



A conversation with  
**Rick Wartzman**, author of  
*OBSCENE IN THE EXTREME: The Burning and Banning  
of John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath*  
(Interview by Public Affairs Books)

**John Steinbeck received the Pulitzer Prize for THE GRAPES OF WRATH, and it is now a modern classic. Why did the Kern County Board of Supervisors ban it? Why was it called “obscene in the extreme”?**

The Kern County Board of Supervisors banned *The Grapes of Wrath* in August 1939 from schools and libraries for several reasons.

First, it attacked the book for its “profanity, lewd, foul and obscene language.” The title of my book, in fact, comes from a statement by one of the giant farm operators in the area—an ally of the Board of Supervisors, who helped lead a public burning of *The Grapes of Wrath*. He described Steinbeck’s novel as “obscene in the extreme sense of the word.”

But the board also didn’t like the way that Steinbeck had rendered the community. As Steinbeck saw it, the big growers around the town of Bakersfield—where the Joads had settled in the book—were brutally exploiting their migrant laborers, often with the aid of local law enforcement. Those running the county maintained that this portrait was unfair and untrue.

And, finally, the resolution banning that book noted that Steinbeck had presented the community as “breathing class hatred.” This, I think, gets to the real reason that the establishment in Central California so feared Steinbeck’s work: The late ’30s was an incredibly uneasy time in America, and Steinbeck’s novel not only captured this sense of agitation; it all but advocated revolution by the working class.

**How did you learn about this amazing story behind John Steinbeck’s THE GRAPES OF WRATH? Why did you decide to write this book?**

I had stumbled upon a photograph of the burning of *The Grapes of Wrath* while researching my last book, *The King of California*, and the image had stayed with me. After all, it’s quite something to see one of the greatest works of literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century being tossed into a fire.

Then one day, while I was chatting with a friend from Bakersfield, that photo came up in the course of the conversation. My friend asked if I also knew about the librarian who had fought the censorship. I said I didn’t. “She was very brave,” my friend told me.

I was intrigued, and so I started to dig. And as I dug, I realized that this was not only a compelling narrative, but there was a much bigger story to tell: The burning and banning of *The Grapes of Wrath* was a wonderful window into the class politics of 1930s America.

### **How so?**

It wasn't until I began reading a lot about the politics of the 1930s, especially in California, that I appreciated just how radical Steinbeck's novel was in the context of the times. He writes passionately and persuasively in *The Grapes of Wrath* about the prospect of insurrection in America: "When a majority of the people are hungry and cold, they will take by force what they need."

That may sound crazy now, but if you were part of the power structure in California in 1939, the possibility of armed revolt probably didn't seem all that farfetched. California had just elected its first Democratic governor of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Culbert Olson—a political protégé of longtime socialist Upton Sinclair. Olson, in turn, had appointed as a state official none other than Carey McWilliams, whose book *Factories in the Field* (often described as the nonfiction counterpart to *The Grapes of Wrath*) called for the Soviet-style collectivization of private agriculture. Communist laborer organizers, emboldened by McWilliams' appointment and Steinbeck's book, were busy trying to organize the farm hands of the San Joaquin Valley.

As Steinbeck himself said, it felt like there was "a revolution . . . going on."

### **Do you think THE GRAPES OF WRATH still resonates now?**

There's no question that it does. The novel continues to be required reading, of course, in many high schools and colleges. And it still sells more than 100,000 copies a year.

I've also seen any number of writers, from historian Douglas Brinkley to novelist Khaled Hosseini, who cite *The Grapes of Wrath* as inspiration.

But what I'm struck by is how fresh the book seems every time I read it—and I've read it five or six times now. I think this is because, as a nation, we're still struggling with a fundamental question that Steinbeck tackled in 1939: How in a country of so much plenty can we have so much poverty, so much suffering, so many left behind?

### **OBSCENE IN THE EXTREME has so many colorful characters, including W. B. "Bill" Camp, a giant cotton and potato grower, who led the burning of the book; Clell Pruett, the field hand who threw it into the flames; Stanley Abel, the Kern County supervisor who belonged to the Ku Klux Klan; and Gretchen Knief, the Kern County librarian who fought the censorship. Who is your favorite?**

I came to greatly admire Gretchen Knief for her bravery, and I have a real fondness for Clell Pruett—even though he's the one who, under his boss's direction, burned *The Grapes of Wrath*.

But my favorite character from this ensemble cast actually isn't on your list. It's Raymond Henderson—the blind ACLU lawyer who battled the book ban. He was an incredibly smart, courageous soul who spent his whole life fighting for the little guy. His letters (which I found at the National Federation of the Blind, where he later served as executive director) are beautifully written and a lot of fun to read. He had a terrific sense of humor and would sometimes conclude his missives with a line that really captures the spirit of those hungry years: "May the pork chops never be wanting." I love that.

## **Every year we celebrate Banned Book Week. Is censorship still a concern in 21<sup>st</sup> century America?**

Very much so. The American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom tracks about 500 challenges to books every year in the U.S. But this is only a fraction of what's actually happening out there. The office estimates that for every challenge that's reported, as many as four or five go unreported.

In Bakersfield a few years back, a group of local parents tried to keep Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* from being taught in their children's high school. Interestingly, as that episode played out, some of those battling the censorship cited the tussle over *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939.

## **What's next for you?**

Some time with my wife and kids, who always sacrifice so much when I take on a new book.

That said, I do have a couple of book ideas I'm mulling. One is a story that's connected to the Japanese internment during World War II. It would be a bit like *Obscene in the Extreme*—a single narrative that provides a window into a much bigger topic.

The other idea that I'm playing with is even more ambitious. It's a narrative history of the erosion in loyalty between employers and employees in America over the last 30 to 40 years. It fits in more with my day job running the Drucker Institute, a think tank at Claremont Graduate University that's dedicated to stimulating effective management and ethical leadership.

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