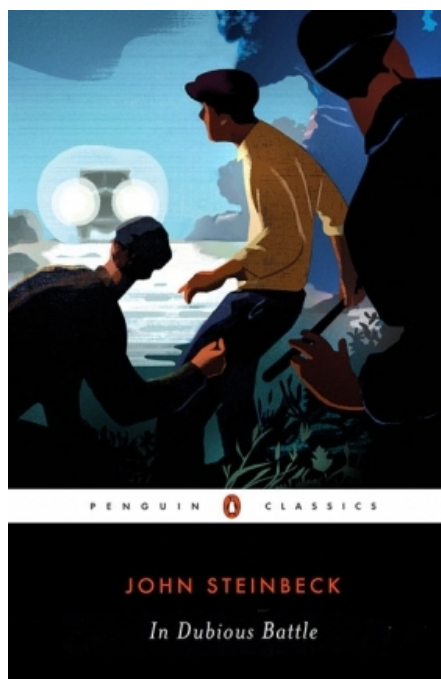




In Dubious Battle

John Steinbeck , Warren G. French (Annotations)

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This 1936 novel—set in the California apple country—portrays a strike by migrant workers that metamorphoses from principled defiance into blind fanaticism.

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In Dubious Battle Details

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From Reader Review In Dubious Battle for online ebook

Adriana says

Desi inrudit cu *Soareci si oameni* prin tematica abordata, acest roman nu e la fel de puternic. E, in schimb, un bun studiu al dinamicii grupurilor. Merita citit.

Sarah says

No more lone cries came from lone men. They moved together, looked alike. The roar was one voice, coming from many throats.

This book had some of the most quotable moments I've read. I liked it, although I didn't really love it. I felt the book was very obviously trying to make a point and so it felt heavy handed at times. It was, however, a very educational look at the lives of migratory workers during the depression. He covers the topic in *The Grapes of Wrath* but this one was from the perspective of strikers. He shows all of the ways that the local power structure tried to prevent and break strikes, as well as all of the steps the strikers had to take to keep from running afoul of those laws. And, not surprisingly, the laws were not on the side of the strikers.

I have no true understanding of economics so it was actually fascinating to me to learn things like the majority of the apples were being disposed of to keep the prices artificially high.

Overall, it was interesting and I'm glad I read it, but I doubt I'll be reading it again soon.

Brent Ecenbarger says

"In Dubious Battle" is a great book, one that is sure to make you angry and sad while reading it. Steinbeck does a great job of showing both sides of the labor battle, while making one side as good and the other as bad, but still showing both sides to be manipulative. The book follows the character of Jim along, as he joins the "party" and eventually accompanies Mac into apple picking country to organize a strike. The bulk of the book's philosophy is expunged in conversations between Jim, Mac, and Dr. Burton.

Steinbeck takes a sociological perspective of labor unions, specifically at mob mentality. This borders on ecological, as man is described as an animal that does not always understand what he does, or can control it, nor predict it. Steinbeck is a master at portraying the common man, and keeping the book exciting even when you can guess how it will play out.

Allan says

Having set myself a challenge of reading at least one Steinbeck book per month, I decided to tackle 'In Dubious Battle' this month due to interest within the Goodreads Ireland group to enjoy it as a Buddy Read.

Published in 1936. 'In Dubious Battle' was Steinbeck's first novel after his breakthrough 'Tortilla Flat'. However, while this breakthrough was a relatively easy going book, very much in keeping with the future

classic 'Cannery Row', 'In Dubious Battle' tackles more serious subject matter, portraying an apple pickers' strike orchestrated by 'the Party' (which party is never made clear) in a Californian valley.

The main action of the novel is held together by the following of Jim Nolan, a new member of the party, whose father was legendary in 'red' circles, and who becomes active under the mentorship of Mac, an experienced strike organiser, as they seek to organise the apple pickers in their fight for better terms from the farmers whose crops they are picking. Initially, one feels sympathetic for the workers' cause, but as the book progresses, while the injustice of the poor conditions suffered by the workers is clear, the actions of the strikers, led by London but manipulated by Mac and Jim becomes increasingly ugly, and ultimately results in a tragic finale.

I absolutely loved this novel, as I have done the majority of the Steinbeck works I have read. In this narrative he writes simply yet vividly, and does a great job in guiding the readers' feelings about the strike, and no doubt the industrial unrest at the time, by commenting on the strike and its ideology through the impartial character of Doc Burton. It sets the pattern for the later and more widely read 'Grapes of Wrath', and is a book that I'd recommend highly to everyone!

Lyn says

John Steinbeck's 1936 novel *In Dubious Battle* (with a title and opening quote from Milton) tells the tragic story of a labor strike amongst apple growers and pickers in a fictionalized California.

Considered by some to be his first major novel, Steinbeck readers will notice many themes that would later become central focuses of his writing like labor injustices, group dynamics, and man's ability for and propensity for cruelty and inhumanity. These same themes would later be explored in Steinbeck's seminal work *The Grapes of Wrath* (published in 1939 and winning the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize – and Steinbeck would go on to win the Nobel Prize in 1962).

In a style reminiscent of his work *Of Mice and Men* (as well as Jack London's writing due to the theme) Steinbeck tells the story of Jim Nolan, a young and impressionable man who has committed himself to a socialist or communist party to take part in a labor strike between apple pickers and the growers association. Mentored (and used) by veteran labor activist Mac McLeod, Jim learns the fundamentals of labor organization and also learns, the hard way, about society's reactions to and against such activities.

Told with sympathy towards labor movements and the nobility of the common man, Steinbeck remains objective and also provides some stern criticisms for socialism as well, especially in regard to practices that are no better than the capitalists they fight.

Using strong, powerful language, Steinbeck describes the enforcers of the establishment:

“they're the dirtiest guys in any town. They're the same ones that burned the houses of old German people during the war. They're the same ones who like to lynch Negroes. They like to be cruel. They like to hurt people, and they always give it a nice name, like patriotism, or protecting the constitution.”

Simply told, with languages and images that are evocative, and with a message that is timeless, *In Dubious Battle* is one of Steinbeck's lesser known, but more serious works.

Jim says

Perfectly titled. All American workers, the common men, are caught between Communists & Capitalists. Only one sentence in the book speaks for the Capitalists, the market price of apples has gone down, thus the migrant pickers wages are lower when they arrive than they expected. Already on the bitter edge, the migrant workers are at the mercy of the growers, the Capitalists, unless they can band together to be a force to be reckoned with which makes them ripe picking for the Communists.

Jim, a new recruit for the 'Reds', wades into this maelstrom with all the good intentions in the world. He sees the workers' plight, fights for them, & wants to do more. Learning from Mack, he soon outstrips his mentor. Along the way, a lot of people get hurt, but he keeps his eye on the Big Picture.

It's a perfect book for the times in which we live where everyone is talking about the 1%, the imbalance between the haves & the have nots. On the surface, the book seems to espouse the cause of Communism, but there is a lot unsaid & a rather ugly subtext. Very little sympathy is wasted on anyone who has anything no matter how hard they worked for it.

The Reds don't really care what they have to do to create conditions for their revolution. It doesn't matter how poorly they use anyone nor who they hurt so long as the Cause goes forward. The Capitalists don't care about the workers so long as their apples get picked, but that's as true of the little guys as it is the bigger ones. The workers just want to be able to eat, but are often nothing save a fickle mob mentality easily swayed by whoever has the last say. Most are more worried about their next meal than the future. It was ugly & so true, a truly dubious battle.

The characters were great & spoke volumes. There was a lot of dialogue that described the scene far better than I would have expected. I liked that method better than plain narration. Best of all, the book made me think a lot. I'm still thinking about it & will for ages. Highly recommended.

PS - English Teachers, please consider this as a reading assignment rather than *The Red Pony*, the worst book by Steinbeck that I was forced to read 3 times in school. It SUCKS. I was turned off Steinbeck for decades. If my own son hadn't read *Of Mice and Men* & badgered me into reading it, I never would have read another of his novels & would have missed out on so much.

Jason Koivu says

At a time when the divide in this country between rich and poor is as great as it's ever been, a book like *In Dubious Battle* becomes quite pertinent once more.

It's the Great Depression and the Red Scare has the nation suspicious of anyone who might organize a strike for better wages, for something higher than the starvation-level pay the bosses are handing out to hard-up fieldworkers.

Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* follows Jim, a newcomer to the Communist Party. Mac, a strike agitator takes him under his wing and off they go to a California apple valley, where the bosses have cut wages. Here they meet a number of different individuals who represent the various sides of the conflict.

Steinbeck's character development is quite impressive here, considering he constructed an ensemble cast and breathed life into each of them, so that they all appear almost real and not just two dimensional caricatures. And while the author originally set out to write a non-fiction account of a workers' strike, he has succeeded in portraying this as an utterly believable fiction that does not drag due to political agenda proselytizing.

While Steinbeck is for the working man, his sympathies do not make him entirely blind to the failings of the "radical left". He does question why, when man rules the Earth, would man subject man to a sub-subsistence existence? Why not share the wealth? Well, Steinbeck points to the lazy, shiftless who prefer to shirk duty and steal to get by rather than do their fair share. And then there's the greedy need in some men to rule, to gather up all the wealth and power they can for their own selfish desire. There it is again, those extremists who go screwing it up again for the rest of stuck in the middle.

Carlos Fonseca says

Esta leitura de "Batalha Incerta", cuja acção tem lugar na Califórnia, nos tempos da Grande Depressão, foi, de facto, uma "releitura". Sucedde que, de vez em quando, volto a livros já lidos de que gostei (o próximo será, provavelmente, "O Leopardo"), e sucedde também que raramente acontece não encontrar um ou outro pormenor (ou pormenor) que me tinha escapado na leitura inicial.

Gostei, tantos anos depois, de voltar à greve dos apanhadores de maçãs, contra os grandes proprietários dos pomares de macieiras que, depois da chegada dos trabalhadores, decidiram reduzir o pagamento dos valores previamente acordados.

Greve que apenas existiu porque dois membros do Partido (cujo nome nunca é referido) se tinham infiltrado entre os apanhadores, acabando por, de modo discreto, dirigir a acção por interposta pessoa - um dos trabalhadores a quem os outros reconheciam uma certa autoridade - que usaram sem revelar os seus motivos

John Steinbeck voltaria ao tema dos trabalhadores explorados durante a mesma época, no romance "As Vinhas da Ira", que considero a sua melhor obra.

Judy says

I did not read Steinbeck's novel about an attempt to organize migrant workers as part of My Big Fat Reading Project because it was published before 1940, the year I chose for the beginning of my project. I read it now for a reading group and must say, it is a much better book than *The Grapes of Wrath*.

All of the qualities I love best about Steinbeck are here. Great complex characters, description that brings the locations and the weather and the events to life, and a thoughtful look at a big human problem.

The trouble with trying to help a person or specific group with a problem is that the helper is not the person or a member of the group. The main characters from "the party" (Steinbeck does not call them communists but the growers do) come in from the outside. They are desperate characters for their own reasons but they are not migrant workers and their agenda stems from a political consciousness.

Steinbeck gives a brilliant exposition of the methods used to organize downtrodden workers into people who will fight the system: finding or even creating an incident that will ignite them out of apathy, the "end justifies the means" mentality, and the justifications for violence and criminal activity. It has been ever thus when the dregs or unfortunates rise up.

He shows all of it, making his book still vital today. The novel moved me as much as *East of Eden*.

Jon says

In *Dubious Battle* is the first of Steinbeck's three Dust Bowl novels, with *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* being the other two. While all three books amply display Steinbeck's profound empathy for those who are marginalized and disenfranchised, *In Dubious Battle* is arguably the more overtly political of the three books. As the book opens, one of the main characters, Jim Nolan, joins the Communist Party. For his first assignment, Nolan is sent with Mac, one of the Party's veteran labor organizers, to help foment a strike among migratory fruit pickers in a small California valley. When the pickers arrived in the valley for the yearly harvest, the Grower's Association announced that their wages would be dramatically reduced, creating the perfect conditions for the organizers to capitalize on the residual anger of the pickers and strike a blow for economic equality. The book follows their efforts to get the strike off the ground and Jim's growth as an organizer as he learns from his more experienced partner.

While both Mac and Jim are often sympathetic, the book is far from a love letter to the Communist Party. Mac is ruthless and, in his own way, as equally manipulative of the workers as the Grower's Association is. To Mac, the workers are merely a means to an end and the potential suffering that the strike might inflict upon them doesn't even merit consideration. In fact, he fervently hopes that things will turn bad:

"There's the bulk of power in the hands of a few men. That always makes 'em cocky. Now we start our strike, and Torgas County gets itself an ordinance that makes congregation unlawful. Now what happens? We congregate the men. A bunch of sheriff's men try to push them around, and that starts a fight. There's nothing like a fight to cement the men together. Well, then the owners start a vigilantes committee, bunch of fool shoe clerks, or my friends the American Legion boys trying to pretend they aren't middle-aged, cinching in their belts to hide their pat-bellies- they I go again. Well, the vigilantes start shooting. If they knock over some of the tramps we have a public funeral; and after that, we get some real action. Maybe they have to call out the troops. Jesus, man! The troops win, all right! But every time a guardsman jabs a fruit tramp with a bayonet a thousand men all over the country come on our side. Christ Almighty! If we can only get the troops called out"

if the strike succeeds and the growers capitulate, it will be a small victory, but Mac and Jim really don't want a small victory. Instead, a spectacular failure serves their cause better. This complexity is one of the book's strengths. Steinbeck isn't content to write a simple story of good versus evil and while Mac and Jim support workers in general, they see nothing wrong with exploiting and manipulating these workers to achieve their goals. Throughout the book, Steinbeck also offers a crash course in mob mentality as the fruit pickers are eventually coaxed and manipulated into staging their strike and then to keep their resolve up in the face of inevitable pushback from the growers and local authorities. Sprinkled throughout the book are philosophical arguments between the two organizers and one of their helpers, Doc Burton, a man sympathetic to their goals but distrustful of their methods. In Burton's opinion the end doesn't justify the means, instead, the means determines the end:

"The end is never very different in its nature from the means...you can only build a violent thing with violence...It seems to me that man has engaged in a blind and fearful struggle of a past he can't understand,

into a future he can't foresee nor understand"

Mac and Jim's goal is to use the strike as a means to bring together countless other exploited workers across the country. The ultimate goal of which is to destroy the capitalistic system that is oppressing them. That the battle will be lost is foreshadowed with the quote that opens the book. The title is a quote from Milton's Paradise Lost. In it, Satan describes his attempt to overthrow God :

"Innumerable force of Spirits armed,
That durst dislike his reign, and me preferring,
His utmost power with adverse power opposed
In dubious battle on the plains of Heaven
And shook his throne. What though the field be lost?"

The book does have some weaknesses, with the lack of strong female characters being the most glaring. While there are plenty of women in the book, most of them are non-entities that aren't even given the benefit of a name. The one female character that Steinbeck spends any time on is portrayed rather negatively and isn't particularly bright. Still, while it doesn't rise to the level of Steinbeck's best work, the book is worth reading and contains some of Steinbeck's classic themes.

Sarah says

This hasn't been my favorite Steinbeck book.

I read it for one of my English classes this semester, and I think the subject matter of the class ("Race, Ethnicity, Gender in American Lit. and Film") definitely influenced my perspective when reading this novel. I grew annoyed with the lifelessness of the female characters in the story--when they ARE presented, they're dull, one-dimensional mothers or daughters or caretakers, and it's just so unoriginal. Because the story takes place during the Industrial Revolution, the absence of female laborers really struck me. Additionally, Steinbeck was known to do extensive research before writing his novels, so the lack of historical accuracy, with respect to women's critical presence in the work-force during the Industrial Revolution, was a bit unbelievable. Then again, I try not to judge white, early 20th century American authors too harshly because they're a product of their time; we all are.

That aside, the overall plot and theme is very interesting. I want to give Steinbeck credit for what I did like. It shows the way in which power can corrupt, even when those in power are fighting against even more powerful people. Mac, the head of The Party, is an example of this corruption, having used his authority to further The Party's agenda, with little regard for the lives that may be lost on that journey.

Jim's character (the protagonist) serves as a symbol of the raw material that those in power utilize, with little/no personal regard, to gain more power. The ending is very solemn and thought-provoking. I do think this novel is worth reading, especially if you're a Steinbeck fan, as it provides some elements of classic Steinbeck (working-class struggle) and presents interesting questions and perspectives; it's good food for thought.

Tarcinlikurabiye says

Steinbeck, insanl???n kapitalist sistemle ve en çok da kendisiyle etti?i o bitmeyen kavgas?n? anlat?yor. Son derece kötü çal??ma ko?ullar?na sadece elleriyle direnmek isteyen mevsimlik i?çilerin kar??s?nda her grevde oldu?u gibi silahlar ve iki yüzlü yöneticiler var. Fakültedeyken s?k s?k duydu?umuz i?çi grevlerini adeta ya?am??ças?na hissettiriyor Steinbeck. Ve ko?ullar de?i?se de geçen y?llara ra?men emek-sermaye dengesizli?inin asla de?i?medi?ini görmek gerçekten çok üzücü. Steinbeck kalemiiyle hala tan??mam?? kitap severler için ba?lang?ç kitab? olabilecek kadar güzeldi!

Kim says

Writing novels about the poor and dispossessed in 1930s California and in the process attracting the wrath of farmers' organisations and the attention of the FBI gave John Steinbeck a reputation which has persisted to this day. Many people assume that he was a communist, or at the very least a socialist. This novel, along with *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men* is a work which cemented Steinbeck's reputation in that regard.

However, the characterization of Steinbeck's politics as socialist or communist is incorrect. While he had a passion for supporting the underdog, he wasn't any further to the left politically than New Deal Democrat. Steinbeck was, if anything, disparaging about communists, commenting in a letter to a friend shortly after this novel was published:

I don't like communists either. I mean I dislike them as people. I rather imagine the apostles had the same waspish qualities and the New Testament is proof that they had equally bad manners.

The plot of this novel - Steinbeck's fifth - focuses on fruit growers in a fictional valley in California. Two "Party" (presumably Communist Party) activists – the seasoned campaigner Mac MacLeod and his young apprentice Jim Nolan – infiltrate a group of itinerant fruit pickers with the intention of provoking a strike and violent confrontation with the growers. From the beginning Mac is aware that the strategy is doomed to failure because of the superior resources of the growers. However, he doesn't hesitate to manipulate the fruit pickers and to use whatever means at his disposal to achieve the Party's objectives.

The novel works on a number of levels. At its simplest level, it analyses the process of manipulating a group of people to achieve a political end. However, it's also an exploration of one of Steinbeck's favourite themes – group behaviour and the way in which it differs from the behaviour of individuals. The novel also functions as Jim Nolan's *bildungsroman*, the psychological portrait of a young man moving from disaffection to self-knowledge as he discovers his skills and strengths.

Unusually for Steinbeck, the novel contains relatively little description of the natural world. Instead, most of the action is contained in dialogue. However, even with the absence of descriptive language, there is a cinematic quality to the narrative. I could picture scenes in the novel as scenes from a film – detailed, vivid and striking. The characters are also striking with a solidity and reality I've come to expect from Steinbeck's writing.

Writing a novel like *The Grapes of Wrath* meant that everything else Steinbeck wrote either before or after was going to be compared to it. That was a burden for Steinbeck as it would be for any writer. Given the subject matter of this novel, the comparison with *The Grapes of Wrath* is even more inevitable. That's a

shame, because this work has its own power. And according to Wikipedia it's Barack Obama's favourite Steinbeck novel, which may well be another reason to read it, should a reason be required.

Mahdi Lotfi says

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Christopher says

[Editor: *For unexpressed reasons, the author of this review has requested with utmost fervency that the reader watch this YouTube video before continuing to read and then imagine its main subject, Dr. Steve Brule, reading the body of the review aloud as a monologue.*]

This was a very good book. It displays all the hallmarks of Steinbeck's greatest writing: wonderful dialogue and characterization, heartbreaking turns of plot, and the permeating sense of optimistic pessimism*.

The problem that this book runs into is that its author went on to write a book you may have heard of: the towering, hulking Great American Novel known as *The Grapes of Wrath*, in the shadow of which *In Dubious Battle* humbly resides. In every way possible, this book feels like a practice run for *The Grapes of Wrath*.

This is the first book in what some call Steinbeck's Dust Bowl Trilogy. *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Where *Of Mice and Men* tells a mostly nonpolitical, simple, perfect little story, *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath* tell essentially the same story. They examine the fates of migrant workers fleeing the desolation of the Dust Bowl who find themselves entangled in a battle with the powers that be.

My recommendation: if you haven't read *The Grapes of Wrath*, go read it, ya dummy! If you have, go read Steinbeck's other books. Then read this one.

*Meaning, of course, that in a Steinbeck novel, you know that the world wants to beat you down and you'll end up sad, but let's give it a good heave-ho and shoot for happiness.

Kevin says

John Steinbeck's novel deals with two Communist Party activists who learn of a strike going down in California amongst migrant workers who are employed to pick the annual Apple harvest during the mid-1930s (the novel was published in 1936, just as Roosevelt's New Deal was taking effect, post Depression era, which is what Steinbeck's main works deal with, such as *Grapes of Wrath*). Mac and Jim, the activists, go along to the dispute, which was caused by a cut in wages and they try to organise the workers to

become united in the face of the employers offensive against them. All the workers have is their unity and 'class consciousness' (however shaky that actually is) in the face of intimidation and repeated attempts to break the strike by the equally organised County employers, who use law-enforcement to try and control the dispute, along with vigilantes who use much more questionable methods to try and break the strike (arson and murder essentially). The employers use every available means to crush the dispute, such as intimidation of supporters, the press, as well as limiting the strikers access to food and so on.

The main purpose I believe of *In Dubious Battle*, is showing how far the agitators would go to win; Jim, the younger of the two, has great idealistic notions about standing up for the 'workers', and this is his first dispute he has taken part in, whilst Mac, a veteran activist is a lot more harder and jaded. Then there is the Doctor who is a sympathiser but not a Communist, having disagreements with the methods and means that the Communist Party activists use. Do the 'ends justify the means', I believe is one of the main tenets of the novel, and whilst you begin to have great sympathy with the plight of the migrant workers in the face of nasty intimidation, hunger, demoralisation and dissent within their own ranks etc, the methods employed by the CP members sometimes are equally questionable too, such as using the shooting of a striker to 'rouse' up the workers. The conversations between Mac, Jim and the Doctor deal with this central theme: How far would you go to win? What is acceptable to gain the end result? And so on.

The conclusion is forgone. There is no way the strikers could win in the face of organised hostility from the employers and what power they could wield (State Law Enforcement with guns and tear gas vs clubs and fists is not a winning formula), and despite holding on to the last, the strike quite tragically ends with the murder of Jim (I assume his martyrdom had some effect, but the book ends at that point), but as Mac states throughout the book, many strikes he had been involved in were lost, but all were remembered. I found the book an interesting insight into post-depression USA, and just how tough you had to be to be a Union Organiser as well as a Communist during the 1930s America. A good read.

Of note, there was a film released last year (2017) based on this novel; I never knew and it is on my 'to watch' list now.

piperitapitta says

Il Dottor John Steinbeck

Quello che lascia senza fiato è la potenza e l'attualità di questo romanzo che nonostante affondi le proprie radici in pieno New Deal potrebbe benissimo essere stato scritto in un'epoca molto più recente.

Dopo alcune letture che mi avevano lasciata più freddina, qui riconosco il vero Steinbeck, quello che ho iniziato ad amare con *Furore* e *Vicolo Cannery*; quello che riesce a tirar fuori dai suoi personaggi tutta l'umanità e tutta la rabbia che secoli di privazioni e soprusi hanno accumulato e covato sotto la cenere, come magma di un vulcano pronto ed esplodere.

A mio parere non *il capolavoro* di Steinbeck, come viene indicato da alcuni critici, ma sicuramente appena sotto *Furore* che alla tematica a tratti simile, unisce una costruzione narrativa ancora superiore.

La battaglia è comunque un romanzo che non può lasciare indifferenti, che costringe a ripensare a quante battaglie siano state sostenute affinché alcune classi sociali, gli agricoltori in questo caso, potessero far valere il proprio diritto "ad avere il pane" - non il guadagno quindi, ma la sopravvivenza - e a quante lotte in altre zone del mondo si è costretti a fare, oltre settant'anni dopo, per ottenere la stessa giustizia.

Se *La battaglia* è un romanzo comunista, se Steinbeck era comunista - di questo fu accusato ripetutamente arrivando persino alla censura di *Furore* in alcuni stati degli Stati Uniti d'America - allora anche io sono

comunista.

Ma Steinbeck, ancora una volta, si pone al centro della battaglia, non limitando la propria intelligenza di osservatore a schierarsi dalla parte dei *padroni* piuttosto che da quella degli *agricoltori*, ma cercando di rappresentare, attraverso le diverse figure presenti, anche tutte le sfumature esistenti fra essi.

La più bella, quella che secondo me riassume in essa non solo tutte le contraddizioni umane, ma anche la curiosità, il desiderio di scoperta e la sete di conoscenza della nostra specie, è quella del Dottore, in cui non fatico a riconoscere la passione ed il desiderio dell'autore stesso, colui che mette a disposizione se stesso e le proprie competenze, colui che vuole trovarsi al centro della battaglia per studiare *l'infezione* e, forse, attraverso l'osservazione del *dolore* stesso, trovare la cura per annullarlo.

Susan Johnson says

4.5 stars

Steinbeck writes another memorable novel that I had neither read or heard of before which says a lot for my ignorance of an author who writes about places in my back yard. I had read "Grapes of Wrath" and "Mice and Men" in school and then never thought of him until Oprah made "East of Eden" a book club selection and I fell in love with Steinbeck.

This novel takes place in the 1930's in the Central Valley of Calif. and concerns a strike among fruit pickers for more money. Although the strike is about apple pickers, Warren French who wrote the introduction, says it's based on a peach picker strike in Tulare County. That part makes little difference. The story made me think of my maternal grandfather who was an almond rancher in the Northern Central Valley and I think probably had experiences similar to the people in the book.

Fruit pickers are really the bottom of the barrel jobs and tend to go to recent immigrants. In the book, the workers are Italians and Irish. As they assimilate the workers became Hispanic and now many are Vietnamese and Hmong. As they are new to the country they seem to have lower expectations of proper working conditions which makes it easier to prey on. But there's a point where people break and decide it's just not right. This is what happens. Pushed and prodded they decide to strike.

A "party" organizer, Mac shows up with his young protégé, Jim Nolan, and start to create situations that make people want to strike. He seems to have a masterful use of mass psychology and no expectations of actually winning the strike. He has no problem with the havoc he causes in people's lives. A business owner is burned out for helping him, another's farm is destroyed and others lose everything they have in the world just to fuel Mac's fierce determination and a losing cause.

French says it's a dubious battle because it shouldn't have happened and Steinbeck was trying to call for an end of man's inhumanity to man. This is where I dropped my rating a 1/2 star because I'm not sure that it shouldn't have happened. It was the strikes by Caesar Chavez that brought better conditions for agriculture workers. I think there becomes a point when people just can't take their situation anymore and take a stand. I think that's what happened to Rosa Parks. One day it was just enough.

The book was also quite interesting on mob psychology. Mac knew how to whip a crowd around and how to develop a man's thirst for blood. It was quite evident how lynch mobs occur. That's a story that goes on today.

Overall, this was a fantastic book that really makes you think. It's still so relevant today when people are faced with dubious battles. People still tilt at windmills and even facing certain defeat, they make a stand.

Aren't they the real heroes?

Marvin says

There is not a Steinbeck novel I don't like, but In Dubious Battle has stayed with me the longest. This novel is also the one that Steinbeck fans often "forget" about. Its tale of the struggles between a party organizer and the agricultural "system" doesn't fit well with reader's depiction of good and bad sides. While Steinbeck identifies with the worker and the union organizers, he also recognizes the fact that each side manipulates and sacrifices often in a cynical way. Much of the novel relates this view through dialogues between Jim, the new volunteer in the party and Mac, a long time organizer who knows reality all too well. This is a novel that gets down in the mud with the characters and takes you into a world that you may not want to go but need to know about. This is a forgotten classic that should be mentioned right along with The Grapes of Wrath and Of Mice and Men.

Buddy says

I realized a little way in that I had read this before. It is an early Steinbeck novel and it is very good. It follows Communist Party agitators in the early 30s who deeply believe in what they are doing, as flawed as it may be. It reminded me of the show "The Americans" in the ability of people on all sides to convince themselves of their righteousness. The old 1946 copy I have was my parents and it virtually fell to pieces as I read it.
