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By Susan Shillinglaw. Reno: U of Nevada P, 2013. xv
+ 312 pp. \$35.

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CAROL AND JOHN STEINBECK: PORTRAIT OF A MARRIAGE. By Susan Shillinglaw. Reno: U of Nevada P, 2013. xv + 312 pp. \$35.

Susan Shillinglaw, one of the leading authorities on Steinbeck's life and work, is determined to propel John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) into the forefront of the American consciousness. With the publication of *On Reading "The Grapes of Wrath"* (2014) and a recent *Washington Post* (April 20, 2014) editorial titled "Ma Joad for President," Shillinglaw is thrusting the saga of the beloved Joad family into the mainstream of contemporary American society. Shillinglaw's dual literary biography, *Carol and John Steinbeck: Portrait of a Marriage*, released on the eve of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the publication of the 1940 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, brings this prominent Steinbeck scholar even closer to achieving her objective.

In *Portrait of a Marriage*, Shillinglaw sets out to reveal the impact Carol Henning Steinbeck (1906–83) had on John Steinbeck's (1902–68) early works, particularly *The Grapes of Wrath*. This marks the first time Shillinglaw, or any academic for that matter, has so comprehensively researched the role Carol Steinbeck played in the literary work of her husband. Through extensive research, she tracks the creative synergy of the Steinbecks' partnership, which inspired some of the greatest works in the American literary canon.

Shillinglaw utilizes the myriad of resources at her disposal, including John Steinbeck's previously unpublished manuscripts and letters, as well as Carol Steinbeck's artworks, scrapbooks, and poetry, to immerse the reader in the intimate world of Carol and John Steinbeck and their circle of friends. Shillinglaw's writing style is as detailed as it is engaging, and her strategic use of vivid descriptions and revealing quotations transports the reader into the lives of this literary power couple. She carefully recounts Carol and John's younger years and how family influences affected their emotional development. Beginning with the first chapter, "Renegades," Shillinglaw sets a tone for what is to come: "Their childhoods were happy enough, yet neither Carol Janella Henning nor John Ernst Steinbeck was a particularly settled child" (10). Both were outsiders whose rigid and domineering mothers spurred their insecurities and pushed them to rebel.

Shillinglaw notes that when Carol and John met in 1928, three years after he left Stanford University, they fell in love "*instantly*" (36). She points out that they brought out the best in each other and complemented one another on multiple levels: "Her gregariousness muted his shyness; her inquisitive mind, rooted in the world, countered his introspectiveness; her fervid belief in his prose complemented his own obsession with writing. Theirs was what one friend called a 'symbiotic relationship,' deeply satisfying for both" (46). However, in their effort to

be “modern” (45) and reject the “bourgeois expectations” (49) of their day, they embarked on a more open relationship than most, which would later contribute to their undoing. John’s obsession with his work also factored into the marriage’s demise, as writing unfailingly remained his primary focus. Nothing else and no one else compared, but for years Carol embraced her secondary role, as she embedded herself in his work with near equal dedication.

During the fall of 1929, Carol and John moved to southern California where they joined up with Charlton Sheffield, John’s college roommate, and his circle of friends. Shortly thereafter they were married in an awkward courthouse ceremony. Shillinglaw notes that this particular time in Carol and John’s life is well documented from Carol’s point of view as her pen and ink drawings provide revealing images of the antics of this bohemian group of revelers. Shillinglaw selected the drawing *Carol and John Gathering Cephalopods* as an illustration for the book. It features a naked Carol playing the accordion, dancing octopi, and John brandishing a knife in one hand and another in his teeth. This is just one of many depictions created by Carol of the edgy lifestyle of this freewheeling and creative young group. While the Los Angeles venture was a lively time for Carol and John, it came to an abrupt end due to lack of finances. They returned to northern California, settling into the Pacific Grove cottage owned by John’s parents.

The Pacific Grove years were happy ones according to Shillinglaw. She quotes John reflecting back on those years: “For entertainment we had the public library, endless talk, long walks, any number of games. We played music, sang and made love. Enormous invention went into our pleasures” (68). Again Shillinglaw emphasizes the importance of Carol to John’s creative process: “Carol was always his first reader, first participant, first listener who savored each work. ‘Our minds are somewhat drawn together,’ Steinbeck would admit a couple of years later, ‘so that we see with the same eyes and feel with the same emotions’” (82). During this time, John wrote extensively, including *Pastures of Heaven* (1932), *To a God Unknown* (1933), *Tortilla Flat* (1935), and *In Dubious Battle* (1936)—the precursor to *The Grapes of Wrath*.

One of the most engaging chapters in the book is devoted to Ed Ricketts. Ed was John’s best friend from the time they met in 1930 until his untimely death in 1948. He was not only a marine biologist who ran a lab on Cannery Row but also a man with a deep philosophical mind and a great love of poetry and music. The bond between the two men was so strong that Ed became the inspiration for the protagonist in *Cannery Row* (1945) and *Sweet Thursday* (1954), as well as the characters of Doc Burton in *In Dubious Battle* and the deeply spiritual Casey in *The Grapes of Wrath*. “Participation” was a major topic of discussion for Steinbeck and Ricketts: “Although writing is a lonely act, as he reiterated

throughout his career, inspiration was mutual, based on a group dynamic, participation with another—his mother reading aloud, friends telling stories, Carol nudging and critiquing and discussing ideas, Ricketts sparking philosophical debate” (77). Here Shillinglaw stresses that this social engagement was critical to Steinbeck’s creative process and his ability as a writer. Nonetheless, she clearly recognizes that John, not Carol or Ed, was the writer.

In the spring of 1933, life changed dramatically for the Steinbecks when John’s mother, Olive, fell seriously ill. Carol and John moved to the family homestead in Salinas to care for his parents. Shillinglaw observes, “Carol became a lifeline for both Steinbeck men. John, emotionally drained, wrote stories next to the bed where once larger-than-life Olive, who had spent her life with a steady hand on everyone around her, lay helpless, nearly lifeless” (129). Since John always turned to writing when in crisis, the time spent at the Steinbeck home during Olive’s lingering passing was highly productive for him: “Out of that grief also emerged his great ‘theme’—group man, ‘whirling like sparks out of a bonfire’” (129). Shillinglaw elaborates, “The greatest group unit, he wrote to Sheffield, is ‘the whole race,’ which ‘remembers a time when the moon was close, when the tides were terrific. It remembers a time when the weight of the individual doubled itself every twenty eight days. . . . The human unit has none of these memories’” (129–30). Ultimately, this line of thinking led to the power of the transformation from “I” to “we” that is at the heart of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

In 1936, Carol and John moved to Los Gatos, to a remote ranch about one hour north of the Monterey Peninsula. Here the symbiotic partnership between Carol and John came into full bloom. John began his research on the plight of the migrant workers and the need for government housing for a series of articles for the *San Francisco News* (October 5–12, 1936). Shillinglaw writes, “Carol shadowed every step of this pilgrim’s journey to partisan wrath and kept their reaction to social injustice turned on high. Her conscience was his, his wrath hers” (165). John was introduced to Tom Collins, manager of the Arvin camp near Bakersfield and a tireless advocate for the migrant workers. Their connection was critical to the writing of *The Grapes of Wrath* since it provided a wealth of primary source material in the detailed camp reports maintained by Collins and in the first-hand experience of Steinbeck living and working among these displaced people whom he came to love. Steinbeck dedicated *The Grapes of Wrath* to the two people who played significant roles in the creation of this work: To Carol “who willed it” and to Tom “who lived it.” Tension between the wealthy California farmers and the impoverished migrant workers was rapidly escalating. The Battle of Salinas, a violent confrontation between the farmers and lettuce workers in his own hometown, propelled Steinbeck to write his own story of the migrant workers, originally titled *The Oklahomans*.

This effort was soon interrupted by the successful publication of *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and an extended European tour that actually provided Steinbeck time to reflect on the themes of what he came to call the “big book.” Upon returning to California, John dove back into the task of researching and writing the migrant story. According to Shillinglaw, “After almost two years, most certainly with Carol’s guidance, he found the structure for the final draft, a double helix. One strand is a family saga, the other a cultural manifesto. With the cadence of the Bible in his mind (he called the interchapters ‘biblical’), the revolutionary tenor and beat of the ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic’ measuring his pace, and the scope of dispossession as his backdrop, Steinbeck’s epic grasp was as mighty as Milton’s, his subject the heaven and hell of contemporary life” (199). It was a monumental effort with John writing two thousand words a day for one hundred days and Carol continuously typing and editing. Ultimately, it was Carol who suggested a superior title for the book, *The Grapes of Wrath*, a title that truly captured the essence of the novel.

When working together Carol and John were deeply engaged. Sadly, this collaborative bond was about to break. According to Shillinglaw, “*The Grapes of Wrath*, ‘Carol’s book,’ is the apogee of their tale of bright visions and ragged disappointments and the fulcrum on which their lives tipped” (9). John and Carol had a brief time in Los Gatos following the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* and then he left, first for Chicago and then to Los Angeles to work in the film business. He left Carol behind to deal with the maelstrom of responses to the novel, some strongly supportive, but many malicious, threatening physical harm to both of them. As Shillinglaw explains, “Unleashed vitriol damaged John and Carol in different ways, he hating the public glare and she hating the glare that put her in the shadows. With the spotlight solely on John as author, her role in the book’s construction was erased, and, not surprisingly, she felt blotted out. Warm-hearted Carol shrank” (207–8).

The controversial responses to *The Grapes of Wrath* surely took a toll on both Carol and John. The calls for censorship and book burning spurred the American Library Association into action, adopting the first Library Bill of Rights in order to provide librarians support in the face of public adversity. But for the Steinbecks, the collapse of the marriage was due not only to the stress of the public response but also to the end of a creative process. Their relationship was important to John’s writing, but John’s writing was also important to their relationship. It was the glue that held them together. Without it, they could not survive as a couple. John wrote to a friend during this time of “profound physical and spiritual disappointment that things turned out the way I knew they would” (210).

From here the story continues with the affair between John and Gwen Conger, John's depression, Carol's rants, the voyage to the Sea of Cortez, and, finally, the complicated divorce and events of Carol's later life. Biographical writing must follow the truth, and that is what Shillinglaw has done throughout this book, including the sad lingering ending. She has provided a unique perspective on John Steinbeck's life and work. Her extensive research and rich narration truly bring the fascinating story of John and Carol Steinbeck to life. In so doing, she enables the reader to appreciate the deep literary bond forged between Carol and John Steinbeck, a bond fully illuminated in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

In the final analysis, Steinbeck was a monumental writer, but he was as human as the humanity he so vividly portrayed. Would *The Grapes of Wrath* have been written if not for Carol and her relationship with John? Shillinglaw convincingly makes the case for the critical role that Carol played on multiple levels in the creation of the book, but she rightly stops short of giving Carol equal credit with John. Would he have been able to write the masterpiece without her? We will never know, but surely this celebrated novel is all the better for her efforts.

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THE WORKS OF JAMES AGEE, VOLUME 2. COMPLETE JOURNALISM: ARTICLES, BOOK REVIEWS, AND MANUSCRIPTS. Ed. Paul Ashdown; General Editor, Michael A. Lofaro; Associate General Editor, Hugh Davis. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2013. xliii + 646 pp. \$117.

James Agee (1909–55) may well have been among the most fascinating and singular men of letters this country has produced, but his performing so brilliantly in so many different forms, his being such a multitasker in a century of specialists, has resulted in a profile of artistic volatility that many critics and teachers continue to find difficult to negotiate. For many, Agee is still that *rara avis* in search of its species. As an artist of the late Depression, he is every bit the equal of John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, and Nathanael West—yet each of these three has more in common with the other two than any one of them has with Agee. His unclassifiable Depression masterpiece, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), still shoulders uncomfortably in the dispiriting corral of “documentary expression” like a unicorn among plow horses. And yet his single full-scale novel, *A Death in the Family* (1957), like *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, has become a classic, thus misleading him into the company of those American writers primar-