Gold](#) (1927)
- [The Red Pony](#) (1933)
- [To a God Unknown](#) (1933)
- [Tortilla Flat](#) (1935)
- [In Dubious Battle](#) (1936)
- ***Of Mice and Men*** (1937)
- [The Grapes of Wrath](#) (1939)
- [The Moon Is Down](#) (1942)
- [Cannery Row](#) (1945)
- [The Wayward Bus](#) (1947)
- [The Pearl](#) (1947)
- [Burning Bright](#) (1950)
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- [The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights](#) (1976)

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- [The Pastures of Heaven](#) (1932)
- [The Long Valley](#) (1938)

#### Screenplays

- [The Forgotten Village](#) (1941)
- [La perla](#) (1947)
- [The Red Pony](#) (1949)
- [Viva Zapata!](#) (1952)

#### Non-fiction

- [Bombs Away: The Story of a Bomber Team](#) (1942)
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- [\*America and Americans\*](#) (1966)
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