

**SANORA  
LOUISE  
BABB**  
**1907-2005**



**CLASSIC  
DUST BOWL  
NOVEL  
MYSTERY**

In the 1930s, a Farm Services Administrator worker assisted migrant workers in California's agricultural valleys. Nightly she recorded her observations for a planned Dust Bowl novel. Without her permission, her boss showed her notes to his friend John Steinbeck. The story of what happened next may surprise you.

Sanora Louise Babb was born in April 1907 in Red Rock. Her gambler father frequently moved around the Oklahoma Panhandle area. She finally started school at age eleven, graduating valedictorian from Forgan High School in 1924, although two town matrons kept 'the gambler's daughter' from delivering the valedictory speech. She graduated from Garden City (KS) Junior College in 1926.

Babb joined the Los Angeles Times in 1929, but the stock market crash eliminated her position. Frequently homeless, she worked at Warner Brothers and wrote scripts for radio station KFWB. While visiting Oklahoma in 1934, Sanora watched once prosperous families waiting in soup lines with evicted farmers, seeing first-hand how the Dust Bowl affected Oklahomans.

In 1938, she worked with Tom Collins, manager of FSA camps in California's Central Valley providing support for refugees displaced by drought, dust storms, and loss of farmland. Living in the camps, Babb was trusted with refugees' stories as she wrote FSA reports. She made extensive notes nightly – planning a novel about their suffering. What she didn't know was Steinbeck was using her research.

Random House planned to publish Babb's novel – until "The Grapes of Wrath" was published in 1939. "What rotten luck," publisher Bennett Cerf wrote. "Obviously, another book at this time about exactly the same subject would be a sad anticlimax!" Babb was devastated and bitter. Meanwhile Steinbeck won a Pulitzer Prize.

Babb married Oscar-winning Chinese-American cinematographer James Wong Howe in Paris in 1937, because California prohibited mixed marriages. They married again in 1948 when the Supreme Court overturned the restriction. She finally published her first novel "The Lost Traveler" in 1951 about her complex relationship with her father.

In 2004, the University of Oklahoma Press finally published the 97-year-old's Dust Bowl novel "Whose Names Are Unknown". They discovered it had far more first-hand experiences. Steinbeck's Joads were from Sallisaw, nowhere near the Dust Bowl while Babb's Dunne family were from Cimarron. Steinbeck knew Oklahoma only through photographs; Babb knew it personally.

When she died in 2005, friend Ray Bradbury said, "She was a wonderful poet, good short-story writer, and fine novelist." Her rejection was "the sort of blow that happens to us all as writers, but didn't let it destroy her." The Los Angeles Times called it a "long-forgotten masterpiece", as compelling as Steinbeck's epic work. Many reviewers called it "an American classic both literary and historical".

Steinbeck, who died in 1968, thanked Collins in his book dedication for the first-hand accounts that helped him create an accurate portrayal of Dust Bowl migrant workers, but he never mentioned using Babb's documents. In the end, Steinbeck's work won the publishing race, but Babb's work remains a voice that cannot be silenced.