

WARREN CHANG

Pulling Leaves, 2020
Oil on canvas, 20 x 21 in.



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

IRIS JAMAHL DUNKLE

Sanora Babb: Challenging a Single Story of the Dust Bowl

Once overshadowed by
The Grapes of Wrath, an
author's work is rediscovered

Make me feel what periods you have lived.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson to Walt Whitman

In February 1938, thirty-one-year-old Sanora Babb drove up from Los Angeles to meet her new boss, a willowy man in a baggy suit named Tom Collins. The rain beat down on the muddy road as she stepped out of her car and walked briskly up to the lone administration building at Arvin Federal Government Camp near Bakersfield, California. Rows of tents stretched out behind the building. She knocked confidently on its thin screen door. Babb had been a writer for as long as she could remember. She'd written her first piece at age five, an essay entitled "How to Handle Men." At age twenty-two she left her home in Kansas to pursue a job as a reporter at the *Los Angeles Times* only to lose her job before it had even started because the stock market crashed. A decade later she was about to begin an eight-month stint working as a volunteer for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in the San Joaquin and Imperial Valleys of California. She'd been encouraged to take the position by the League of American Writers, of which she was an active member, in the Los Angeles chapter of the John Reed Club. The administration building, like all the other "permanent" buildings of the camp, was half tent and half solid shelter. Arvin was one of the original FSA camps that provided housing, washrooms, toilets and showers, and a community room for the ever-growing wave of migrants descending on California from the Dust Bowl.

Collins answered the door with a half smile as he exclaimed, "Welcome to Arvin, Sanora!" Rain drummed the tin roof as she smiled back and stepped inside.

For the next eight months, Babb would work closely with Collins providing supplies for Dust Bowl refugees, whose overflowing flivvers or Model Ts crowded the roads. Between 1935 and 1940 over 350,000 impoverished people fled their homes to try and find work in California. Collins and Babb walked the dirt roads from the Imperial Valley, through the Central Valley to the Feather River in Sacramento, up north to the apple farms of Oregon, spreading word about the camps to newly arrived refugees who were homeless.

Babb wasn't new to the fight of helping migrant workers. When she'd learned that children were harvesting walnuts at a farm near Modesto without pay, she'd reached out to the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) in San Francisco to see if

Outside the camp, prejudice against “Okies” intensified. Local Californians saw refugees as debased, barely human, and ignorant.

they could help her, but they’d turned down her request. Instead, she’d organized a strike on her own and ultimately the children were paid for their work. She’d also spent a night in jail after being arrested during another strike.

The situation of the mass migration of refugees was a political issue: it was a fight between activists, unions, and liberal newspapers, who valued the camps and their purpose, versus the corporate landowners and large-scale agricultural companies and conservatives, who found the whole movement to be communist leaning and anti-American. Collins, a tireless, dedicated FSA administrator, oversaw the entire camp program. He’d set up his first camp in Marysville in 1935 and had continued to open and run several more camps over the next few years. His vision was to create a place that would foster self-governance among the refugees to boost morale. A system he called democracy functioning (DF), in which refugees made democratic decisions about the place they lived through committees. Babb helped implement the project. There were four committees that ran the camp—the Central Committee, the Entertainment Committee, the Maintenance Committee, and the Good Neighbors Committee—and an array of subcommittees offering social events, athletic contests, childcare, clubs, and a camp newsletter. Collins saw the DF groups as

a training ground for creating a union for farmworkers. He was immediately impressed by Babb’s ease with the camp’s residents. She saw who they were: people who wished only to reestablish themselves. As he wrote about Babb’s work,

It was she who bridged the chasm between the D.F. and the next move, the C.I.O. [Congress of Industrial Organizations]. It was she who raised aloft the bigger banner for the united front. Of such stuff are the real leaders of men made.

When they finally returned to Arvin, Babb lived among the refugees at the camp and devoted herself to its operation and documentation. Collins estimated that Babb visited 472 families, or 2,175 men women and children, and that she met with approximately 781 families (about 3,640 individuals) during her time working for the FSA. Even though Collins praised the hands-on work Babb did organizing residents at the camp, he knew she was a gifted writer and felt she could make an even bigger impact using this craft. In a 1938 letter to Babb, Collins wrote:

I feel you can do your best work for the agricultural and industrial workers by and through the power of the written word. You have the unusual ability possessed by so few writers to do a POWERFUL bit of work. The field is rapidly being filled with organizers. Whatever you write will be of great assistance to the workers and organizers. I would like to see you WRITE and WRITE. It is your profession. You are nobly fitted for it. May you DO IT. We all HOPE YOU WILL. WE WANT YOU TO DO SO.

Fueled by Collins’s encouragement and inspired by the stories she was told by the camp residents, at night in her own tent cabin, Babb began to write her first novel: a book about two families who suffered through the environmental disaster of the Dust Bowl and, having lost everything, had to migrate to California. The idea for it had come to her a year before and she’d begun to gather source materials from her family. Now that she was living among the very people who had been directly affected, she was filled with inspiration. She was surprised to find that writing it came easily, perhaps because she was writing

about the place where she had grown up and the people she had grown up with. As she later reflected, “These were the people I knew all of my life. . . I knew them and lived with them through the hard pioneering days of breaking new land, of more prosperous days, of the early Depression years.” Pleased with her storytelling and fueled by her passion to reach the widest audience possible, she took a risk and sent the first four chapters of her work in progress to Bennett Cerf, an esteemed editor at and cofounder of Random House.

The families who sought refuge in the camps were from a variety of backgrounds. They were settlers of the plains who’d gained property in land runs and homesteading. They were sharecroppers from southeastern Oklahoma. They were Arkansas homesteaders, or tenant farmers, or they were dryland famers. Many who arrived from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, Kansas, and other Great Plains states weren’t even farmers. They were tradesmen, teachers, lawyers, and small business owners who had lost everything to one of the greatest natural disasters that had ever hit North America.

Outside the camp, prejudice against “Okies” intensified. Local Californians saw refugees as debased, barely human, and ignorant. Local papers played up these ideas with caricatures that fueled taxpayers’ anger at having to pay for other people’s troubles. Schools refused to allow refugee children to attend. Hospitals wouldn’t admit refugees regardless of their willingness to pay up front for services.

Whenever Babb left the camp, she’d be harassed in town due to her association with it. Once, when she was sitting at a lunch counter in Porterville, two large men sat down on either side of her. One looked at her and said, “You’d better get out of town fast. The last organizer who came through here—they found his body floating in a canal.” When she told Collins about the incident, he advised her to be cautious and leave; however, Babb was undeterred. Along with her novel, she began to write articles about the plight of the migrants in the politically left-leaning magazine *New Masses*.

The camps provided shelter: tents with the possibility of a wooden floor (for ten dollars more), medicine and medical care from a nurse on staff, baths, and much-needed community. At first, when the refugees arrived, they refused any help, even though they and their families

were often desperate for it. All they wanted was what they couldn’t find: work, the ability to be once again self-sufficient. The refugees had been lured to the Imperial Valley by the promise of work picking peas and lettuce in the winter, or they had been lured to the San Joaquin Valley for the promise of work during the long cotton season, or they had been lured to the Sacramento Valley to work picking peaches and prunes in the spring. But, somehow, no matter how fast they traveled from crop harvest to crop harvest, there were never enough jobs for all who needed them. But soon, with the help of the Good Neighbors Committee, the new residents eased into getting the things they needed: blankets, a place to sleep, a meal.

A few months into her job, Collins invited Babb out to a nearby café to have lunch with a writer he was working with named John Steinbeck. Steinbeck had found Collins while he was writing a series of articles on the plight of the Dust Bowl refugees for the *San Francisco News*, which were published from October 5 to 12, 1936. Thinking that having an up-and-coming writer bring attention to the struggling camps would be beneficial, Collins had agreed to accompany Steinbeck as he visited the camps. After the articles’ success, Steinbeck was considering writing a novel about the Dust Bowl refugees and so he arranged to visit his friend again at the Arvin Camp. Collins was thrilled that Steinbeck might bring attention to the desperate issues surrounding the refugees. As Collins wrote in his own unpublished memoir about this time, “Bringing in the Sheaves,” he pleaded with Steinbeck to write about what he had witnessed, “What you want to do, John, is to keep your impressions in your mind and when the time is ripe DO something about those conditions. If you fail to do that then you are letting those thousands of people down.” None of the migrants knew they were being observed by a famous writer who intended to document their experiences, as Steinbeck used a fictitious name while he was there. But Collins told Babb, his closest confidant at the camp, that they were in the presence of a bestselling author who wished to use their reports and field notes to write accurately about the plight of the migrants. That sunny day, as Babb walked into the café, the rainy season had subsided and already the earth was throbbing with the possibility of new crops. Over cups of coffee, they talked about the camps, the refugees’ plight, the Associated Farmers, and

the powerful political lobby of farm owners. Little did Babb know that the field notes she would willingly give to Steinbeck would help make the publishing of her novel impossible. As she later reflected, “Tom asked me to give him my notes. I did. Naive me.” For the source material of *Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck would heavily rely on the FSA field notes written by Collins and Babb. Steinbeck noted using “great gobs of information” from Babb’s and Collins’s notes, as well as Collins’s letters. As he noted in the journal he kept while writing the book, “Letter from Tom with vital information to be used later. He is good. I need this stuff. It is exact and just the thing that will be used against me if I am wrong.”

As the days passed, Babb worked steadily at her book. Though she had already widely published her poetry and short stories, this was her first novel, and it was fueled by what she saw as “the farmers [who] were done dirty.” She knew severe hardship. She also knew the independence and the freedom the West could afford women. Babb grew up in Red Rock, Oklahoma, and on the Otoe Reservation, before moving to the prairie of eastern Colorado, where her family lived in a dugout and farmed broomcorn. She wasn’t formally educated until she was ten years old. Instead, she learned to read off the newspapers her mother pasted to the walls of their dugout in eastern Colorado. Nevertheless, she began writing at a young age, working in newspapers from the age of twelve, when her family lived in Kansas and again in Oklahoma.

In 1934, Babb returned to visit her mother in Kansas and what she found was pure devastation. Gone was the booming post-World War I agricultural town where she’d lived. Now, the sky was black with dust. Farms were abandoned. The disaster of a mass migration loomed on the horizon. A disaster that cut across all classes, as she records in her journals,

I saw the people I used to know who had lived smugly in their imaginary stratas—the best people who had bathtubs and cars, the middle ones who had bathtubs and white-collar jobs, the unacceptable ones who had no bathtubs, manual jobs, or doubtful means of support—standing in line together. The essential differences in these people in the first place had been very slight, and now with the superficial gloss gone, and

hunger a near and known thing to all of them, their stricken faces, one after the other in a long line, looked very much alike.

She had seen the disaster firsthand. She knew its people. The farmers who could no longer farm. The closed schools. The sand blowing in through every window, every crack. The no way back to a life you had fought so hard to keep.

The refugees Babb met at the camps or saw when she visited her mother in Kansas in 1934 were not poor, uneducated Okies. The people she introduces us to in her novel are varied and real. She chose to title her novel *Whose Names Are Unknown* after an eviction notice she had seen on a decrepit worker’s shack on a corporate farm, which read To John Doe and Mary Doe, Whose True Names Are Unknown; she thought this title embodied the fact that to the big-business corporate farmers in California, the workers who toiled for pennies a day were nameless. And to the local citizens who blocked the migrant workers’ children from going to school, these children were nameless. And to the hospitals that would not admit migrant women who were suffering difficult labors and instead sent these women back to the dirt floors of their tents to deliver their babies, these mothers and children were nameless. In this monumental novel, Babb endeavored to give these people back their names. More importantly, she records a version of the Dust Bowl’s history that gives agency to its victims.

Bennett Cerf was impressed with the four chapters that Babb sent him, so much so that he invited her to an all-expense paid trip to New York to finish writing her novel—and offered her a book contract to go with it. A few months later, after her work at the camps was finished, Babb flew to New York to finish her manuscript, living on the Upper West Side in a residence provided by the publishing house. She loved living in New York City and knowing her first book was underway. The summer was boiling hot, but she sat at her desk and diligently completed her book.

The last time she’d been in the city was to attend the League of American Writers Conference. She’d driven across the county with the English novelist Harry Carlisle and Tillie Olsen “in a one-seat, Soft-top Ford roadster (and nearly froze).” The trip had been inspirational and had pushed her toward writing a novel about the plight of those affected by the Dust Bowl.

However, a few weeks in, Cerf invited her to the Random House offices to meet with him. When she entered his office, he was seated formally at his desk, which was cleared of everything except a single check. She knew right away that something was wrong. Her publishing contract was canceled—due to the wide success of Steinbeck’s newly published book, *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck was already famous for his bestselling novel *Of Mice and Men*, and she was an unknown writer.

Cerf, who acknowledged the craft of her work but couldn’t see his way to publishing two books about the same event, advised Babb to put her manuscript away for a few years until the market could be more receptive to reading another novel about the Dust Bowl. As he wrote to her in a letter on August 16, 1939,

after viewing the matter from every angle and discussing it in a full editorial conference for an hour, I don’t see how in God’s green earth we can publish ‘Whose Names Are Unknown’. What rotten luck for you that ‘The Grapes of Wrath’ should not only have come out before your book was submitted but should have so swept the country! Obviously, another book at this time about the exactly the same subject would be a sad anticlimax! And I think that you must face the fact just as we did here. The last third of your book is so completely like ‘The Grapes of Wrath’ that the families and characters might basically be interchanged in the two.

This news left Babb devastated. As she recalls in a letter, “I thought after that blow, I couldn’t ever write again, and I didn’t for a year.”

What one sees when one compares the two books is that even though Steinbeck relied heavily on source material provided by Collins and Babb, Babb’s book is strikingly different from Steinbeck’s. While Steinbeck created a fable-like story whose characters are meant to be “the over-essence of the people,” as he outlined in his notes for the book, Babb’s novel reveals the catastrophic natural disaster as it unfolds in real human details: the daily toil of poverty met with dignity in everything from childbirth to suicides.

In *Whose Names Are Unknown*, when we meet Babb’s protagonist, Milt, on the Oklahoma Panhandle, he is living with his father, Kronkie, who decided to switch crops

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from broomcorn to the potentially more lucrative crop of winter wheat. Babb initiates us into the routine of their daily life and shows us how intimate they are with the land on which they live.

Milt and the old man rose every morning at day-break. . . . When they came up into the yard, the sharp high air of western autumn came into their noses, penetrated their clothes, made them go about their chores briskly. Each morning they felt renewed in themselves, and a clear unknown excitement sprang up in them with the sense of the new season. They looked at the land they had planted the day before, and the land they would plant this day, and they felt a sense of possession growing in them for the piece of earth that was theirs.

As readers, we watch the catastrophe unfold slowly, her characters helpless against what has struck them. For

Steinbeck never visited the Oklahoma Panhandle—and his lack of knowledge about the area led to serious mistakes and omissions that numerous scholars have well documented.

example, she describes what this same land looks like after a horrific night of dust storms. “All night the dust blew and by morning the yard wore that melancholy look of a place revisited after years of desertion and ruin.” By the time Milt and his family leave for California, we know they have no other choice, and it is this tragedy that fuels our compassion for them as they are treated as outcasts by the corporate growers and regular citizens in California. By emphasizing her characters’ lives before they were forced to migrate, Babb humanizes them.

Babb’s work also differs from Steinbeck’s because it creates a narrative that destroys the idea of a single story. Her work also showcases the multicultural and multiethnic environment of California during this era and tells the story of the Dust Bowl through the experiences of women. In her novel, women have agency. They stand up against the atrocities they are faced with, and they make it known that they work as hard as men. When the farmworkers strike against low wages, the strike is led by Phoebe, an African American woman, and the workers are representative of

the people who were actually working in the fields at this time. They are not only white, but also Mexican, Filipino, and African American.

The story of Steinbeck’s book is quite different. In late 1938, John Steinbeck began rapidly writing what would become the iconic book about the Dust Bowl: *The Grapes of Wrath*. He stopped and started several times. Then, finally finding a form for the book, it took less than nine months to complete. Perhaps due to this breakneck speed, Steinbeck never visited the Oklahoma Panhandle—and his lack of knowledge about the area led to serious mistakes and omissions that numerous scholars have well documented. For example, he accidentally set the novel in Sequoyah County, a place that wasn’t affected by the disaster, and his book made it seem as if the only people who were affected by the Dust Bowl were poor white farmers. Steinbeck’s novel doesn’t elaborate on the horrific effect the greatest natural disaster in the United States had on the people who were living in what had once been called No Man’s Land. Instead, his story focuses on what happened once a handful of the 350,000 Dust Bowl refugees arrived in California. Because of this, *Grapes of Wrath* readers don’t witness the slow terror of the natural disaster and the little choice it left for the people who were living through it.

Though Steinbeck met Babb on several occasions, including their lunch at the café, he never credited her. His dedication in *Grapes of Wrath*—“To CAROL who willed it. To TOM who lived it.”—only acknowledges his wife and the influence of Collins, whom Steinbeck referred to in his journal as a “chief source, guide, discussant, and chronicler of accurate migrant information.” He even gave Collins a real-life prototype in the character of Jim Rawley, the manager of the Weedpatch Camp. But though Babb had contributed a vast amount of the material Steinbeck received, he never acknowledged Babb’s assistance, as she was Collin’s assistant. It’s likely that Steinbeck didn’t know about Babb’s novel. *Whose Names Are Unknown* was not published before his death on December 20, 1968, and there are no references to it or to Babb in Steinbeck’s archives. When Babb met him at the camps, she didn’t tell him about her novel because she was too shy to talk about her own writing with a writer whose career was clearly on the rise. However, Steinbeck makes a cameo in *Whose Names Are Unknown* as “the famous writer” who pleads with a judge to release

a young boy who has stolen “four scrapped radiators from a junkyard” to buy groceries for his starving mother. The judge thanks the famous writer, telling him this was the “first time he had thought of these okies as human beings.” And everyone in the community celebrates, thinking the writer has saved the day. However, when the boy comes up for trial, he receives no mercy and instead is sentenced to the maximum eleven years in San Quentin for his crime. After his sentencing, the judge visits the boy’s mother with a basket of food, remembering what the famous writer had told him about treating Okies like human beings, but the woman he finds is mad with grief over her imprisoned son and she will not accept the food. Babb’s tongue-in-check nod to Steinbeck in her book communicates how ineffective she believed his activism to be. Sure, he was able to reach a wide audience, but could he get them to do something about the issue that would be effective, that would help the impoverished people she worked with every day? His undercover visits to the camp are well documented in Collins’s “Bringing in the Sheaves,” where the camp residents are furious after they find out that the man who’d visited with them for two weeks was the author of *Grapes of Wrath*:

The woman screamed in my direction, “Ain’t it so, Mr. Drake, that you done had a guy here with you fur nigh two full weeks? And ain’t it so you done let him know all ’bout us people? And ain’t it so you done give him all that rotten stuff he done writes about us?”

There was no sleep for me that night, so I passed the long hours by finishing the reading of John’s book—my death sentence—the termination of my work and effort with the rural poor—for their confidence in me had been LOST.

When Babb wrote up her Guggenheim application in the 1940s, she asserted the difference between her book and Steinbeck’s. “In *Whose Names Are Unknown* I have presented the people in a somewhat different light than in the [*Grapes of Wrath*], and I feel I know these people thoroughly and want readers to know about them in this way.” Babb knew her approach to documenting the Dust Bowl and its impacts on the people she knew was quite different than Steinbeck’s and she continued to fight to bring her version of the past into the light.

In the 1940s, Babb took her manuscript out of the drawer and continued to work on it for a few more years, famously receiving in-depth feedback on it from her then lover, Ralph Ellison. He wrote to her, imploring her to finish and send her manuscript out, “I hope you have gotten back to the novel and that it is completed for fall publication. *You must!*” He was also moved by Babb’s evocation of place: “In re-reading your novel I had the same feeling of an emotionally dense atmosphere I experienced during our first conversation (coming up Park Avenue in the dark) that was more of Kansas and the plains than of a taxi and New York.” Ellison was also impressed with how Babb had achieved a working-class perspective, as he wrote, “Steinbeck was never for the workers in GOW [*Grapes of Wrath*], but was pleading subtly for the big shots to stop their wrongdoing. You, however, have been for the workers, showing his rebirth into a new consciousness.”

But, no matter how she crafter her novel, no publisher could see past the single story about the Dust Bowl that had been solidified by the success of Steinbeck’s novel. Rejection after rejection weighed Babb down until she gave up her fight and again put her manuscript away in a drawer. As time wore on and *Grapes of Wrath* became considered a classic of American literature, Babb’s views about Steinbeck’s work softened and she claimed she held no ill will against him.

Then, in 1990, as she was working on assembling a collection of her short stories, *Cry of the Tinamou*, Babb mentioned the fate of her manuscript to her then editor, Joanne Dearcopp. Dearcopp was fascinated by what Babb told her and asked if she could read it. When she did, Dearcopp was so impressed she asked if she could send it to a friend who was the fiction editor at *Michigan Quarterly Review*. And for the first time an excerpt from Babb’s novel was published that year. Dearcopp flew out to Los Angeles from New York, where she lived, to take her friend out to dinner to celebrate. Over glasses of wine, she tried to convince her friend to try and find a publisher for the full novel. Babb hesitated, but she agreed.

Over the next nine years, Dearcopp and the scholar Douglas Wixson, who’d also agreed to help after he’d discovered Babb’s work through his research about Jack Conroy, helped Babb edit *Whose Names Are Unknown*, writing back and forth and exchanging drafts. But Babb’s health

began to decline in the late nineties before she'd finished working on the manuscript. In 1996, she had major surgery, which left her with depleted energy. She wrote to Dearcopp, "At present, no writing news from here. . . . when I leave dear old planet Earth. Until then I hope I can write a story or two and poems. Work is such a vital part of being alive, truly alive. But I love all kinds of being alive. Every minute!"

Finally, in 2004, a re-edited *Whose Names Are Unknown* was published by the University of Oklahoma Press to critical acclaim. The *Los Angeles Times* claimed her novel rivaled *The Grapes of Wrath* because of the way it approached its topic with such sensitivity. It was a finalist for the 2005 Spur Award and the 2005 PEN Center USA Literary Award. Babb died, after finally seeing her long-lost novel about the Dust Bowl published, at her home in Hollywood, California, on December 31, 2005, at the age of ninety-eight. But, before she died, she wrote to Dearcopp, "This is the most meaningful book I've written."

In a time when so much of the West is plagued with natural disasters, and climate migrants are a growing worldwide concern, Babb's novel and her extraordinary life offer us a lesson in humility. Had Babb left the FSA camps and finished her novel just a few months earlier, perhaps it would be her Dust Bowl novel, instead of *The Grapes of Wrath*, that would now be taught in high schools across the country and perhaps our understanding about this time in history would have been widened to include more than a single story.

Babb's novel ends with the hopeful idea of transformation: "An old belief fell away like a withered leaf. Their dreams thudded down, like the over-ripe pears they had walked on, too long waiting on the stem. One thing was left, as clear and perfect as a drop of rain—the desperate need to stand together as one man. They would rise and fall, and in their falling, rise again." Indeed, Babb's novel, and subsequently the more inclusive version of the Dust Bowl her book presents, has, in its falling, risen again.

Iris Jamahl Dunkle wrote the first full-length biography on Charmian London, Jack London's wife, *Charmian Kittredge London: Trailblazer, Author, Adventurer* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2020). Her fourth collection of poems, *West: Fire: Archive*, was published by the Center for Literary Publishing at Colorado State University in 2021. Dunkle teaches at Napa Valley College and is the poetry and translation director of the Napa Valley Writers' Conference.

WARREN CHANG

Essential Worker, 2020
Oil on canvas, 32 x 24 in.



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY