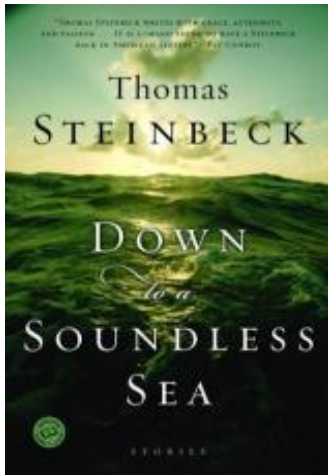


# Down to a Soundless Sea

by Thomas Steinbeck

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## About the Book

Here is an unprecedented fiction debut that is cause for celebration. Growing up in a family that valued the art of storytelling and the power of oral history, Thomas Steinbeck now follows in his father's footsteps with a brilliant story collection. **Down to a Soundless Sea** resonates with the rich history and culture of California, recalling vivid details of life in Monterey County from the turn of the century through the 1930s. Steinbeck accomplishes an amazing feat: his stories have the feel of classic literature, but his haunting voice, forceful narrative drive, and dazzling imagery are unmistakably his own.

In seven stories, Steinbeck traces the fates and dreams of an eccentric cast of characters, from sailors and ranchers, to doctors and immigrants?as each struggles to carve out a living in the often inhospitable environment of rocky cliffs, crashing surf, and rough patches of land along the California coast and the Big Sur. In "Blind Luck," a wayward orphan finds his calling at sea, only to learn that life must concede to the whims of authority and the ravages of nature. In "Dark Watcher," with the country at the start of the Great Depression, a professor craves a plausible discovery to boost his academic standing?and encounters the Indian myth of a shadowed horsemen that may ruin his career. "An Unbecoming Grace" tracks the route of a country physician who cares for an ill-tempered cur?but feels more concern for the well-being of the patient's beleaguered young wife. The collection concludes with "Sing Fat and the Imperial Duchess of Woo," a novella that follows the tragic love story between a young apothecary and the woman he hopes to marry.

Deeply felt and richly imagined, full of compelling drama and historical authenticity, **Down to a Soundless Sea** heralds the arrival of a bold new voice in fiction. Thomas Steinbeck has written stories as memorable and rugged as the coastline that inspired them.

## Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the implications of "home" in **Down to a Soundless Sea**. The collection opens with Bill Post constructing

ahome for his new family, Chapel Lodge in "Blind Luck" never has a real home growing up, and Dean in "An Unbecoming Grace" makes his home by throwing its original settler over a cliff and renaming the homestead for himself. What does the concept of "home" imply specifically in these stories of the newly settled Monterey Coast?

2. "The Wool Gatherer" ends with the line, "John kept that receipt for years to remind him of his bear and the expense incurred by magic visions." What might this reference to "expense" imply, especially in a family of storytellers like the Steinbecks, who hold the "magic visions" of fiction in such high esteem? In the end, was John Steinbeck's pursuit of his Great Sur Bear worth the expense and trouble of tracking it that summer of 1920?

3. Many, if not all, of the characters in **Down to a Soundless Sea** are self-made. What are some pressures of the West after the turn of the century that force them to practice their personal industry? What are some freedoms that the Monterey County of that era allows them?

4. In his "Author's Note," Steinbeck notes how difficult it can be to "attempt duplication of language used by the original participants and make it ring true for the modern ear." Steinbeck does so in a number of ways: for example, the Portuguese captain seeks "a fitting dog's body to take the axe when the cards turned sour," the Partington brothers of "The Dark Watcher" were "not known for salting the mines of accuracy." How do such phrases contribute to a tone of live storytelling? What other devices does Steinbeck use to emphasize these stories' oral history?

5. Many of the characters in **Down to a Soundless Sea** are immigrants, from Chow Yong Fat to the dually surnamed Simon Gutierrez O'Brian. Discuss the struggles that faced immigrants in the Monterey Coast area of this era. What support systems did it offer them? How does the liberation they found there compare to the hardships that confronted them?

6. **Down to a Soundless Sea** opens with the birth of Charles Post and closes with the death of Sue May Yee. Both events occur during great storms. Discuss this circularity. Do you see any other correlations in the way Steinbeck chooses to order the stories of this collection?

7. What does **Down to a Soundless Sea** have to say about the regard for learning in the early days of the Monterey Coast? Consider characters like Doc Roberts in "An Unbecoming Grace," Sing Fat in "Sing Fat and the Imperial Duchess of Woo," and Professor Gill in "The Dark Watcher."

8. Many of the characters of the collection appear in more than one story: the Post family, introduced in "The Night Guide," reappears in "The Dark Watcher"; the captain "smuggling Chinese 'illegals'" in "Blighted Cargo" references Chow Yong Fat's experience in "The Imperial Duchess of Woo"; Chapel Lodge chances across Captain Leland after many years in "Blind Luck." How does this comment on the community of the Monterey Coast at the century's beginning, especially in a time when travel and communication were more difficult?

9. The antagonists of **Down to a Soundless Sea** have all the deliciously vile characteristics of the good villains of oral storytelling. Are there any redeeming qualities to characters such as Simon Gutierrez O'Brian in "Blighted Cargo" and the Stoat in "An Unbecoming Grace"?

10. Water is very significant in this collection set on the Monterey Coast. When is water a negative force in these stories? When is it positive? How is the sea "soundless" in all senses of the word "sound," connoting stability,

measurability, noise, or something free of flaws?

**11.** The intimate stories of **Down to a Soundless Sea** read like stories told by the fireside, stories told in person. Discuss the differences between oral storytelling and the written tale. What are some advantages of the story on the page? What is gained by stories told in person?

**12.** A reader comes away from **Down to a Soundless Sea** feeling connected to its vibrant characters. Although the modern plight is markedly different from that of the newly settled Monterey Coast, how do you feel that your experience is similar to theirs? How are the hardships of modern life different from those of turn-of-the-century California?

## Author Bio

Thomas Steinbeck began his career in the 1960s as a motion picture cinematographer and photojournalist in Vietnam. Interspersed with his writing, speaking and producing obligations, Mr. Steinbeck has taught college-level courses in American Literature, creative writing, and communication arts. He serves on the board of directors of the Stella Adler Theatre Los Angeles and the National Steinbeck Center. He has written numerous original screenplays and documentaries as well as adaptations of his father's work. Thomas Steinbeck lives on the central coast of California with his wife. He is currently at work on his first novel.

## Critical Praise

"These tough, unsparing stories are written as if they were lived, not imagined, by their author. Thomas Steinbeck has found his own voice and he exults in the sound of it. This is authentic, honest American writing. The kind of writing a father would be proud of."

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