

# KU COMMON BOOK

## *The Worst Hard Time*

### Faculty Guide

#### GENERAL INFORMATION

The KU Common Book promotes community and academic engagement through discussions of a common reading experience among faculty, staff, and students. In addition to building valuable connections to individuals across campus, the KU Common Book illustrates the interdisciplinary nature of the subjects we study, and creates an understanding that new students are entering a community that explores topics together.

During orientation, incoming students will receive the 2013-14 KU Common Book - *The Worst Hard Time*, by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Timothy Egan. *The Worst Hard Time*, a National Book Award winner, is a captivating account of the Dust Bowl, the drought and series of dust storms that plagued the high plains during the 1930s. The strength of this selection is that the book has great relevance for our state and can serve as a lens through which we consider our current treatment of the earth. The book explores a variety of themes across academic fields and engages issues related to several of KU's strategic initiative areas. We are encouraging interested faculty to adopt the book in courses and look forward to many campus conversations.

#### About the Selection

John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, told the story of the people who fled the effects of the Dust Bowl for California. *The Worst Hard Time* tells the stories of the people who stayed, the parents, grandparents and great-grandparents of people living in Kansas today. Egan follows the lives of real individuals—Native Americans, Hispanic ranchers, homesteaders, Volga German immigrants—in Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Colorado and Texas. Egan challenges readers to think critically about the causes of the Dust Bowl, individual and national responses, and the modern legacy of this era.

*The Worst Hard Time* mixes historical records with first-hand accounts from this period. Some readers will recognize their own family's roots in Kansas, while others will gain a better understanding of the history, landscape, and people of their adopted state.

#### Related Events

Hawk Week KU Common Book Discussions

4pm Sunday, August 25

*Discussions will be held on residence hall floors for those in Student Housing.*

*Alternative locations will be available for those living off campus. Specific locations to be announced.*

An Evening with Timothy Egan

7:30pm Thursday, September 26, 2013

Lied Center

Coffee & Conversation

featuring Timothy Egan

9am, Friday, September 27, 2013

The Commons (Spooner Hall)

Additional events will be held throughout the fall and spring semesters. Please visit [commonbook.ku.edu](http://commonbook.ku.edu) for a complete list of activities.

### Review Copies

We have a limited number of copies available for those interested in using *The Worst Hard Time* in their classrooms. Due to high demand, we are only able to provide one book per instructor. To request a review copy, please email [commonbook@ku.edu](mailto:commonbook@ku.edu) with the following information:

- Name of instructor of record
- Department
- Course name
- Course number
- How do you anticipate using the book in your course? Please review the resources for more information on the book's content and themes.

### Departmental Orders

The KU Bookstore is providing discounted rates for KU departments that are interested in purchasing copies of *The Worst Hard Time*. Pricing is dependent on number ordered.

1-24 copies - \$12.00 per book

25-49 copies - \$11.50 per book

50+ copies - \$11.00 per book

Departmental Orders can be placed by contacting [James Rourke](#) or [Michael Engel](#).

### TOPICS IN THE WORST HARD TIME

*Source: KU Libraries*

- Government
  - Multiple Homestead Acts
  - Prohibition
  - War
  - Federal Farm Loan Act of 1916
  - Stock market crash 10-29-29/Depression
  - Emergency banking bill (insuring deposits)
  - Foreclosures
  - Civilian Conservation Corps
  - Works Progress Administration
  - Government subsidized scarcity (killing cattle/planting no wheat)
  - Social Security Act (1935)
  - National Labor Relations Act (unions)
- Environment
  - Dust storms
  - Drought
  - Ecosystems
  - Wheat surplus

- Sodbusters
- Exodusters
- Rainmakers
- Great American Desert
- Ogallala Aquifer
- Grasshoppers
- Dust = static electricity
  
- Technology
  - Tractors/threshers
  - Barbed wire
  - Railroads
  
- Health
  - Dust pneumonia
  - Suffocation
  - Lack of drinkable water
  - Mental illness
  
- Social/cultural
  - Homesteading
  - Sharecropping
  - Prohibition
  - Depression
  - Wheat and war
  - Entertainment
  - Discrimination and racism
  - Deporting immigrants
  - Prostitution
  - Diaries and letters
  
- People
  - Theodore Roosevelt
  - Herbert Hoover
  - FDR
  - Charles Goodnight
  - F. Scott Fitzgerald
  - John Wesley Powell
  - Sitting Bull
  - John Steinbeck
  - Woody Guthrie
  - Hugh Bennett
  - Sanora Babb
  - Arthur Rothstein (photographer for Farm Security Administration)
  - Pare Lorentz (documentarian – Plow that Broke the Plains)
  - Ernie Pyle (one of most influential writers of the day)

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

The following is a list of organizations and offices that offer experiential and service learning opportunities related to themes of the 2013-14 KU Common Book, *The Worst Hard Time*.

**Center for Civic and Social Responsibility:** Located on the first floor of Strong Hall, the Center for Civic and Social Responsibility provides resources for faculty members looking to incorporate experiential or service learning opportunities in their classes. Additional information is available at [servicelearning.ku.edu/resources.shtml](http://servicelearning.ku.edu/resources.shtml).

**KU Fights Hunger:** KU Fights Hunger is a staff group that works with Just Food, other local organizations, and campus entities to learn about hunger-related issues locally and globally. The group plans a campus-wide food drive each October. Event updates and additional information is available at [facebook.com/KUFightsHunger](https://facebook.com/KUFightsHunger).

**Center for Community Outreach - Daily Bread, Jubilee Cafe, Earth:** CCO is a student-run organization that operates 15 daily, weekly, monthly or annual service programs across the Lawrence community. Daily Bread is a food recovery program for the KU campus; Earth grows local food to distribute to food pantries; and Jubilee Cafe is a semi-weekly program that provides free breakfast to community members in need. Learn more about volunteering for any CCO program at [cco.ku.edu/~cco/cgi-bin/index.php/programs](http://cco.ku.edu/~cco/cgi-bin/index.php/programs).

**KU Environs:** A student-run environmental advocacy group, KU Environs works to promote sound environmental practices at KU and in the Lawrence community. Recent programs include promoting sustainable practices with campus hydration stations; running a rain barrel auction; and visiting local gardens. Additional information and updated event listings are available at [facebook.com/KUEnvirons](https://facebook.com/KUEnvirons).

**Center for Sustainability:** The KU Center for Sustainability works to promote a culture of sustainability on the KU campus. As a piece of its mission, the Center “works across campus to support sustainable practices in operations, education, research and campus life.” Additional information about ways to get involved with the Center for Sustainability is available at [sustainability.ku.edu/involvement/index.shtml](http://sustainability.ku.edu/involvement/index.shtml).

## RELATED ORGANIZATIONS

The following is a list of local, state and regional organizations that offer resources and programming related to the subject matter of the 2013-14 KU Common Book, *The Worst Hard Time*.

**Kansas Humanities Council:** Organizing events around the state, the Kansas Humanities Council, “clarifies the connection between history, literature, ethics, and culture, and the daily decisions that Kansas make on the job, at home, and in their civic life.” Related resources include resident histories from the 1930s, and cultural collections related to music, writing, and art. [kansashumanities.org](http://kansashumanities.org)

**Kansas Historical Society:** The Kansas Historical Society oversees dozens of historical sites and museums across the state; provides research resources and assistance; and provides state historical materials to Kansas K-12 schools. Online resources related to the Dust Bowl and 1930 Kansas are available here: [ksbs.org](http://ksbs.org) Among the online resources available through the Kansas Historical Society is

a catalogue of resources related to the Civilian Conservation Corps and its stations in Kansas during the 1930s: [ksbs.org/p/civilian-conservation-corps-in-kansas-and-its-newspapers/13871](https://ksbs.org/p/civilian-conservation-corps-in-kansas-and-its-newspapers/13871)

**The Nature Conservancy:** An organization devoted to conservation worldwide, The Nature Conservancy is the largest conservation organization in Kansas. Resources related to the Dust Bowl are available online here: [nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/when-the-dust-settled.xml](https://nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/when-the-dust-settled.xml)

## RELATED LOCATIONS

The following is a list of locations to visit related to *The Worst Hard Time*, its themes, and its setting in the Dust Bowl era.

**KU Student Farm:** Located just north of Lawrence, the KU Student Farm offers educational opportunities to KU students, faculty and staff on topics including agriculture, sustainability, and local food systems. Students have the opportunity to grow their own food at the farm. [kufarming.wordpress.com](https://kufarming.wordpress.com)

**KU Student Rain Garden:** A student-run effort, the Rain Garden covers 5,200 square feet, and offers lessons in sustainable landscaping and storm water management. [sustainability.ku.edu/raingarden/index.shtml](https://sustainability.ku.edu/raingarden/index.shtml)

**Kansas Museum of History, Topeka, KS:** Exhibits cover all of the state's history, with some collections related to the Dust Bowl. [ksbs.org/museum](https://ksbs.org/museum)

**National Agriculture Hall of Fame, Bonner Springs, KS:** Exhibits at this museum cover topics including farming practices and agriculture history. Hugh H. Bennett, the soil chemist who started work to reverse the effects of the "Great Plowup," was among the Hall of Fame's first inductees. [aghalloffame.com](https://aghalloffame.com)

**High Plains Museum, Goodland, KS:** Exhibits and events cover the history of Western Kansas, specifically related to agriculture. [highplainsmuseum.org](https://highplainsmuseum.org)

**Ellis County Historical Society Museum, Hays, KS:** Exhibits and events cover the history of Western Kansas, specifically related to residents of Hays, including information on Volga German settlement and history. [elliscountyhistoricalmuseum.org](https://elliscountyhistoricalmuseum.org)

**Woody Guthrie Center, Tulsa, OK:** Dedicated to the music and life of Depression-era songwriter Woody Guthrie, this museum in Tulsa, Okla. serves as a home to Guthrie's creative output and an educational resource. [woodyguthriecenter.org](https://woodyguthriecenter.org)

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Reader's Guide

A reader's guide was created to help the students through the reading of *The Worst Hard Time*. This guide can be found at [firstyear.ku.edu/resources](https://firstyear.ku.edu/resources)

## Library Guide

KU Libraries has created an extensive online Library Guide to complement the use of *The Worst Hard Time*. The guide includes both print and electronic resources included in Egan’s bibliography, as well as additional resources related to the Dust Bowl, American History, and the subject’s connections to the University of Kansas. The guide can be found at [guides.lib.ku.edu/commonbook2013](http://guides.lib.ku.edu/commonbook2013)

## Teaching Resources

Activities, lesson plans, and multimedia resources related to “The Dust Bowl,” a PBS documentary by Ken Burns: [pbs.org/kenburns/dustbowl/educators/overview](http://pbs.org/kenburns/dustbowl/educators/overview)

Publisher’s discussion guide for “The Worst Hard Time,” a conversation with author Timothy Egan: [houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers\\_guides/egan\\_worst.shtml](http://houghtonmifflinbooks.com/readers_guides/egan_worst.shtml)

Library of Congress “Voices of the Dust Bowl” ethnographic field collection includes links to audio and visual resources, field recordings, and folklife collections, divided into topic areas including history, critical thinking, and the arts and humanities. [loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/connections/dust-bowl/file.html](http://loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/connections/dust-bowl/file.html)

## Timeline

A comprehensive timeline of the events related to the Dust Bowl was compiled by PBS in relation to their special “Surviving the Dust Bowl” and can be found at [pbs.org/wgbh/americalexperience/features/timeline/dustbowl](http://pbs.org/wgbh/americalexperience/features/timeline/dustbowl)

## Other Resources

A list of other resources, including book reviews and the author’s website can be found at [firstyear.ku.edu/resources](http://firstyear.ku.edu/resources).

## INTEGRATING THE KU COMMON BOOK INTO COURSES

### KU Common Book and the KU Core

The KU Common Book, with its focus on inviting students to critically read, engage with, and participate in a scholarly conversation about a text, reinforces the following goals and principles stated under the **General Education Goal to Strengthen Oral and Written Communication of the KU CORE:**

1. The ability to engage with diverse audiences and ideas in writing and speaking [which] supports personal relationships, educational development, professional advancement, and civic engagement.
- 2) Support for critical and integrative thinking by allowing students to generate and examine fully their ideas and engage with multiple perspectives.

Source: [kucore.ku.edu](http://kucore.ku.edu)

### Sample Writing Topics for *The Worst Hard Time*

With the goals of the KU Core in mind, the following are sample topics that could lead to more extended writing projects:

1. An issue that arises within the book is the question of whether or not the dust storms are acts of nature or man-made disasters that are a “by-product of hubris and ignorance on a grand scale”

(225). What lessons, if any, have we learned from the dust bowl catastrophe—about how human actions, well-intentioned or not, can lead to environmental damage? Is there anything comparable on the horizon today? Drawing on more contemporary examples of environmental disasters or concerns, write a paper that explores how this debate continues to be timely or that takes a stand on this debate.

2. According to the *Houston Chronicle*, “*The Worst Hard Time* documents how government and business with the best of intentions can facilitate the destruction of an entire region.” Explain how this is true with regard to the Dust Bowl, and then extend your analysis to include the relevance of this statement to more recent events. What parallels to current events do you see? What are the implications for our society today?

3. Watch the 2012 documentary film by Ken Burns called “The Dust Bowl” ([pbs.org/kenburns/dustbowl/](https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/dustbowl/)), and then write a comparative analysis of the documentary film and Egan’s book. Note any conflicting accounts of the dust bowl or the presentation of events or any additions of details in one account that aren’t present in the other, and then reflect on the significance of these differences. Do the accounts share the same purpose and audience? How do the messages vary? Analyze how the different medium and genre—a historical book vs. a documentary film—employ similar or differing strategies to appeal to the audience and carry out their message.

4. As noted at the end of the book, in the section on “Notes and Sources,” Egan conducted the research for the book using multiple methods and by compiling various types of data. Besides consulting public documents (like U.S. Census reports), local public library collections, local newspapers, and other historical societies and historical sources, Egan also did primary research by visiting the High Plains and interviewing people who lived through the Dust Bowl. What is the effect of weaving personal stories and stories of individuals and families into his historical account? What is the effect on you, as a reader, and your understanding of this historical event? Carry out your own project in which you 1) consult a secondary source on a local historical event (environmental, political, or cultural) and then 2) interview an older relative or acquaintance or community member who has a recollection of the event. Write a report on the event, followed by a reflection on how your understanding of the event and presentation of the report were affected by these different types of evidence.

5. Conduct further research on the political and social events coinciding with Egan’s Dust Bowl portrayal—such as the Stock Market Crash of 1929, the Homestead Act, the Hoover administration policies, the election of FDR, the New Deal programs implemented by FDR, etc. Then write an analysis of how an understanding of the larger cultural, historical, and economic context can deepen our understanding of the Dust Bowl. As an alternative, you might research and write a project that examines the local context in Kansas, drawing on Kansas History resources (see the links at [kansashistory.us/dustbowl.html](http://kansashistory.us/dustbowl.html)). Or, explore, in particular, the political effects of the Dust Bowl. How did Washington eventually respond, and what have been the lasting effects?

6. Create a multimedia project—a website or video—that integrates print, audio, video, and images to capture the multi-layered experiences of various families and regions portrayed in Egan’s book, along with the multi-sensory experiences of the Dust Bowl. You might create a timeline or use maps, oral histories, photos, etc. to help convey the experience via a multimedia format. Or you might focus on a key event or issue, such as Black Sunday, dust pneumonia, static electricity, soil

erosion and conservation, etc. and organize your multimedia presentation around one of these topics in order to deepen and enrich understanding of these issues.

7. Write a response to the question: “How is this book relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> century readers?” You might consider the most serious ecological or environmental issues that we currently face, and the responses and actions of individuals, communities, activists, and governments. Or, as a group collaborative project, define an ecological or environmental problem, and outline a proposal or solution that might address the problem. Present this as a multi-part paper or website.

8. During the Dust bowl, a number of people left their homes—a migration about which Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* is written. But most residents chose to stay. Write a response in which you evaluate why the residents stayed. Would it have been better to have left? Which choice would you have made? Use illustrations and examples from the book to support your analysis.

9. Create a class environmental blog in which you include discussion threads of historical accounts of environmental disasters—such as the Dust Bowl—along with accounts of current environmental events or concerns. With the purpose of creating collective action, include concrete steps that individuals and communities might take to address environmental concerns, and include links to relevant national and local organizations and community groups.

10. Imagine that the sequences of diary entries from Don Hartwell in Nebraska (pages 244-48; 274-78; 294-302) were presented in the current day as a weblog or blog. Hartwell, like many bloggers, has chosen to leave the entries open to comments from readers. Write a comment in response to one of the sequences of diary entries. Hartwell's last entry came in the form of a poem (page 302). Analyze the significance of that poem, or write a response to that in the form of a blog entry.

11. Egan's historical account incorporates multiple disciplinary perspectives ranging across the sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. While the environmental perspective is crucial to Egan's account of the Dust Bowl, he is also interested in effects on human psychology, family behavior, marriage, labor conditions, agriculture, the food industry, the liquor laws and trade, political systems, religious systems, economic systems, music, the arts, etc. Drawing on your own academic (or personal) interests or the subject area or field in which you are planning to major, look for appearances of this interest/area of interest in the book. What role does your disciplinary interest (or related interest) play in Egan's historical account? Or, if you don't see your area of interest or study represented in Egan's account, explain what role it might have played had it been factored in.

### **Links to further questions for discussion or short writing prompts**

From LitLovers: A Well Read Online Community: [litlovers.com/reading-guides/14-non-fiction/1181-worst-hard-time-egan?start=3](http://litlovers.com/reading-guides/14-non-fiction/1181-worst-hard-time-egan?start=3)

From Rochester Reads:

[www.rochesterreads.org/rr2011graphics/documents/WorstHardTimeDiscussionGuide.pdf](http://www.rochesterreads.org/rr2011graphics/documents/WorstHardTimeDiscussionGuide.pdf)



## INTEGRATING THE KU COMMON BOOK INTO ENGLISH 101

The goal of the common book program is to introduce students to academic discourse and to create a shared intellectual context for incoming students, to stimulate discussion and interaction, and to cultivate the skills of critical thinking, reading, and rhetorical engagement with ideas that students will employ throughout their academic life and beyond. Students will enter English 101 having read a substantial (whole) text and having discussed it before the first day of class. Teachers of writing have the potential to draw on and extend this critical engagement by incorporating the book as a basis for the following options:

### First Day Informal Writing Topic

Teachers might base their first-day writings or diagnostic writings on the common book (the diagnostic is an ungraded, in-class writing assignment administered during the first week of classes and used to gauge the level of writing skills of students, diagnose any class-wide writing problems, and alert students to skills they may want to work on during the semester and to recommend additional tutorial work in the Writing Center.) Following are some topic ideas:

- One of the goals of your English 101 class will be to teach you the skills of rhetorical analysis and how to identify the strategies that writers use to persuade readers of a message (and then to employ these same strategies in your own writing). Based on your reading of *The Worst Hard Time*, explain how you think the text works to persuade its audience of a message. What is the message of the book, in your opinion? Does Egan rely mainly on facts and evidence or on trying to persuade readers through appeals to readers' emotions and values? What is the effect of his use of a combination of historical research, interviews with survivors, and even family journals and diaries? How does this affect his portrayal of a historical event? Explain what techniques you found most effective in carrying out Egan's message.
- Suppose that another university in our region or in a nearby region has chosen *The Worst Hard Time* for its own common book reading program. Write a letter to the faculty on the selection committee explaining why—from your perspective as a student who read the book for a university common book program—this book would be an effective or ineffective choice for their incoming students. In other words, evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the book. You might focus on the appeal of the book to first-year students, its readability, its relevant themes, or its appropriateness to a common book program. Be sure to use examples from the book to back up your claims.

### Supplementing Rhetorical Goals of the Writing Class

Because the book is a whole text that all students will (presumably) have read before getting to 101, it can form the basis for early discussions of rhetorical strategies and principles:

Rhetorical Situation/Situating the Text: To understand Egan's purpose in writing the historical account, the audience he envisioned, his subject matter, the genre, students might consider the following questions:

- What questions does the text address? Why are these significant questions? What communities care about them?
- What is the writer's purpose in writing?

- Who is the intended audience? Am I part of this audience or an outsider?
- What situational factors (biographical, historical, political, cultural) might have motivated or influenced the writing of this text?

Students might also consider their own positioning—their previous experiences and personal responses to the book:

- What did you already know about the subject of the book—the Dust Bowl—and how did your own experiences and previous knowledge influence your reading? Do you know of anyone who lived through the Dust Bowl?
- What did the title of the book—*The Worst Hard Time*—evoke for you?
- What did you learn about the author, Timothy Egan, and the book from the visual and textual features of the cover and from the prefatory material inside? Had you heard anything about either the book or author?
- What is your impression of the excerpts from reviews on the front and back cover, particularly the quotation from Walter Cronkite? How did these reviews and quotations affect your reading?
- The Seattle Post-Intelligencer calls the book a “masterpiece of historical reportage?” In what ways did the book fulfill your expectations for this genre, and in what ways did it depart from your expectations?
- Which of the families' stories did you find particularly poignant? Which characters did you find most admirable? Which did you most identify with?

Rhetorical appeals:

Ethos: What do we know about Egan as an author/journalist that builds his credibility? How does he build this credibility and knowledge through the text?

Pathos: How does Egan appeal to pathos through vivid detail and sensory description of a scene or through diction and figurative language (simile/metaphor, symbol), through examples or anecdotes, or through individuals and their voices?

Logos: How does Egan appeal to reason? How does he integrate facts, evidence, expert testimony, etc. to reinforce his message?

Interwoven with historical facts and research in Egan’s book are stories of individuals, like Hazel Lucas, Bam White, Alfalfa Bill, etc. What role do these narratives play in the historical account?

What is the effect of the visuals—maps, photos—on the purpose and audience?

What is the significance of the “Notes and Sources” and “Acknowledgements” at the end of the book? Why do you think Egan included these?

Arrangement:

What is the effect of dividing the book into 3 parts—Part I. Promise: The Great Plow-Up, 1901-1930; Part II. Betrayal, 1931-33; and Part III. Blowup, 1934-39?

What is the significance of the breakdown in years covered during each part?

Why does Part III contain the largest number of chapters?

What function does the “Epilogue” play?

Style:

Take note of any specialized language or diction (word choice)—such as “dusters,” “roof-busters,” “sodbusters,” “exo-dusters,” “leaners,” “rabbit drives,” etc. Examine the effects of these words or phrases.

Examine passages that describe the “dusters”—the feel of the air and temperature changes, the color of the sky and clouds, the textures of the dust and wind. What is the effect of these sensory descriptions?

Many of the reviewers note that the book is highly engaging and “haunts” the reader. What stylistic and language choices lend to this quality?

Does Egan effectively convey the voices of characters? What techniques does he use to capture the voices of the locals?

What role is played by the inclusion of diary entries (the diary of Don Cartwell)?

What is the significance of the epigraph—the quotation by Willa Cather?

**Connections with English 101 Textbook (*Everyone’s an Author*):**

Students might examine how Egan’s text constitutes different genres and purposes—of “Arguing a Position” (Ch. 7) or “Writing a Narrative” (Ch. 8) or “Reporting Information” (Ch. 10).

There might also be readings related to environmental topics or other social/cultural issues that the book could supplement, such as the following readings:

Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steel’s “Monsanto’s Harvest of Fear”

Monsanto, “Why Does Monsanto Sue Farmers”

Penelope Green’s “The Year without Toilet Paper” (on carbon footprint)

bell hook’s “Touching the Earth”

**For more information about KU Common Book**

The KU Common Book program is coordinated by the Office of First-Year Experience. If you would like to learn more about this year’s selection, related events, the selection process, or the KU Common Book Committee, please visit [commonbook.ku.edu](http://commonbook.ku.edu). If you have any additional questions, please email [commonbook@ku.edu](mailto:commonbook@ku.edu)