45 CRITICS DISCUSS

Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

"Mr. Stegner, who has not published any long fiction before this novelette (*Remembering Laughter*), has built a narrative which comes startlingly close to perfection. In many ways it will remind everyone who reads it of *Ethan Frome*. It has the same quiet strength and simplicity in structure and style. The characterizations are not as mature or subtle as those in Mrs. Wharton's novelette, but they are well-realized, and this story has dramatic relief from the tragic mood in Alec's tall tales the opulence of the farm life. There is no use to mention the assurance and calm competence that Mr. Stegner brings to his first book—it has to be read to be believed."

Phil Strong
Saturday Review
(25 September 1937) 5

"The passing generation of writers examined man with a minifying glass, made him smaller, baser, more miserable than life-size. Inevitably, the characters became too small to be seen; and new writers are returning to their only possible tool, the magnifying lens, and establishing man once more above the ground. In this tradition Mr. Stegner has written a rich and moving study (*On a Darkling Plain*). Perhaps it is in spite of himself that he is romantic, mystical, compassionate, and warm. The interbellum generation has been taught by the war generation to distrust these qualities; but in Mr. Stegner—as in Steinbeck, Wolfe, and Saroyan—they are what we value most."

Milton G. Lehman
New Republic
(26 February 1940) 284

"Stegner is prepared to give an inside view of the great Northwest as it was passing from the pioneer to the settled agricultural stage. In numerous tales he has faithfully worked this mine, without really striking pay dirt until the present moment….With *Big Rock Candy Mountain* the author takes a real hold on his subject….Mr. Stegner has felt the spell of mountain and prairie, of drought, flood and blizzard; he can write of moving accidents and hairbreadth escapes which give us the feel of frontier life better than phrases about the stars and seasons."

Joseph Warren Beach
New York Times
(26 September 1943) 4

"*The Big Rock Candy Mountain* is not a conscious rediscovery of American values. Mr. Stegner is as amused at small-town cussedness as was Sinclair Lewis, but he knows that satire accomplishes nothing. In a larger sense, however, his book is an extraordinary study in American folkways. The language, the psychology, the customs of his characters are essential and characteristic, largely because, knowing them, he takes them for granted and does not dissect and analyze. His, to be sure, is a masculine world, just as, despite the tenderness with which the wife is treated, this is a masculine book."

Howard Mumford Jones
Saturday Review
(2 October 1943) 11

"Mr. Stegner is a regional writer in the usual sense that a certain geographical area engages him. Three subjects particularly intrigue him: memories of a prairie boyhood; a sudden and often belated revelation to one character of the incubi that haunt another; and what might be called the He-man pastoral, a highly American form found at its purest in the work of Sherwood Anderson and in such stories as Hemingway's 'Big Two-Hearted River,' and Faulkner's *The Bear*."

Harry Sylvester
New York Times

(1 January 1950) 15

"Mr. Stegner writes beautifully about almost any kind of rural landscape, whether it be a birch-and-maple forest in Vermont, an apricot ranch in California, or the 'endless oceanic land' of Saskatchewan…. At their most effective, his landscapes leap at you with a vividness that reminds you of the first time the eye doctor dropped the right lens in your test frame. In his quiet way, Wallace Stegner is one of the most talented writers in our midst."

Richard Match
New York Herald Tribune
(1 January 1950) 4

"Stegner is always the quiet, sure workman, slipping in almost unnoticed bits of poetry and little ironies and sage observations as the story moves along, but, though almost unnoticed, the little touches dig in, take hold, do their work on the subconscious mind of the reader. But he is at his best when he is aroused, when he gets his waters to rolling and roiling, for then he gets up on that high plateau that most of his *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* represents."

Feike Feikema
Chicago Sun Book Week
(9 January 1950)

"Wallace Stegner is a thoroughly skilled writer who belongs to a tradition which takes the short story seriously, but not too seriously. Even his least successful stories are characterized by a well-disciplined, essentially conservative craftsmanship. Neither an entertainer nor an artist *per se*, he seldom fails to respect either his characters or his readers. In short, serious as his approach to short fiction may be, he does not allow his story to be submerged by message or overshadowed by technique."

William Peden
Saturday Review
(21 January 1950) 17

"The psychological or regional not-at-homeness of Stegner's main characters makes his stories dominantly reflective in tone. The changes are mostly inner. What begins as condemnation of others becomes self-criticism. A deepened sense of what others are and need results in a deepened and chastened sense of self. Such detachment and reflectiveness are not likely to go with passionate commitment, and the stories do not usually drive dramatically to some final outer resolution. They are wise and humane as well as observant, however, and teach what must happen in ourselves before we can love and understand others, and by what steps we can move toward effective sympathy with those who, most needing love, are most unlovable."

Robert Gorham Davis
New York Times
(26 October 1956) 6

"His gifts are of a distinguished, though completely unspectacular kind. They include a cool steadiness of insight into the complexities of the human condition and an extraordinary flexibility in making the idiom of the moment bespeak many subtleties of judgment….Stegner always turns away from the shattering climax. When his point is made he breaks it off, sometimes abruptly. This is as it must be with a writer to whom nothing is more offensive than the second-hand affirmative unless it is the garish, improbably bloody tragic resolution."

James Gray
New York Herald Tribune
(4 November 1956) 4

"You are in the presence of a master…one of the deepest, truest, most likeable writers in America."

C. P. Snow (1961)
British novelist

"Stegner attended high school and college in Salt Lake City and did graduate work at the universities of Iowa and California. He taught at Iowa, Utah, Wisconsin, Harvard, and Stanford universities. In 1937 he won the Little, Brown Contest with his *Remembering Laughter*, and he twice won the O. Henry Memorial Award. Among his other novels: *The Potter's House* (1938); *On a Darkling Plain* (1940); *Fire and Ice* (1941); *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943); *Second Growth* (1947); *Country Dance* (1948); *The Preacher and the Slave* (1950). These novels, like his excellent short stories, some of which have been collected in *Women on the Wall* (1950), *City of the Living* (1956), and *A Shooting Star* (1961), have varied and realistic settings and give an animated, impressive picture of American rural life.

Stegner's work also includes nonfiction of great interest. Under the auspices of *Look* magazine he undertook a survey of national and religious tensions in the United States and published the results in a frank, polemical, trenchant volume entitled *One Nation* (1945). Also under the auspices of *Look*, he prepared an informative called *The Central Northwest* (1947) in the 'Look at America' series. Earlier he had written about *Mormon Country* (1942). Undoubtedly the best of his nonfictional works, however, is *Beyond the 100th Meridian* (1954), a biography of a great explorer, engineer, and conservationist, John Wesley Powell. As director of the creative writing center at Stanford, Stegner analyzed *The Writer's Art* (1950) and in collaboration with Stuart Brown and Claude Simpson compiled *An Exposition Workshop* (1939)."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 1076

"Wallace Stegner has published twenty books, including fiction and nonfiction. In 1972 he won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel, *Angle of Repose*. In addition, he was the head of Stanford University's creative writing program for over twenty years. Now retired from full-time teaching, he continues to write at his home in Los Altos Hills. It is a contemporary home with a sweeping view of the Coast Range.

Dressed casually in khaki trousers, wool Pendleton shirt, and loafers, he leads us to his book-lined office which is separated from the main house by a covered walkway. He sits down at his desk in front of a wall covered with plaques, framed certificates, and old snapshots of friends. Relaxed, he leans back in his swivel chair and lights a cigar. He discusses his work in a rambling, conversational voice. Despite his informality, he is an imposing figure. His mane of silver hair, the lines which give his face an air of perpetual contemplation, and the things he says, all command respect. But more than any one thing, or series of things, his overall demeanor is that of a man who has, over the course of many years, achieved something of what he set out to do. 'I believe in the life chronological, rather than the life existential,' one of his characters says. It is obvious that Wallace Stegner believes in the life chronological as well."

Dan Tooker and Roger Hofheins
Fiction!: Interviews with Northern California Novelists
(Harcourt 1972-76) 167-68

"Wallace Stegner has been described as a non-religious humanist, but his theory of literary art is based on a belief in literature which is not unlike the religious faith that Jonathan Edwards had in the 'divine and supernatural light,' or the faith that Ralph Waldo Emerson had in 'Reason,' or that the devout Mormon has in the 'Holy Ghost.' Stegner's literary beliefs center on the idea that the aesthetic experience is a private, subjective, mystical experience that is 'never quite communicable,' and that the aesthetic experience is not subject to empirical verification. Art has its own peculiar sort of truth, the ancient and unverifiable 'knowledge of things *as experience*,' and this truth is just as important as, and is complementary to, measurable, scientific truth. The artist, for Stegner, is the 'man aware,' the man who can record the knowledge of things as experienced. But today we live in the age of the transistor and too often ignore or distrust the subjective, mystical experience; and says Stegner, this makes us like little children 'trying to spell [the word] God with the wrong blocks'….

Stegner's literary theory and practice do not categorize nicely into any of the traditional groups, such as classicism, naturalism, or realism. If one must have such a handle, he might try soldering the world 'archetypal' onto Stegner's works…Following in the tradition of T. E. Hulme's idea of the 'image,'

Stegner believes that images (concrete things drawn from experience to symbolize the human truths of experience) are what make the reader *see*….What is needed in Stegner's case is a philosophical focus… From the sorrows of the bleak life on a Saskatchewan farm, from the disorder of the sooty life in cities, Stegner has tried to find physical and moral order….Some writers, Stegner notes, begin with ideas and make them into flesh and blood as Nathaniel Hawthorne did. Other writers start with flesh and blood and let them work themselves out into ideas, as Mark Twain did.

Regardless of the method, the artist's goal is 'dramatized belief.' No fiction should state its meaning flatly: 'It does not state; it imitates or reflects, and is witnessed.' For Stegner, human dramatization is the writer's key tool. Chisel a great character and you have great literature—Oedipus, Don Quixote, Hamlet, Ahab, Huckleberry Finn. The meaning of life lies in people….The primary aim of literary art, Stegner believes, is to celebrate the human spirit. Literature today, he also believes, has assumed much of the spiritual responsibilities traditionally belonging to religion. 'Literature has become for many of us…the source of wisdom and the receptacle of values'."

Sid Jenson
"The Compassionate Seer: Wallace Stegner's Literary Artist"
Brigham Young University Studies (Winter 1974) 248-62

"His sane, realistic approach seeks to illustrate that some of the largest myths that burden the image of the West in our nation's consciousness—especially the fantasy of 'man alone'—prevent us from perceiving important cultural truths about ourselves….I think *Angle of Repose* best represents [his] approach. Not only is it his best novel to date, it also shows itself to be a descendant of and an improvement upon *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943), and a culmination in his struggle to present Western realities."

Kerry Ahearn
"*The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Angle of Repose*: Trial and Culmination"
Western American Literature (Spring 1975) 11-27

"Stegner goes beyond a Cheever because his main concern is not depiction but the reconciliation of philosophy against the facts."

Barnett Singer
"The Historical Ideal in Wallace Stegner's Fiction"
South Dakota Review I (1977) 28-44

"Wallace Stegner…argues that in the interior West aridity and openness are the major forces shaping writers and their work….Stegner takes the giant step. I treat his *Angle of Repose* at length because he has produced a western novel that is more than *about* history; he has written a first-rate fictional interpretation *of* the historical development of the West….Norman Cousins…has even higher praise for Stegner, calling him the leading man of American letters….Not only does Stegner ask the most important questions about the making of the modern West; he seems to give the best answers….And thus, if I were asked to name the most significant western novel of the last decade, I would nominate *Angle of Repose*. I know of no other novel of the last ten years that says as many meaningful things about the American West as Stegner's book. It is a model for subsequent novels written about the West."

Richard W. Etulain
"Western Fiction and History: A Reconsideration"
The American West: New Perspectives, New Dimensions
ed. Jerome O. Steffen
(U Oklahoma 1979) 152-74

"It is the disturbing thesis of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (indeed, of the large bulk of Stegner's work, fiction and non-fiction) that the pioneer virtues of a Harry Mason—restlessness, impatience, individual initiative, and an unshakable certainty that the American Dream means that he must prevail—have become disabling vices in an era which requires cooperation for survival….

The adolescent search for identity that Stegner revisits in *Reconciliation* is, of course, a major theme in American literature. Some writers, such as Thomas Wolfe, never went beyond it, and their work now seems

rather overwrought. An essential difference between Stegner and a writer like Wolfe, whose compelling account of his childhood and his overwhelming father in *Look Homeward, Angel* is not unlike *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* in emotional appeal, is that Wolfe died young while Stegner has had the opportunity to let his protagonists grow older along with him. They are still searching: the now-mature Bruce Mason; the retired literary agent, Joe Allston, of *All the Little Live Things*, 'Field Guide to the Western Birds,' and *The Spectator Bird*; and Lyman Ward, the retired history professor in *Angle of Repose*, all share with Stegner's younger characters the need to strike a balance, to find an 'angle of repose' from which they can view their lives with understanding. What gives their stories added depth is that all these men had enough experience of life to transcend the youthful ignorance and naivete imposed by the limitations of the initiation theme….

Another reason for the wide appeal of Stegner's books may be that he presents his characters, particularly when he is dealing with the West, in a context larger than their own egos. Defining for us and for himself the regional identity of the inter-mountain West, he shows the connections that exist between the land and those who inhabit it, both past and present….In philosophical terms, then, Stegner's world is man-centered, not nature-centered or God-centered. Nature is not a gift but a test, one that is often failed. It is part of the continuing history of the West, Stegner says, that the ignorant eye can be indifferent or hostile to the most magnificent landscape, and the effects can be disastrous, as he notes in a recent article on the resistance of native Utahns to environmental controls that would preserve the beauty of their state. It is what people do to and with the land, and why, that most interests Stegner; he is intrigued by the culture that gave definition to the West, and some of his best work deals with…his search for cultural identity, described in 'Born a Square' and other essays….

The recurrent theme in his work…is that the West is in danger of becoming a despoiled oasis, a synecdoche of the American Dream defiled. The cause lies in the American myth of the solitary seeker who descends upon the land, uses what he can for personal advantage, discards the residue for someone else to clean up, and moves on further west to repeat the process. Our experience has been a parody of the [Frederick Jackson Turner] thesis, which sees in the same pattern the American genius for successful nation-building. Popular literature and popular culture have perpetuated the Western myths until they have become self-fulfilling prophecies, further weakening an already-strained social fabric….

Another paradox emerges. Stegner has always distrusted zealotry, especially in religion and politics; thus his admiration for the Mormons' social coherence, which is based on the famous symbol of the beehive, is qualified by his skepticism concerning both its sources and the limitations it places on human freedom….His rejection of *angst* is implicit in his work generally, and notably so in the passage cited above from his essay on Willa Cather. His essential premises include the assumption that human development, even the much-maligned notion of 'progress,' rather than disintegration, is the right and proper subject for art. People do learn, they do grow, beneficial change is possible….

Stegner recognizes his separation from a 'literary generation that appears to specialize in despair, hostility, hypersexuality, and disgust,' and he credits the 'several Wests' which he has identified for helping to perpetuate aspects of 'traditional American innocence.' These American 'Wests,' he says, 'breed more meliorists than nihilists, and they encourage booster clubs, culture clubs, and reform movements much more commonly than the despair, decadence, masochism, sadism, self-pity, *angst* and the hopeless prick of conscience that are compulsive to many contemporary novelists….Wallace Stegner's career, in summary, has been a notably successful one, lacking only the full critical recognition which it deserves."

Anthony Arthur, ed.
Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner
(G. K. Hall 1982) 2-6, 11, 14

"What a career, unequaled in this century."

Malcolm Cowley
Letter to Stegner
(7 August 1987)

"In a varied career of more than half a century, Wallace Earle Stegner has earned an honored place in American letters and is one of the foremost authors to have been closely associated with western North American themes….In his mid-twenties, Stegner was poised for a career either as a teacher or as a writer, but by 1937, he had chose both, for in that year he gained the first of several university appointments and his first major fiction work, *Remembering Laughter*, was published.

This novella is the story of an Iowa farmer, Alec Stuart, and his prim wife, Margaret, whose vital younger sister is drawn into an affair with Alec. The heart of the tale describes the affair's somber legacy of pregnancy, alienation, and death, relieved only at the end by the courageous departure of the fourteen-year-old son/nephew to find a new life. While *Remembering Laughter* is far surpassed by most of Stegner's later fiction, it is a well-wrought statement of many themes he would later explore, particularly that of conflicts within families. Stegner's next three novels describe other varieties of social, emotional, and physical isolation. *The Potter's House*, set in California, concerns a deaf-mute artisan and his family, whose life is upset by the meddling of the potter's brother. *On a Darkling Plain* is the story of a young Canadian soldier, who, wounded by gas in the Great War, seeks recuperative isolation by homesteading in Saskatchewan, only to be brought back to a sense of community in joining with his neighbors to combat the deadly influenza epidemic of 1918. *Fire and Ice* forgoes the connection with the land seen in Stegner's first novels and concerns the struggles of a Midwestrn college student caught in conflicts of ideology and personal conduct.

In these few years, Stegner had completed his novelist's apprenticeship, and in 1943, he achieved his first critical and popular success with *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. This semi-autobiographical novel is dominated by the character of the ambitious but erratic Bo Mason, a seeker after the American Dream whose search for prosperity pushes the limits of the law and family cohesion alike. The events of the novel closely parallel the Stegner family's years in Saskatchewan, Montana, Washington, and Utah as Wallace's father pursued a futile series of money-making schemes. In large measure, this first longer novel set the tone of Stegner's future writing, particularly in suggesting that the restless individualism of Bo Mason is the disabling, if not destructive, expression of an outworn frontier mythology.

After *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, Stegner might conceivably have become identified exclusively with the West (and in fact he has remained, throughout his career, a spokesman for the West both as a writer and as a conservationist), but he chose New England as the locale of his next novel, *Second Growth*, a study of change and renewal in social values following World War II. Almost all the author's subsequent books have had Western locales, but Stegner has resisted easy classification as a 'regional' writer by diversifying his themes and by examining their widest cultural implications.

Stegner's Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *Angel of Repose*, perhaps the best known of his books, is a key example of his wish to examine major issues such as the relationship of the West and East in American culture and the significance of history in personal and social life. The novel's narrator, Lyman Ward, is an ailing professor of history engaged in distilling the letters and diaries of his grandparents, whose married life in the nineteenth century West Lyman discovers to have been a web of misunderstanding. Susan Ward, his grandmother, regarded her marriage as an undeserved exile from the genteel East, while her husband, a visionary and idealistic mining engineer, suffered professional failure and Susan's incomprehension. The geological term 'angle of repose,' denoting the incline at which a landslide or talus slope achieves stability, serves as a metaphor of the uneasy stability of relationships maintained at cross-purposes. Stegner achieved a new level of thematic and structural richness in *Angle of Repose* by mingling past and present while maintaining control of the narrative through his alter ego Lyman Ward, who expresses Stegner's belief in 'life chronological, not life existential."

In a short story, 'Field Guide to the Western Birds,' and in the novel *All the Little Live Things* Stegner developed the character Joe Allston, who, like Lyman Ward, is a vigorously ironic dissenter from contemporary American social and moral values. Allston reappeared in *The Spectator Bird*, a National Book Award winner which was well received by the public, though some critics found the older Allston tedious, if believable. *The Spectator Bird* is another retrospective novel but uses European locales and themes (surprisingly, the Danish writer Isak Dinesen is a minor character). The theme of remembrance was further explored in *Recapitulation*, which reintroduces the character of Bruce Mason of *The Big Rock*

Candy Mountain, and a novel set in the Midwest and New England, *Crossing to Safety*. An account of Stegner's career as a novelist reveals chronological gaps that were largely taken up with work on short fiction and nonfiction writer.

In his short stories, Stegner often rehearses material that he later explores in novels. For example, both 'The Blue-Winged Teal' (perhaps his best short story) and 'Maiden in a Tower' make an appearance, in altered form, in *Recapitulation*, two decades after their publication in the collection *The City of the Living and Other Stories*. Similarly, within the body of his nonfiction, the commissioned documentary study *One Nation* anticipates *Second Growth*, and more indirectly, Stegner's scholarly historical study *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* precedes *Angle of Repose* in its attention to the conflict of myth and reality in Western development.

Whle the acclaimed John Wesley Powell book is straight history, Stegner's *Wolf Willow*, subtitled *A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier*, combines autobiography, history, and two short stories, 'Genesis' and 'Carrion Spring.' Widely admired in Canada as well as the United States, *Wolf Willow* is centered on the author's reminiscence of the part of his childhood spent in East End, Saskatchewan, at the foot of the Cypress Hills. Notwithstanding the fact that it was written before the midpoint of his literary career, the book draws together so many of Stegner's strengths as a writer, including his mastery of the short story, his use of evocative family chronicle, and his appreciation of the role of history and environment in daily life, that it may be taken as a paradigm of the work of this unusually versatile man of letters."

C. S. McConnell
Cyclopedia of World Authors II, Vol. 4
(Salem 1989) 1411-12

"When I first met Wallace Stegner in 1982, I had no idea our meeting would lead to this descriptive bibliography. At that time, like thousands of others, I was simply a Stegner reader. Although generations apart, my own move from the New Almaden area of California to Colorado mirrored the travels of his characters in *Angle of Repose*, that novel, with its skillfully drawn characters and settings, touched me deeply. It struck me then, as it does today, as the work of a true artist, a master."

Nancy Colberg
Wallace Stegner: A Descriptive Bibliography
American Authors Series
(Confluence Press 1990) xiii

"The roads taken by the sensuous little savage who grew up on the last plains frontier and became the famous virtuoso—novelist, short story writer, editor, literary critic, historian, biographer, teacher, conservationist—will doubtless surprise and fascinate us with too many twists and turns to imagine now. But that the father of the Stanford Writing Workshop and (in the words of Edward Abbey) 'the only living American worthy of the Nobel Prize in literature' is still walking these roads remains for millions of us a source of comfort and immense consolation….His life exemplifies the kind of historical continuity between the American past and the American present that is comparable to a character in a Faulkner novel….

Although not everyone grants Stegner Nobel status in the pantheon, on July 12, 1987, T. H. Watkins, the vice president of the Wilderness Society in Washington D.C., submitted the name of Wallace Earle Stegner in nomination to the Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, Professor Lars Gyllensten, in Stockholm. Whether the Nobel Prize in literature remains within or beyond the grasp of any American writer before the turn of the century, however, is beside the point here. That time has passed when American critics in particular can refer to Stegner in strictly regional terms and fail to recognize him for what he is—a world class American writer in the tradition of Henry James, Mark Twain, and yes, William Faulkner.

Too often, the efforts of critics in the United States have eclipsed our view of Stegner with a narrow lens. In other words, the provinciality of critics on both sides of the Mississippi has often distorted rather than enlarged. On the one hand, for example, it took a Pulitzer Prize in fiction and the angry goading of Stegner readers to finally force *The New York Times* into a belated (and snobbish) retrospective review of

Angle of Repose (1971). Five years later, despite a National Book Award in fiction, *The Times* completely ignored *The Spectator Bird*. By that date American readers had long since discovered Wallace Stegner for themselves….Stegner's readership is growing in record numbers….Translators have been busy rendering Stegner's books at a steady clip into French, German, Greek, Italian, Polish, Spanish, and Japanese….

From the 1960's through the 1980's, when other American writers slipped away into metafiction, magical realism, minimalism, fantasy, and historical romance…Stegner 'lowered his lance and charged.' Among other things he wrote that powerful series of novels whose complex themes confronted the social problems of the day head on: race and gender, the annihilation of the American family, the realities of marriage and divorce, sexuality and promiscuity, cancer and apocalypse, youth and identity, age and faith, environmental disaster and political chaos.

But then, we all know how many times a critic reads a book: less than once. Those who do otherwise will quickly notice that three of the novels—*Angel of Repose*, *The Spectator Bird*, and *Crossing to Safety*—rely heavily upon transcontinental settings, most notably Mexico, Denmark, and Italy. The other two—*All the Little Live Things* (1967) and *Recapitulation* (1986)—make use of cosmopolitan backdrops—San Francisco and Salt Lake City, two of the most worldly and frankly materialistic cities on the face of the earth. What goes on trial in all five novels, however, has most to do with the profound questions left along the staggering but constantly accelerating path of western civilization. Who is this New Man? And this New Woman? Indeed, who are these Americans? And what, if anything, do they hold sacred?…

Stegner may very well qualify as the writer whose voice has literally defined the modern West. But a close analysis of what some scholars call 'Stegner Country' turns out to include as much of the Midwest—Iowa, Wisconsin, the Dakotas—and New England—particularly Vermont but also New York—as it does Utah, Idaho, Colorado, or Montana. Stegner's so-called 'California novels' may be the closest thing he has to compare with Faulkner's 'little postage stamp of native soil,' the Yoknapatawpha County seat of virtually all his great novels….To think of Stegner as a regional-ist, then, betrays the very brand of regionalism Faulkner and Stegner exemplify: their universal perspective….

The list of books, neglected and otherwise, that Stegner's acquisitive nature either helped back into print or got published for the first time is much too long and distinguished to include here….To put Stegner's accomplishment in [historian Bernard] DeVoto's terms, *Beyond the Hundreth Meridian* helped give us 'enough basic knowledge…to construct a new general synthesis of American history,' a history 'more realistic and therefore more useful than [historian Frederick Jackson] Turner's'….

Like [the critic Malcolm] Cowley, [Stegner] can spot a writer's blind spots at a glance and save him the embarrassment of a lifetime….It may be that one of the greatest benefits of the ripple effect generated by the proliferation of creative writing programs in the United States has been to expand the audience for contemporary literature: to ensure it a readership."

James R. Hepworth
Introduction (18 February 1990)
Wallace Stegner: A Descriptive Bibliography
Nancy Colberg
(Confluence 1990) xviii-xxvi

"He explained the whole West, the people, the societies, the history, the land, the obstacles, the hope, the spirit, the spirituality. His writing was universal, but, like all great writing, grounded in a place and a culture."

Charles F. Wilkinson
"A Tribute to Wallace Stegner"
High Country News 25
(3 May 1993) 16

"The most significant writer about the American West in this century, a visionary of tempered hope, a novelist and historian of eloquence and insight, a conservationist whose moral leadership deeply touched me as it did many others."

Donald Worster
An Unsettled Country: Changing Landscapes of the American West
(U New Mexico 1994) xii

"What is most remarkable about Wallace Stegner's development as a major American literary figure is the absence of sudden thrusts or skyrockets. He added to his reputation year by year and book by book…. What gives his work its essential character is a deep familiarity with American historical, cultural, and political terrain. Few writers in the recent past have been able to summon as much knowledge of the main strands of our national life….

Stegner properly takes exception to the careless tendency to pin geographic tags on writers outside the Northeast…For example, Saul Bellow is labeled an 'American writer,' not an Eastern writer, even though his books may be about East Coast life. Yet other writers who happen to live west of the Mississippi are tagged regionally, whatever their themes, as though it is necessary to warn readers about being in the company of writers who are somehow short of the mark…What appealed to us most about Wallace Stegner was the integrity of the man, the identifiability of his values, the high quality of his scholarship, his undoubted craftsmanship as a writer, and the fact that his books added greatly to an understanding of the subjects he chose to write about."

Norman Cousins
Forward
Stegner: Conversations on History and Literature
Wallace Stegner and Richard W. Etulain
(1983, 1990; U Nevada 1996) vii-viii

"I did know Wally, and I loved him. Like so many, I still grieve his death. I miss him, but he left us his words, his stories. This is our inheritance, a source of great joy and solace and wisdom….Their lives, [Aldo] Leopold and Stegner, create a compass of words and actions, pointing us in the direction of an empathetic response to the world we inhabit….Consilience. Inner and outer ecology. Home. Seeing the world whole, even holy. This is the work before us….Stegner will forever be our mentor. His words will always remind us of the artist's civic responsibility….Every writer I know in the American West feels the weight of Wallace Stegner's hand on their shoulder."

Terry Tempest Williams
"Wilderness Conversation"
Wallace Stegner and the Continental Vision, ed. Curt Meine
(1996; Island Press 1997) 212-14, 216-17

"For more than half a century Stegner's work had stood out, monumentally, on the literary landscape. When he died, the effect was something akin to the explosion of a Mount St. Helens: for many a reader, a familiar literary landmark was simply gone….Since 1993, Stegner has been the focus of several symposia, a biography, a documentary film, and several volumes of essays….By the 1970s, critics had begun to describe him as the 'dean of American western writers.' He gained that reputation through his thorough immersion into the history, literature, and developing culture of the region he knew best. His untiring efforts to shape and reshape our understanding of the West may very well stand as one of twentieth-century American literature's great accomplishments….He suggested time and again that to grow as a writer, to find one's personal angle of repose, and to be a decent citizen in an evolving democracy, one must try to understand the relationships connecting history, culture, and landscape."

Curt Meine, ed.
Introduction
Wallace Stegner and the Continental Vision (1997), xvii, xix-xx

"Wallace Stegner was a rebel against the pervasive rebellion, out of step with time and tide. He has never been a celebrity among America's youth. He has more often spoken as a parent than as a child, about struggle and responsibility rather than freedom and desire. Our world is upside down: we may be inclined to think that there is something wrong with a man who has been married to the same woman for almost sixty years. To paraphrase what Robert Stone said in a recent novel about one of his characters, Wallace Stegner believed in all those things we used to believe in.

He was a remarkable man, not the least remarkable in making his life and work of one piece. His integrity shone forth equally in both. He was not stern, self-righteous, or judgmental, but was a person who could be the life of the party, someone who knew how to have fun and who had a ready sense of humor. Yet he was unbending in his belief in right conduct. He was kind, thoughtful, and generous, a person who was easy to talk to, yet he was held almost in awe by many who knew him as being somewhat larger than life, in the expectations he had for himself and in his superhuman capacity for hard work.

In his pursuit of living a worthy life and in expressing that pursuit in his writings, he passed beyond the modernist rebellion against Victorianism—its emphasis on respectability and conformity—by the writers of a previous generation. He did not see it as his task to tear down the taboos of a shopworn Puritanism, but rather to search through the cultural ruins produced by rampant individualism for a solid foundation from which to live a good life in the good society. He found that foundation in responsibility and concern—responsibility for our own actions and concern for the welfare of others and the welfare of our environment. These in turn might lead, he hoped, to a recovery of our sense of community and a realization once again of the importance of cooperation.

Youth and diversity are cultural forces which tended to shunt him aside, and his position was somewhat akin to the liberal who has fought hard for equal rights who finds himself or herself passed over by affirmative action. He felt ambivalent. It certainly isn't that he opposed these voices; on the contrary, I can think of no other recent male American writer who has shown as much sympathy for the condition of woman or who has so often taken the woman's point of view in his fiction. Furthermore, he wrote a book (*One Nation*, written with the editors of *Look*) back in 1945, when it could have been dangerous to an academic career to do so, about the problems of various minorities in various localities around the United States—not just African-Americans, but Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, Catholics, and Jews.

One of the short stories he wrote while doing research for this nonfiction book is called 'Pop Goes the Alley Cat.' It is about a white photographer who accompanies a social worker on her rounds in the Mexican barrio of Los Angeles. In the experiences and reactions of the photographer, Charlie Prescott, we see the ambivalence of the white liberal as his sympathy is pushed to the breaking point. As in so many of Stegner's stories and novels, the problem posed by this story is one of 'getting one's head straight,' which usually involves reexamining one's thinking processes and feelings. Stegner picked out precisely the difficulty of race relations, a difficulty that most whites are incapable of seeing. Middle-class whites, with the best of intentions, want dispossessed blacks to participate and achieve in society on *white terms*: everything, including compassion and understanding is strictly limited, defined by white expectations.

Wallace Stegner was in the strange position of having been constantly cast in the role of outsider, often for reasons that might seem to be contradictory. Some people have resented him as an outspoken liberal; others, for having been too often critical of liberalism (which he was when it lapsed into irrationality and radicalism—he hated extremism of any sort). He has been ignored, even belittled as a Westerner, but has earned the enmity of Western fans who resent his refutations of the Western mystique. And then late in life, as a lifelong liberal in the best sense of the word—open-minded, tolerant, and compassionate—he was once again outside the artistic, intellectual vanguard as someone too much in the mainstream, too straight, too traditional…Writers in the West, he laments, are likely to find themselves 'so unfashionable' that they feel practically voiceless. Most of the writers of this region are likely not to feel very much 'at home in a literary generation that appears to specialize in despair, hostility, hypersexuality, and disgust.' In an age when so many people are trying so desperately to assume the mantle of victim, these 'unfashionable' writers find it difficult to believe themselves either victim or victimizer….

The question about Wallace Stegner remains: can a middle-class white male who wrote not about victimization, but about the facing down of adversity, and who, through example both in his life and work, extols the old verities of love, friendship, sacrifice, compassion, and forgiveness—can this writer find a place in the literature of the 1990s? Or are these aspects of the human condition, once considered to be at the foundation of the best we can become and the best that our society can become, now irrelevant along with those who write about them? Has separateness, hatred, envy, fear, and the need to control others with religious doctrine, or guilt for past wrongs, or the fear of being different, become the norm? Will there

never be forgiveness, a coming together? Wallace Stegner believed that there can be, that there must be, and made that belief a cornerstone of his work….

There are other ways in which Wallace Stegner's career can be thought of as against the grain. Unlike most writers of fiction, he wrote nearly as much nonfiction….The breadth of his knowledge is astonishing…[His] need to grow is reflected directly in his career: unlike many novelists who write their best books at the beginning of their careers, Stegner's novels have gotten better and better. He has defied the cult of youth and triumphed with age. 'To pass on to others' has been a unifying theme in a multifaceted career. This man who at heart was a teacher in everything he did; as writer, as environmentalist, as historian, he lived to discover the truth and to help others in their own search.

Such a man could have nothing but contempt and perhaps a touch of pity for those who claim that art has nothing to do with truth or experience [Postmodernists], and in this Stegner operated once again against the grain, against those currently popular poststructuralist doctrines which deny that texts have any experiential meaning….Stegner seemed very much out of step with the current vogue in fictional approaches, a vogue that all too often seems to value experimentation for its own sake. He was a Realist and met some contempt for being a Realist. At one point there was a small group at Stanford that was agitating in favor of getting rid of him as head of the creative writing program because it thought him hopelessly old-fashioned….

What he has had to say has always been concerned with tearing down barriers between people, building trust, encouraging love, concern, and cooperation….If there are villains in his work, they are the selfish, the self-centered, and the greedy. But more often the fault is on the part of those with the best intentions, as they reach out to understand but fail….As a Realist, Stegner saw the complexities of life, and like Henry James, as he grew older his fiction became more and more filled with ambiguities….As a writer, Stegner's primary concern in regard to the role of the individual was to define the difference between the reality of individual responsibility and the myth of total independence…

In *All the Little Live Things* Joe Allston finds it easy enough to love and to understand the lovely Marian, the almost saintly cancer victim, but the real challenge, the hippie biker, Jim Peck—unlikeable, arrogant, self-centered—is beyond him. And his failure hurts, since Jim reminds him of his dead son, a probably suicide, whom he was never able to reach. Larry Morgan in *Crossing to Safety* is confronted with a similar challenge, a more complicated one that is presented in the two sides of a single character. Charity is beautiful, loving, and generous—but she is also domineering, manipulative, and willful. Larry is somewhat more successful in reaching out, forgiving the fault in order to embrace the good, than his predecessors in other novels. But it is not easy, nor is it without misgivings.

First in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and then in its sequel, *Recapitulation*, Bruce Mason's problem of forgiveness is similar to Larry Morgan's in its ambiguity. On the one hand, he wants to win his father's approval; on the other, he is oppressed by his father's callousness and dishonesty. His father makes life difficult and unpleasant not only for him, but for his mother—and it is the latter that the son cannot forgive. His mother, a simple, hardworking woman with a taste for books, only wants the opportunity to setle down somewhere and make a home for the family. But her husband's boom-or-bust temperament makes them permanent migrants, first as he tries one get rich scheme after another and finally as a bootlegger, always just one step ahead of the law. It is an archetypal conflict between man and woman in the West as it really was.

But Bruce's father, Bo, is not an evil man. His worst quality is a bad temper, and this, and a rather flexible sense of right and wrong, is balanced against courage, a fun-loving nature, and enormous capacity for hard work. The reader is likely to find Bo somewhat attractive, but Bruce, the artist as young man and by temperament the opposite of his father, grows increasingly resentful and finds, by the end of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, that he hates him. In this, the most autobiographical of Stegner's novels, the situation is one that closely reflects his own experience, as he admitted on a number of occasions. He was haunted all his life by his relationship with a father very much like Bo Mason, and in listening to him talk about his father, one couldn't help but feeling that for him, personally, forgiveness was a difficult battle. That was why, perhaps, it came to have such a central place in his work.

Just how much it haunted him may be indicated by Stegner's return to the Bo-Bruce relationship more than thirty-five years after the publication of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* in *Recapitulation*, an apparent effort to put the ghost of the first novel to rest. And this same struggle is one, as we realize later in *Angle of Repose*, that motivates Lyman Ward's compulsive historical research into the lives of his grandparents: his recreation of the story of their relationship is an effort to come to terms with the wrong done to him by his wife, who ran off with her doctor, abandoning Lyman to crippling disease. Once again, in this novel as with the long journey of Bruce Mason toward expiation of his hatred and resentment, one feels that Lyman Ward is a lost soul, wandering, mentally, not only the face of the earth, but through time as well in an effort to find some formula, some mechanism by which to make his spirit, if not his body, whole once again.

Forgiveness. The coming together of fallible human beings. In Stegner's work there is always struggle; in novel after novel we suffer through the strivings of human beings to be better. Following the pattern set in the Nobel Prize acceptance speeches of Faulkner and Steinbeck, Stegner also believed in the possible perfectibility of man. Here, too, he ran against the grain of current opinion, which declares that individuals do not need to strive to be better—all they need to do is sit down and recognize how wonderful they already are [the 1960s counterculture].

As one might imagine, Stegner was not in favor of the American Dream, or at least not the materialistic dream of status and possessions. And, indeed, when we see the damage done by such a seeker of the dream as Bo Mason and a dozen other Stegner characters looking to find the 'Big Rock Candy Mountain,' we realize that for this author, as for so many other American writers (one can't help but think of another mountain, the one in F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Diamond as Big as the Ritz'), the dream is seen as having led to moral and physical catastrophe. It has brought us a land despoiled and a people largely exploited and disheartened. A few have gained their yachts, while the old growth forests are clear-cut, poisonous heavy metals run down into the rivers of the Rockies, and thousands have lost their retirements in corporate 'restructurings' and savings-and-loan scams. Not much has changed since Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle*; not much has changed since Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* [On the contrary, the national forests are burning down because loggers have not been allowed to thin forests and create firebreaks.]

Stegner found the American Dream far more damaging than does Dreiser in *An American Tragedy* or Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*. Almost alone among major writers of our time, he realized that the dream has not only twisted our lives and corroded our values, it has despoiled the very land that has given us such hope. And that hope, as represented by the frontier, is what has given the West such a symbolic role in representing the dream, has made the perpetuation of the mythic West possible. What motivates Bo Mason in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* is what motivates poor people, dreaming the impossible dream of sudden riches, to hate unions and vote Republican [*Oh the horror!*].

Like Willie Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, they wait for Uncle Ben to pass on the secret of wealth, while at the same time, the land and air are so polluted they cannot plant seeds that will grow in their own backyards. For Stegner, who was concerned with cooperation, empathy, and mutual support in basic relationships, the American Dream very often spelled disaster, not only for individuals, but for our society and our land.

When Stegner depicts in his writings someone who is successful, it is not for his material possessions or status due to wealth or fame, but for what he has made of himself morally and spiritually and what he has accomplished. Most of Stegner's heroic figures appear in his nonfiction: John Wesley Powell, who took on the nearly impossible job of surveying the Colorado River; Ansel Adams, who, working often in the most awkward and inhospitable circumstances, became gradually, picture by picture, our preeminent landscape photographer; and Bernard DeVoto, who for many years, like a voice in a wilderness of exploitation and greed, fought for our public lands and the preservation and expansion of our National Parks system. In every case these people not only faced terrific odds with courage and persistence, but their motives went beyond themselves, serving others through science or art or journalism.

For the most part, Stegner's fictional protagonists are neither hero nor antihero, neither conqueror nor victim (in a time in which the hero figure dominates popular culture and the antihero, high culture). They

are usually relatively ordinary people who are trying to find their better selves. They do good things, if not heroic things, but they also fail, betray themselves in some way, and try to recover. In the early novel *Fire and Ice*, Paul Condon wants to improve the world by his activities in the Young Communist League, but realizes at last that he is essentially motivated by revenge, a hatred generated out of the mistreatment of his parents by an uncaring society. He ends up at least in part cleansed of his hatred and becomes a less self-centered individual.

At the opposite end of the social scale from the impoverished Paul Condon is the socialite Sabrina Castro, who, in *A Shooting Star*, realizes she is leading a useless life, a life without goals, achievements, or satisfactions. She feels trapped by her wealth and position and is baffled by the need to somehow escape, going through a number of hideous and demeaning experiences before at last finding a true path out of her frustration and selfishness. With neither Paul nor Sabrina is there a happy ending—there is only the sense that the internal struggle is worth it, that one can, with courage and persistence and goodwill, find a path that might leas to a productive and meaningful life.

In *All the Little Live Things*, Joe Allston, formerly a literary agent and now retired to California suburbia, is seen as having gained some success by the kind of person he is, rather than by his comfortable retirement circumstances. He has rubbed shoulders with the high and mighty in the heady atmosphere of New York media circles and never lost his integrity or sense of what is really important—the inner man. And to the end of his life, he is trying to find the right thing to do, worrying not only about his actions, but about his attitude. Attitude is important to many of Stegner's characters—and one's motives. The battle is nearly always an internal one, the attempt to triumph over the meaner self, ignoble thoughts and reactions, and this conflict is very often externalized through interaction with another character.

In the case of Allston, it is his wife, Ruth, who resists his tendencies to categorize, to be dogmatic, to be less than generous in his reactions to activities and people that don't match his expectations. Larry Morgan's wife, in *Crossing to Safety*, performs the same function, applying common sense and a generous spirit to the foibles, weaknesses, and irritations of others, things that drive Larry to the edge of explosion. But conscience is not always played by the women. In *A Shooting Star* that function is performed by Leonard MacDonald, the schoolteacher husband of Sabrina's best friend. Leonard, like the two wives just mentioned, provides the common sense, the optimism, the standard of caring for others, the lack of prejudice and dogmatism that helps Sabrina in her inner struggle to achieve self-esteem. At a climactic point in the novel near the end, he tells her, 'I'll tell you what I believe in. I believe in human love and human kindness and human responsibility, and that's just about all I believe in.' And one can say that that is close to being true for Stegner as well.

Responsibility is one thing Stegner insists on that is often ignored or slighted by his writer contemporaries, and it is the one thing above all that for him defines the function of the individual…. Wallace Stegner was a man who lived under the obligation of trying his best to be 'a good man,' and his writing was part and parcel of that effort. For him, the individual, insofar as his or her capabilities allow, must not only take charge of his or her own destiny, but take on the responsibility of contributing to the welfare of others in family, community, and society.

Quietly modest and gentle on the outside, Stegner was a very confident, competent, tough man. There is nothing in his works that by any stretch of the imagination could be called sentimental. He has been hard on himself and in equal measure has been hard on his fictional protagonists, and in this regard can be seen once again to be out of step with his times. For several decades the most common leading characters in our fictions have been victims, the host of antiheroes who are the descendants of Stephen Crane's Maggie and Salinger's helpless and unhappy Holden Caulfield. But while Stegner's characters live in an equally harsh and unjust world, their role has been to cope, rather than complain.

Having grown up in the difficult circumstances of the frontier, and subject to the harsh code of frontier culture and to the discipline of a father intolerant of any show of weakness, Stegner had understandably been at odds with those of his contemporaries who have celebrated suffering and made victimization a virtue….Nothing could be more against the grain of a society in which groups compete with each other in their claims to be the most victimized, and responsibility is more often than not abandoned in favor of self-

pity. As a writer, Stegner's primary concern in regard to the role of the individual was to define the difference between the reality of individual responsibility and the myth of total independence and larger-than-life achievement. This concern is anchored to his own role as truth-seeker, to his conviction that literature can mirror life, and to his devotion to the truth.

His realism can be seen as a natural outgrowth of his toughness. There are several strands of Realism in twentieth-century American fiction, and of these, probably the most persistent and enduring is that which attempts to refute the illusions we attempt to live by…Realism is essentially moralistic, for it suggest that the illusions we hold so dear are the sources of many of our social ills, allowing us to avoid problems and to become self-righteously judgmental….The role of a Realist such as Stegner is to tell us disagreeable truths, to pull away the masks and tear down the attractive facades that allow us to pretend and cover the reality. This is not an activity that is likely to endear the writer to a wide audience. His role as a moralist in his fictions has been to challenge us."

Jackson J. Benson
Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work
(Viking 1996) 1-15

"Few American writers this century have had the reach of Wallace Earle Stegner. Robert Frost might have had Wally in mind when he made the observation, 'There's nothing like turning up somewhere else.' Stegner turned up on the road of life as a historian, a novelist, an essayist, a teacher, a conservationist, a humanist, a public citizen, and a man with a true gift for friendship. He fulfilled all of these roles with equanimity and grace, and with a dose of what Aldo Leopold once called 'intellectual humility.'

I became one of his lucky 'students' when he agreed to come to Washington, D.C. in the 1960s and be a senior adviser during the first months of my tenure as secretary of the interior. His counsel ranged from policymaking to personal guidance. He encouraged me to champion expansion of the National Park system. He presented fresh arguments for the Wilderness Bill. He provided insights which helped us formulate an idea that evolved into a law that established a national system of Wild and Scenic Rivers. And he challenged me to widen my understanding of the issues crossing my desk by suggesting that I write a book about the history of American land stewardship.

Some observers and literary critics habitually classified Stegner as 'a western writer.' He was, to be sure, a superb interpreter of the history and experience evoked by his native ground, but to cram Wally into a regional pigeonhole was to miss his breadth, and the strain of humanism that permeated his work. As his friend James Hepworth has written, 'In all of American literature, there is nobody like Wallace Stegner, and nothing quite like his novels,' I have no doubt that his eloquent essays on the subject of conservation—and his indictments of the mistakes that have marred the West's stewardship of its resources—will influence the thinking of future generations. Sensitive readers will find in his words a land ethic that complements the classic definition composed by Aldo Leopold.

Despite the big gap in their ages, in the period just before the Second World War when Robert Frost wanted a companion to accompany him on long walks at Cambridge and during the writer's conferences at Breadloaf, he often turned to Wallace Stegner. We talked once about the source of the rapport that brought him into the circle of America's great pastoral poet. It was, Wally surmised, an overlap in their lives that formed the basis of his friendship with Frost. Both, he said, had experienced family tragedies. And both had participated in struggles to wrest a living from the land, forcing them to concentrate on country things and to become acquainted with the intimacies of the earth."

Stewart L. Udall
U. S. Secretary of the Interior (1960s)
Foreward, *Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer*
ed. Charles E. Rankin
(U New Mexico 1996) ix-x

"If there are skeletons in the closet I [son Page] am unaware of them; and I have never been all that interested in the subject that seems to pique the curiosity of most of the magazine editors who call—to wit: How tough was it growing up in the shadow of a mountain as big as Wallace Stegner….I think, rather, of

being the lucky son of a man who was as devoted to his responsibilities as husband and father as he was to his public reputation, and whose ambitions did not include the pursuit of any literary reputation beyond that generated by the works themselves. I think, too, of having been the lucky son of a consummate teacher…. Perfection, or as close as one ever gets to it, comes in the fifteenth or twentieth draft, was always his message, and I'm glad I heard it early in my life….

He had a kind of holistic relationship with the land, and he couldn't look at it without remembering its geological history, its exploration, its social development, its contemporary problems, and its prognosis for the future….Fifty years ago I helped my father plant eight thousand Norway pines on two hundred acres of land we owned in northern Vermont—land I still own—and about five years ago I cut down three hundred of those now grown trees, had them milled out flat on three sides, and built a log house out of them. When I stand outside it sometimes on a warm summer evening, and look at it weathering there, gradually, against its dark background of cedar and spruce, I think, Jeez, this is quite totally amazing. My old man and I, we *grew* this house. I think it's about as good a legacy as a human being can ever receive."

Page Stegner
"A Brief Reminiscence: Father, Teacher, Collaborator"
Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer (1996) 27-29, 33

"The American West, once so over-imagined and yet so dismissed, was Wallace Stegner's land. His, not because he claimed it, possessed it, or owned it by growing up in it, by tromping over it in weather, or by driving through it on one side of a yellow line—although he did all that, but rather because Wallace Stegner became a conscious and steadfast defender of western people and western places, whether they thought they needed it or not….

The vision of ourselves that he gave us was both a gift and a responsibility. It was also a gift of confidence that he bestowed upon us, one that seemed particularly real in many small places in Montana in the 1970s and 1980s. So, with the sad news of Wallace Stegner's untimely death, Charles Rankin of the Montana Historical Society and I, representing the Center for the Rocky Mountain West at the University of Montana, thought it appropriate to commemorate this most western man with a memorial symposium in Missoula, Montana. It was the first major symposium in tribute to Stegner…

However distant Montana may have become in the passing years it remained to surface repeatedly in Stegner's more mature conceptions of the West—that most American of places. It did so because, for Stegner, Montana was the classical western place which, against great odds, had retained its authenticity, keeping its earlier promise through its people and their works. As for Missoula, well, Missoula has long enjoyed a deserved reputation as a literary center in the West."

William E. Farr
Preface
Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer (1996) xiii-xv

"In a long and productive career that spanned all but a few years at either end of this century, Wallace Stegner, quite unlike any other writer on the American West, caught the ear of the world….Stegner [is] a man many consider the West's most eloquent twentieth-century spokesman….This book, then, is an attempt to build on the Missoula symposium and answer the desires of those who want to know more about Wallace Stegner and the West….

To think of Wallace Stegner as a phenomenon is not to succumb to hyperbole, for surely he was as remarkable for his breadth and complexity as for his productiveness, and among spokesmen for the West he has few if any peers. Novelist, historian, essayist, short-story writer, teacher, thoroughgoing Westerner at heart yet man of a much wider world. Wallace Stegner was also an optimist, truth-seeker, pragmatic realist and dreamer of a better society. Sometimes moved to anger toward the forces he thought were ruining the West, Stegner nonetheless was consistently modest and always accommodating to anyone pursuing sincere inquiry….Stegner staked the middle ground between history and literature, triangulated it with personal experience, and explored the terrain as thoroughly, probingly, and sympathetically as any American writer has done in the twentieth century….

Young Wallace developed a bond with a landscape that had, as its special peculiarities, aridity and sparceness, features that characterized his prose in the form of dry humor and statements as clear and direct as a line of sight in the western air. Eventually, Stegner claimed Utah, and more specifically Salt Lake City, as home, largely because his family's time there coincided with his maturing into young adulthood. But he forever felt an acute deficiency for having never 'stuck' in a western place long enough to become a composite part of it. To compensate, Stegner claimed the entire West as home….

Even a description of his more famous works is striking, not only in number but in intellectual range. It includes *Angle of Repose*, Stegner's 1971 novel based on the life and letters of Mary Hallock Foote that won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction; *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, the sprawling quasi-autobiographical story of his family's quest for the American dream; *The Uneasy Chair*, his biography of friend and mentor Bernard DeVoto; *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, a biography of western explorer and scientist John Wesley Powell; *The Gathering of Zion*, a history of the Mormon migration to Utah; *Wolf Willow*, his evocative memoir/history of southern Saskatchewan's western prairie. Other novels were *Joe Hill: A Biographical Novel*, his attempt…to cut a legend down to size; *The Spectator Bird*, which won the National Book Award in 1977; *Recapitulation*, a late-life sequel to *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*; and *Crossing to Safety*, his last novel. In addition, Stegner compiled memorable collections of essays: *Mormon Country*; *The Sound of Mountain Water*; *One Way to Spell Man*; *The American West as Living Space*; and his last book, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*, published in 1992….Wallace Stegner was undeniably an overachiever, and he had fun being one….

Such an influence as Stegner's could be practical as well as abiding, as it was to Wendell Berry. 'When I sit at my worktable now,' Berry observes, 'I am aware of certain attitudes, hesitations, and instances that I think are traceable to that seminar [at Stanford] thirty-four years ago.' To Page Stegner his father was a consummate teacher, imbuing everything with substance. Wallace Stegner took his role as teacher so seriously that he agonized over giving his son Page a deserved 'A' in his own course….

Stegner once warned that his seemingly autobiographical characters may not provide an altogether accurate guide to what he himself believed and felt, indeed, that we should discount their statements by about 60 percent….He spoke out against the forces of what he identified as frontier individualism, with its carelessness, greed, and rapaciousness—in a word, its destructiveness. Stegner recognized limitations, especially the limitations imposed by aridity, and he rebelled against a frontier heritage that encouraged Americans generally and westerners in particular to ignore not only those limitations but their consequences. His appreciation for the western landscape was born of innocence—'a response,' he said, 'to landscape and weather and familiar images and the kiss of the wind'….

What charms us about the mythical western hero, Stegner said, were his daring and skill, his invulnerability, his seeming chivalry, his liberty to go where and when he pleased, and his impatience with all restraint, especially institutional and communal obligations. But these were the very things that undermined a sense of community and belonging, a commitment to social responsibility, and thus a willingness to adapt intelligently. 'I spend this much time on a mythic figure who has irritated me all my life because I would obviously like to bury him,' Stegner said after a lengthy discussion of the cowboy culture hero. 'But I know I can't. He is a faster gun than I am'….

Rejecting on the one hand formulaic westerns and on the other modern literature's focus on the despair, defeat, and cynicism of the aberrant personality, rejecting, that is, the extremes, Stegner tilled the middle ground of relationships between individuals and their physical landscape, the agonizingly human relationships between family members, and, as he did especially in *Angle of Repose*, between people of different eras. Shunning the faddish trends sanctioned by the eastern literary establishment had its consequences. He could feel alone and isolated at times, and the sting of rejection was real, for his pursuit of unconventional goals long delayed the critical recognition his work deserved."

Charles E. Rankin, ed.
Introduction
Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer (1996) 3-10, 12

"Stegner was one of the American West's preeminent historians and arguably the most important of its novelists. His work, unequaled in the American literature of place, created a new consciousness of the West as America only more so, a region that embodies the national culture at its most energetic, rootless, complex, reactionary, subdivided, wild, half-baked, comic, tragic, and hopeful. He taught two generations of writers, and after he left teaching he continued to be both model and mentor for what has become an explosion of literary activity in the West. And in matters of conservation he was the most rational and eloquent of the region's statesmen; everyone who values wilderness owes him a debt….Stegner gives us what is missing from the analytic approach taken by so many historians—the living American experience, our own story—so that we can respond to it with the full power of both our intellect and our emotions….

In the late fifties and early sixties, the tail end of the Beat Generation must have regarded Stegner—tall and broad-shouldered, bespectacled but handsome, short-haired and often conservatively dressed in jacket and tie—as hopelessly middle-class, something out of 'Ozzie and Harriet.' To the hipsters who followed in the mid- and late sixties, he probably represented the very epitome of the liberal establishment, someone who still believed it was possible to accomplish change within the system. Clearly he would have to go and in 1971 he did. Perhaps they drove him out, or perhaps he dropped out, like many of them. 'I never "retired" from Stanford,' he told me once. 'I quit. I'd had a bellyful'….

Stegner's 1969 essay collection *The Sound of Mountain Water*, may have done as much as anything else to save what wilderness remains in the United States….He helped steer the course of a civilization that continually threatened to spin out of control….For another thing, Stegner challenged most of the fads and intellectual assumptions of his times—everything from Marxism to structuralism, biological determinism, magical realism, and metafiction—and whether it was a brat pack or a gathering of freeze-dried intellectuals, he never ran in a gang….By ignoring accepted opinion and approved fashion, his novels restore a lost balance to American fiction. Stegner's characters do not challenge or defy the universe, much less despair of it….

For Stegner, nature, not art, is the model…He works from the details of ordinary settings and events to present common, ordinary lives. Even his diction and sentence structure tend toward a plain style, highlighting the story rather than the teller. Often, he leaves much of the story untold, so that the form of the novel reflects the truth that our perspectives on life are limited. Such a story ends in a given character's reflection on the failure of life to present itself in neat packages for our inspection. By contrast, the critics point out, many of our novelists are most notable for their feats of style, writing novels that often present the unusual as if it were normal….

In all of American literature, there is nobody like Wallace Stegner, and nothing quite like his novels. He was a master of his art, and though he was a man I would have liked whether or not he had ever written a word, I will take him now wherever I can find him, and I suppose that must mean mainly in his books. I loved him. We all did."

James R. Hepworth
"Wallace Stegner, The Quiet Revolutionary"
Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer (1996) 17, 19, 21, 24-26

"In person, he looked like a one-man Mount Rushmore. That solidity, Stegner's Scandanavian-Saskatchewan-Montana-Utah etcetera mien of flatfooted common sense and endurance, went much more than skin-deep. He knew his stuff…Stegner once tallied up that in his hyper-western boyhood, he lived in 'twenty places in eight states and Canada….In undervaluing for so long such an important body of work as Stegner's, the American literary establishment and the American reading public and the western states of America collectively shot themselves in their tangled trio of feet….The man could not even write book titles without making his pages make music. None of us is going to replace him, and it's just about as doubtful whether any half-dozen current writers and thinkers at this end of the country can produce a combined rainbow of work to equal his….

Stegner left amid a late, luminous blossoming of public and critical appreciation for his life's worth of books…and at last people were seeing his work as the vast national resource it is….In his last years, when the national best-sellerdom of *Crossing to Safety* and his *Collected Stories* inspired paperback publishers to

pour his earlier books back onto the bookstore shelves, Wallace Stegner was a bit bemused at getting mined as a new literary resource. 'I'm a land of opportunity,' he laughed, 'just like the West.' Was he ever."

Ivan Doig
"Thoughts on Wallace Stegner"
Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer (1996) 35-38

"Stegner's paragraphs seem like ideal versions of the ones I wanted to write thirty years ago at Oregon State University when I first got the urge…As I understand it, the Greeks had a word for such moments, exphrasis, which means the moment which contains the past and implies the future. The impulse to understand them, I think is mostly religious and probably the work I have always wanted to get at. Which maybe accounts for my quite irrational affection for some patches of Stegner's writing….Stegner is an artist who reminds other artists of fundamental responsibilities….

No matter how arrogant we may become inside the convolutions of our technologies, Stegner reminds us, as he shows us those bones from under the snow and the high roiled sky on the horizon, as his great storm of rain sweeps toward us, we inhabit a universe our categorizing cannot remotely approach naming, one which doubtless in any foreseeable future will remain at least partway unfathomable. Stegner reminds us to stay humble and to stay compassionate because this animal life is all we have for sure. He reminds us to love it, make the best of it. He reminds us to attempt staying true to what we actually have."

William Kittredge
"The Good Rain: Stegner and the Wild"
Wallace Stegner:Man and Writer (1996) 40-42

"Eventually I thought there must have been a moment when he decided that he would not be the kind of writer who would look on his native country as 'raw material' for his art, and leave it otherwise to take care of itself or to be cared for by other people, but that he would be a kind of writer who would be devoted to his country for its own sake, and do what he could to protect it….And how moving it is…to see in this almost unnoticeable self-effacement the fineness, the magnanimity, and something of the greatness of Wallace Stegner."

Wendell Berry
"Wallace Stegner and Influence"
Wallace Stegner:Man and Writer (1996) 45-46

"Like southerner William Faulkner and New Englander Robert Frost, Stegner used local and place-based materials to examine wider worlds….No one spoke with more persuasion, with more humane insight about the West than Stegner….Wallace Stegner advanced seven leagues beyond most westerners because he internalized the rhythms of the West, experienced but learned from the bruising dilemmas of his life, and realized how premier regional writing must link the provincial and universal. As a result, in the past half century Stegner increasingly became our Wise Man of the West, his shelf full of superbly written novels, histories, biographies, and inspired environmentalist works…In the largest sense of the words, Wallace Stegner has served as a model western humanist….Well before others became born-again ecological evangelists, Stegner urged his countrymen to show much more care in their uses of land, water, and other natural resources….

In *The Sound of Mountain Water* (1969), *The American West as Living Space*, and *Where the Bluebird Sings*, Stegner collected his luminous essays calling for more beneficial consideration of the West's landscapes and resources. Yet here, as in all parts of his life, Stegner was a model of humane balance, not a Don Quixote galloping after every doctrine of wilderness idealism. To the end of his fourscore and four years, Stegner was a thinker not a throbber on environmental issues. Obviously no mindless advocate of a Sagebrush Rebellion, neither was he a lockstep follower of Pied Pipers waiting to redeem all the West from beneficial uses of land and water….His fiction and his histories, as well as his writings on the environment, were ever wise marriages of lofty ideals and necessary realities….

He gained thousands of new appreciative readers even though his fiction focused on families, friendship, and the humane qualities of characters rather than on the despair, social criticism, and hyped ethnicity that marked much contemporary American fiction. Moreover, his three most recent books, *Crossing to Safety* (1987), *Collected Stories* (1990), and *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs* (1992), all appeared on the *NYTBR* best-seller lists, won major press attention, and were quickly reprinted in prestigious paperback series….When the lordly *Review* [*New York Times Book Review*] lionized Stegner [finally] as the 'Dean of Western Writers,' it misnamed him William….

Especially deserving of extended comment is Stegner's outstanding novel of the West, *Angle of Repose*, which brilliantly illustrates his…abilities in combining historical research, imaginative characterizations, and humanistic perspectives. Equally significant, Stegner's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel modeled for historians and novelists alike what a notable work of western fiction could reveal about the region's past and present. No one since John Steinbeck in his *Grapes of Wrath* produced a more memorable work of fiction about the West; in several respects *Angle of Repose* represents the high point of the western novel since World War II….

As they do in *Angle of Repose*, Stegner's consummate abilities in encapsulating central experiences and meanings of the West surface repeatedly in his work but never in so brief a compass as in his essay 'Variations on a Theme by Crevecoeur,' the concluding twenty-page chapter of *The American West as Living Space*. Paraphrasing Crevecoeur, Stegner asks 'Who, the, is this westerner, this new man?' and proceeds to furnish an abbreviated but probing sociocultural profile of westerners….The drama of western history played out over time in these eye-stretching spaces, Stegner continues, helps to generate the regional qualities of 'energetic individualism, great physical competence, stoicism, determination, recklessness, endurance, toughness, rebelliousness, resistance to control.' When Stegner ascribed these qualities to the hero of *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, he did not realize they also marked protagonists in the novels of Ole Rolvaag, Mari Sandor, and A. B. Guthrie, Jr. Nor have outsiders like Leslie Fiedler and Bernard Malamud been able to understand and accept these western characteristics….

If his mother Hilda and his wife Mary were the two heroines of his life, his father George was the villain. Although Stegner celebrated his father's energy and his talents as a fund of lore and local history, his son Page recalled that Stegner never said 'twenty-five words' about Page's grandfather, and when Stegner was asked about his treatment of…father figures in *Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Recapitulation* (1979), he noted that he had not placed a marker on his father's grace—and then added, 'and I never will.' On the other hand, later in life he saluted the perseverance and warmth of his mother and celebrated her as a 'sticker' who exuded a healthy spirit of western community….

He wore his laurels lightly, and I was especially impressed with his friendliness and energy. He calmly answered questions, his alert, blue eyes and white hair setting off a handsome, masculine face….All his life Stegner tried to draw a line between his regional work and stereotyped popular Westerns. Once, when asked the difference between his and Louis L'Amour's Wests, he replied with a chuckle, 'a few million dollars'….He was an enormously talented writer and a generous friend of understanding and foresight. Wallace Stegner stretched our minds while he delighted our souls."

Richard W. Etulain
"Wallace Stegner: Western Humanist"
Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer (1996) 49, 51-52, 54-59

"[In] 'History, Myth and the Western Writer' [1967]…his main point was that western writing was suffering a sort of paralysis because it was frozen in dichotomies, a series of either ors. There was the tension between the restless, freedom-loving types (invariably men), forever in search of the main chance, and the civilizers (women, of course) striving for domesticity and order. There was the clash between the law, as laid down in books and enforced by institutions, and true justice that good men knew in their upright souls. Above all, there was the distinction between a heroized past of natural beauty and 'horseback virtues' and a contemporary West that blights the eye and stifles the spirit. As long as western writing was continually pulled between these opposites, Stegner argued, it would be like a car high-centered between ruts. It was going nowhere.

Stegner was making two interesting points here. First, the people of his region had been left marooned in the present….Westerners, in other words, were historically stuck. They had no story to help them understand how things around them had come to be, no way to know who in the world they were….That kind of rootedness must come from stories that connect westerners both to what they see around them and what they know has come before. And those, Stegner argued, were the stories that were not being told…. We have to tell better stories, Stegner said, if we are going to have 'a personal and *possessed* past,' and however our new history is written, I think it must include not only those outward, visible events and transformations but also that inward narrative, familial and sensuous, that plays such a prominent part in Stegner's writing….Stegner made the family what it ought to be in our stories and what it always has been in western history—a central part of people's lives, a powerful shaping force on the land and institutions, and the main emotional arena in which a western identity has developed….

The recent flourishing of western writing offers several examples of what I am talking about—books by, among others, Ivan Doig, Bill Kittredge, Mary Clearman Blew, Terry Tempest Williams, and most recently Teresa Jordan, a small tribe of former 'sensuous little savages' who have started to record what are essentially the gut memories of those connecting generations between the frontier and today. All these books are about families, about land and air seen and felt and sniffed, about the inseparability of identities and particular places. They strike me as just the kind of storytelling that Stegner said we needed but were not getting."

Elliott West
"Stegner, Storytelling, and Western Identity"
Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer, 61-66, 68-69

"Some writers, like Hemingway and Faulkner, find and develop their voices early; others, like Stegner, find theirs late, so that their best work comes closer to the end rather than to the beginning of their careers….The road toward the creation of an individualized, convincing, and forceful voice was for Stegner a long and hard one, with wrong turns, detours, and potholes. His career began with a success, a prize-winning novelette, then faltered with two undistinguished works, and then was revived with *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943) when he changed directions toward the semi-autobiographical. After telling his own story, he tried in mid-career to figure out in which direction he should turn, wavering as he tried one approach and then another. His career came to a point of crisis. He felt he was getting nowhere. He was so discouraged in his effort to transcend the autobiographical (my analysis of the problem, not his), he gave up writing novels for ten years….

Stegner was an extremely intelligent man, as shown by his brilliance in school, the quality and variety of his publications, and the testimony of colleagues and students, but he had to learn during this early period of his career that writing a successful novel is more than an intellectual exercise….Gradually his work focused more and more on his own feelings and experiences in growing up, more and more on his own family and circumstances, those things and people that moved him, still filled him with joy or pain….As voice in Stegner's fiction moved closer to becoming a more accurate expression of the author, it became more effective as a literary expression—most notably in its increased credibility, in its forcefulness of presentation, and in its power to intellectually challenged the reader and entertain him….

Stegner's first significant entry into the autobiographical came with a story, 'Bugle Song,' composed in 1936 before *Remembering Laughter* was published and won its prize in 1937. The story deals with a boy on a farm on the prairie who leads a dual life, representing a conflict in roles that he does not yet recognize….Contrasts between male and female roles, between insensitive and sensitive, caring and uncaring are carried on as themes in a series of stories about this boy that followed the first, stretching through the period in which *On a Darkling Plain* (1940) and *Fire and Ice* (1941) were published, and up to 1943, when the novel, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, which incorporated most of these stories, came out. The success of the initial stories in the series led to the idea for the novel. Reading these stories one after another, we can see how Stegner moves closer and closer to the bone, to his own sense of life as it was formulated on the Saskatchewan frontier, to what became important to him….

These stories became the basis for the development of the great period of his late work. *All the Little Live Things* (1967), *Angle of Repose* (1971), and *The Spectator Bird* (1976). In these novels, as well as in

his final one, *Crossing to Safety* (1987), Stegner uses a first-person narrator to achieve a voice close to his own yet fictional, which would convey a sense of truth and conviction coming not, as in *Big Rock*, out of the telling of his own story, but rather out of the force of his personality and belief—and, one might add, his willingness to give up authoritarian control and let his characters breathe.

When asked in an interview if the voice of Joe Allston (who is the first-person narrator of two of these novels) was close to his own, Stegner replied, 'Yes, but…don't read him intact. He goes further than I would. Anybody is likely to make characters to some extent in his own image'…. He may take on another guise, go further, speak more frankly than he would in life, but the voice is his. Stegner was a man of old-fashioned virtues—polite, courteous, kind—who applied a great deal of self-discipline to his life and who usually repressed the kind of witty sarcasm or outspoken opinionatedness that his first-person narrators are likely to voice. In that sense, Joe Allston might be called an 'extreme Stegner,' saying and doing the things that Stegner in life might have been prompted to say and do, but didn't….

Such is the nature of this narrator as he evolved through these stories to become the voice, the 'fallible wise man' of the later novels. Stegner has remarked that 'any work of art is the product of a total human being,' but it is only with these late works that he was able to bring himself totally to his art….It is only with the evolution of the Joe Allston voice and stance that he was able to create a narrator which is a fiction, someone other than himself, yet bringing to that fiction all his faculties, all the force of his personality….More than that, he was able to divide that voice into roles which reflect his own splits into male and female, detached and involved, accurate or inaccurate in perception. It was a mark of his maturity as a writer that in the later part of his career he could accomplish such a complex division and then synthesis.

The voices of his primary narrators make use of Wallace Stegner's personal assets—his dry sense of humor and wit (which make these later novels so entertaining); his willingness to laugh at himself and to examine himself; his skepticism; his openness to learning' his search for the truths behind cultural and historical myth; his concern for the preservation of the earth. Over time the narrators get closer to the inner man, his concerns and values, as the man sheds his reluctance to risk and reveal himself—and divide himself to reveal his own uncertainties….His growth came as a result of being able to give up the authoritarian control of the early novels, and he enlarged himself by instead creating characters who are 'free people'…One of the things that draws us most to them—Joe Allston, Lyman Ward, and Larry Morgan—is that their wisdom is certified by their fallibility, their uncertainty. All of them, even at a late stage of life, are learning and growing, and while having strong values and carefully nurtured, strong personalities, they nevertheless remain open to experience….

One of his strengths as a writer of fiction was the relationship he formed with his readers, a relationship that evolved gradually and became stronger as his career progressed and he found the narrative voice that allowed him a deeper participation in his work. By giving so much of himself, risking so much of himself, he bound his readers to him, and it is this quality, above all, that will lead to a wider recognition of his greatness of spirit and the rich vibrancy and continuing relevance of his fictional creations."

Jackson J. Benson
"Finding a Voice of His Own: The Story of Wallace Stegner's Fiction"
Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer (1996) 206, 208-09, 211-13, 218, 225-28

"Based on the evidence in *All the Little Live Things* and certain passages in *American Places*, Stegner was never able to feel completely at ease with the generation of which I am a part….Stegner could seem almost the establishment incarnate. In the 1960s and 1970s, reading him was never so fashionable as reading, say, Ken Kesey or Jack Kerouac—or that reading Edward Abbey is to the environmentally interested here at the end of the century. He suffered, too, perhaps, from the fact that the professors were always recommending him….*Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* not only opened a lot of eyes about western realities, it was a work of high art whose flowing, forward-tilt narrative and clear-eyed logic possessed the irresistible pull of the Colorado River itself….

What he represented, I think, was a transition figure in the tradition of the great American literary environmentalists of place, a group that commences with Thoreau sitting in his cabin by Walden Pond, and includes Muir on the lip of Yosemite, Leopold planting pines on his Wisconsin farm, and Rachel Carson marveling at the sea life along the New England coast. Stegner was a transition figure because he took a larger country—the whole American West—for his place, and because he lived long enough to see environmentalists escape the grasp of the literary amateurs and become something of a modern profession ….'No one has ever synthesized the environmentalist position with respect to Western development more thoughtfully, at a more informed level, or with more graceful language….I flip through this little book [*The American West as Living Space*] with the same reverence a Southern Baptist conventioneer must lavish on his New Testament whilst bound for the mecca of Dallas.' I suspect I am like a lot of others in internalizing Stegner's ideas that way….

It was a vision, with perhaps only one or two exceptions, that most any modern western environmentalist—including plenty of Earth Firsters! And Deep Ecologists—would be proud to endorse. Yet what gave Stegner's vision a power than many environmentalist manifestos lack is that it was a product not just of a far deeper knowledge of history but of harder, more penetrating thinking. History and intelligent thought were the main weapons in Stegner's arsenal, and he used them on behalf of a sane environmental future for the West the way Crazy Horse used his warriors against equally formidable and apparently overwhelming odds in 1876….

In the early 1950s dams threatened a part of the West that Stegner was one of the few people to know intimately….The Colorado River Storage Project on the upper Colorado had been envisioned by Democrats as a TVA for the West, although that vision would change as the 1950s dawned. Despite its economic promises, one of the things the CRSP dams certainly were going to do…was to back waters up into Dinosaur National Monument. The battle over this issue raged for five years, in the process shaping much of what we now call modern environmentalism. The Dinosaur National Monument battle created conservationists who were dismayed to learn, as Muir had been, what an environmental threat federal development policies could be….

Looking back, it almost seems as if fate had Stegner poised at this juncture in his career to assume DeVoto's mantle as America's environmental laureate….In the end, the offending dams were dropped from the final version of the plan, and Dinosaur was saved. But the peerless Glen Canyon was sacrificed—or so environmentalist mythology goes. In fact, a dam at Glen Canyon was always part of the CRSP. The only thing environmentalists really bargained away was some additional height in the Glen Canyon structure…. Stegner always regarded it as a personal failing that he had not fought harder to keep that quiet sandstone marvel from being inundated….

In the late 1950s, after three decades of agitation…Congress began to hear testimony on bills to create a wilderness system in the United States. Stegner was by no means the only voice, or even the most important voice, to speak up about the necessity of wilderness to American culture. But his 1960 'Wilderness Letter,' now a world-wide classic, of environmental history, was a galvanizing document, and with good reason has been endlessly quoted as perhaps the single best statement on behalf of wilderness preservation….In the process of conquering the continent we in part surrendered our souls to the wild and the natural, and this has given Americans a sense of bigness, a primal sense of ourselves as 'a wild species' that few modern people retain. Preserving wilderness amounted to a 'geography of hope,' as Stegner's memorable phrase put it, that humans could retain that sanity of knowing they are nature's children. Echoing Thoreau, Stegner believed that the wild held out to Americans our last, best hope of being 'good animals'….

Stegner's vision of how life ought to be lived in the West, derived from his Webb-Powell-DeVoto influences, evolved over time and reflected his experiences….In some of his last nonfiction—*The American West as Living Space* and *Where the Bluebird Sings*—he urged a kind of organicist adaptation for western societies. From his consistent idea that aridity was at the core of the West came the idea that because of aridity the West is substantially different from elsewhere. And it follows that aridity makes the West more fragile, that its resources must be managed more carefully, that it cannot absorb the levels of environmental modification or human population the rest of the country perhaps can….Stegner has

served—and still does—as an apotheosis of environmental activism for writers and even academics whose topic is the West. He married intellectual rigor and literary grace with passion and social commitment, and in his quiet way he promoted those…who shared that commitment."

Dan Flores
"Citizen of a Larger Country: Wallace Stegner, the Environment, and the West"
Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer (1996) 74-76, 79-83, 85

"Stegner's ostensible wilderness position was—and still is—highly regarded for its articulation of a consistent pattern of ecological awareness. And *conservationist* assuredly is the best word to characterize the most obvious pattern of Stegner's ideas….One would expect any good conservationist, I think, to embrace adaptation while disdaining engineering….What he believes—which resembles the thinking of a man like Aldo Leopold but is absolutely contrary to the notions of an Edward Abbey—he calls 'stewardship'….

Observations like 'a place is nothing in itself,' or 'it has no meaning…except in terms of human perception, use, and response' sound contradictory when judged against the 'Wilderness Letter' or the many other Stegner allusions to the 'idea' of wildeness as an abstract necessity. Yet in *Dinosaur* he is insistent about this man-centeredness. 'We cannot even describe a place except in terms of its human uses,' he contends. 'It would be idiotic to preach conservation of such a wilderness in perpetuity, just to keep it safe from al human use. It is only for human use that it has any meaning, or is worth preserving.' A lot of environmentalists would disagree….

Here lies…the core of Stegner's environmental point of view. Stewardship is the keystone—the concept both organic and rational, flexible and systematic. It is the tenet that can embrace such diverse things as Stegner's abstract 'idea' of wilderness, a book like *Discovery!* [about oil exploration], his studied anthropocentrism, some crotchetiness, and an abiding concern that has stayed with him for nearly four score years….In *One Way to Spell Man* he zeroes in on the unhappy consequence of the American Dream. 'We have been fruitful, and multiplied…but in doing so we have plundered our living space. If we have loved the land fate gave us—and most of us did—we went on destroying it even while we loved it, until now we can point to many places we once pointed to with pride, and say with an appalled sense of complicity and guilt, "Look what we've done!"….

Part of the burden rests with the individual. From the heritage of his boyhood, Stegner still holds the dream of the yeoman farmer, and from the heritage of his study, he still sings the praises of Thomas Jefferson and St. John de Crevecoeur. He even titles the last chapter of *The American West as Living Space* 'Variations on a Theme by Crevecoeur,' referring the reader to Crevecoeur's *Letters* of two hundred years ago and speculating why the Frenchman's idealized yeoman American farmer has either disappeared or been transformed. So in good faith Stegner can romantically applaud Montana ranching, even though he knows how difficult such a life of yeomanry and stewardship can be….

Stegner suggests a partial reliance on the federal government. In this respect he differs quite radically from a number of his fellow conservationists, because he genuinely believes that proper governmental intervention is a viable course of action. *History may have proved otherwise* but Stegner retains a measure of confidence that sounds almost uncharacteristically optimistic. He rejects what he regards as the bad agencies—the Bureau of Reclamation, for example—and embraces the good. The good, in this context, are those land-managing bureaus that 'have at least part of their purpose the preservation of the West in a relatively natural, healthy, and sustainable condition'….Unlike the ardent preservationists, or even the most studied conservationists, Stegner assumes an ongoing need for man's participation in things environmental because, as he well knows, whole ecological systems no longer remain intact. For what the anthropocentric has already manipulated, the anthropocentric must accept responsibility for managing further." [Italics added.]

Ann Ronald
"Stegner and Stewardship"
Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer (1996) 89, 91, 93, 99, 101

"Wallace Stegner was a man of humor, and of great foresight, and of wisdom….The troubled state of affairs in higher education adds up to one major reason why Wallace Stegner's example is so compelling and urgent today. He was not a man in flight from the word *wisdom*….You start rereading his work, and several hundred fine passages leap to the eye, passages that you feel you simply must call to the reader's attention….

When you meet Mr. Stegner, you knew that fifty thousand fans before you had already gushed their way through the statement that you were on the verge of saying. 'Oh, Mr. Stegner,' you stood on the edge of blurting, 'I love your books, and they are really an inspiration to me. I start to cry if I think of the end of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* or if I think of the rosebushes in *Angle of Repose*. And the last thing I must say is that I always thought you were handsome in your book jacket photos, but in fact, you are even more handsome in person'….

Look at *One Nation*, and you learn that Stegner was just as dramatically ahead of his time in the matter of race relations as he was in environmental affairs….When one reaches Stegner's discussion of police brutality toward minorities, the urge—to look back at the publication date and make sure that it really says 1945—becomes overpowering….He warned Americans in 1945 that they ran the risk of 'Balkanizing the nation, splitting it into mutually repellent fragments.' The warning stands, having only gained in relevance….The writing of western history finally caught up to Wallace Stegner, and Stegner derived much pleasure in seeing the thinking he pioneered take hold of the field. Even if we have not matched him in wisdom, we at least know wisdom when we see it, and know that we have a lifetime's work cut out for us, pressing the implications of Stegner's thinking."

Patricia Nelson Limerick
"Precedents to Wisdom"
Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer (1996) 105-07, 109, 111, 113, 115

"Stegner's historical legacy is voluminous….[His] view of history, with his emphasis on the continuity of historical experience and his continued attempts to rope together the past and present, was a profoundly conservative one…Stegner spelled out the specifics of his historical methodology in a 1965 essay titled 'On the Writing of History.' For Stegner, effective history was more art than science because it utilized the techniques of fiction and dramatic narrative….Stegner recommended the use of 'the middle ground' as a solution to the twin evils of mythical nostalgia and cynical desperation that pervaded much of modern American literature….Although Stegner acknowledged that many good historians, including Bernard DeVoto and Paul Horgan, have been romanticizers, he had little personal interest in writing history that tended to romanticize or mythologize the past. 'The mythic West is the West that everybody knows,' he wrote…but the real people of the West are infrequently cowboys and never myths'….

Stegner's perspective on the West was heavily influenced by two western historians. He adopted the regional ideas from the work of Texas historian Walter Prescott Webb, examining distinctive places and cultures within the larger West, including the Mormon-built Great Basin area of central Utah and the frontier settlement of the Saskatchewan plains….Bernard DeVoto had an even greater impact on Stegner's development as an historian…'Insofar as I'm a historian at all, I'm a DeVoto kind of historian'….DeVoto had little but contempt for Mormon culture, but Stegner believed that the Mormons had some redeeming qualities. In his western histories, DeVoto was less critical of nineteenth-century American imperialistic attitudes toward the land and other cultures than was Stegner. Moreover, DeVoto maintained a progressive attitude toward the notion of continued American expansion and its promise of democratic and enlightened rule, whereas Stegner examined American expansionism with more ambivalence. Finally, Stegner preferred to focus his historical gaze more narrowly than DeVoto, who enjoyed writing sweeping epics in Parkmanesque fashion….

Literary artist, cautious regionalist, avowed realist, skillful synecdochist—all four terms characterize Stegner the narrative historian. Interestingly enough, they also relate to the four goals that shaped much of Stegner's historical work: (1) connectivity—connecting the past with the present; (2) didacticism—exploring the dilemmas and ambiguities of the past, to question and problem-solve in the present, and perhaps, to make corrections in the future; (3) demythification—illuminating the historical complexities of

the past by probing beneath the layers of myth and illusion; and (4) historicizing the relationship between communities and the land….

History, Stegner observed, had lessons to teach, and it was the historian's job to illuminate the ambiguities and even the failures of the past, as well as the successes, if history was to be 'usable.' Didacticism, then, was closely linked to Stegner's first goal. Connecting the past with the present creates a continuity of experience….Stegner's four goals, connectivity, didacticism, demythification, and an exploration of the historical human/land relationship, are present throughout his historical work on the West….Many contemporary scholars have cited Stegner's important influence on the development of current trends in western historiography....

Finally, Stegner's provocative and sometimes problematic methodological approach bridged the gap between fiction and history. His willingness to draw on a variety of literary techniques—simultaneity, synecdoche, and dramatic narrative among them—suggested important possibilities for the historical field, while illuminating the dangers inherent in experimentation."

Rob Williams
"'Huts of Time': Wallace Stegner's Historical Legacy"
Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer (1996) 119-20, 122-27, 138-40

"Wallace Stegner's death on April 13, 1993, has already triggered a near industry of tributes in special symposia and publications. This will certainly continue for a time, and all of it is both predictable and appropriate, for Stegner embodied a special vision of the West and a special type of westerner, someone who wanted the region to become not only a place, but a civilization as well….

My thesis is that there is no understanding Wallace Stegner as a historian without first understanding Bernard DeVoto, who was at various times Stegner's neighbor, friend, colleague, and mentor, and from whom Stegner derived much of his vision of the West and his approach to western history. Stegner's attributes as a historian, as well as his deficiencies, were those of DeVoto, differing for the most part only in measure….If one discounts DeVoto by ten to twenty percent, what one finds substantially, is Wallace Stegner….Conservation (later environmentalism, in Stegner's case) was their common passion: western resources were being squandered and pillaged with no eye to the future, because we have been governed by optimistic myth rather than reason in appraising those resources. History clearly mattered to DeVoto and Stegner, not only at the personal level, but also at the level of public policy, where it could serve as the basis for intelligent political decisions. From literature they imported the technique of synecdoche, in which the part can stand for the whole….

The two great forces that DeVoto and Stegner saw governing men's thinking regarding the West were myth and science, and in each of their books they selected characters who symbolized those forces, who could represent the rest of their 'tribe,' as Stegner put it….For Stegner, the heroes are the practical John Wesley Powell and Brigham Young…During his youth he had seen, both in Canada and the Rocky Mountain West of America, an unrestrained exploitation of nature that, by the time he began his work on Powell, was threatening to leave nothing but a wasteland….

While there are few if any historians who could not learn something about writing from Stegner, there are major perils in bending the rules of our craft in casual pursuit of literary elegance. Regarding synecdoche, for example, while a novelist or a poet may need nothing but samples, both the glory and the usefulness of history exist in the complexity and nuance of detail. Historical figures are not characters in a morality play, and Stegner's type of judgmental assessments have given history, as Marc Bloch warns us, 'the appearance of the most uncertain of disciplines'."

Gary Topping
"Wallace Stegner the Historian"
Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer (1996) 145-47, 152, 159

"Wallace Stegner's writings are uniquely valuable to western Canadians because he was a border man and large enough to comprehend both sides….Quite inadvertently…Stegner had become involved in introducing Canadians not only to their history and geography but to each other and in promoting national

unity….The appeal of this American writer to Canadian westerners arises partly out of the fact that he claimed a kinship with them, partly from his brilliant evocation of their land, but also from certain of his implicit beliefs about individual freedom and social responsibility, beliefs which may or may not have been encouraged by his brief stay in Saskatchewan but which make his work especially congenial to Canadian readers….Stegner's Saskatchewan years, 1914 to 1920, were important not primarily because of where they took place but when—in that period between ages five and twelve that he identified as the most impressionable in a child's growth….

Stegner has, in turn, been of great importance to at least two generations of western Canadian writers, beginning in the mid-1940s when he recommended to the editors of Atlantic Monthly Press that they publish W. O. Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1947). That novel became an acknowledged classic, sometimes characterized as the *Huckleberry Finn* of Canadian literature….For the following generation of prairie writers, Stegner was an inspiration by his example as well as his writing. *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* has been particularly influential….

That it should become so influential in the criticism of western Canadian literature without the weight of received opinion behind it is a testimony to the vitality of Stegner's ideas and his perception of 'European man's imaginative response to the prairies. Stegner himself was surprised, 'almost shocked,' he says, when he came to the 'Crossing Frontiers' conference in Banff in 1978 and discovered 'how much *Wolf Willow* was the beginning of a tradition'….In critical commentary on Canadian prairie fiction, *Wolf Willow* has been a germinal text. A rough idea of how central it has been can be gathered from the first three book-length studies of prairie fiction published after the appearance of *Wolf Willow*. All rely in varying degrees on Stegner's images and ideas in framing their conceptions of the fiction…

Most of Stegner's influence in Canada has been felt through the 'memoir' and 'history' sections of *Wolf Willow*, but his direct contribution to fiction of the Canadian prairies is substantial in its own right. In two novels, the novella *Genesis*, and a number of short stories, Stegner created a vivid fictional presence for his area of southern Saskatchewan. The fictional Whitemud and its surrounding prairie showed signs of developing into Stegner's equivalent of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, with local characters reappearing, often under the same names….Stegner's fiction is charged with the presence of the international boundary and the implications of Stegner's own crossing of it….

Increasingly in the past few years, evidence of the general diffusion of Stegner's influence has appeared in various media….The weekly news magazine *Alberta Report*…published a lead article headed 'Reclaiming Wallace Stegner: A Great American Author is Lauded as a Founding Father of Western Canadian Literature.' The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation ran a two-hour documentary titled 'The West of Wallace Stegner'…Consistently the recurrent theme of popular tributes to Stegner is that he gives westerners their own place….Canadian enthusiasts have tried to 'reclaim' Wallace Stegner, but he was able to make his valuable contribution to Canadian literature, in part, because he was never Canadian but 'only halfway.' His was a border experience; he understood the border between the two cultures by having lived both sides of it'….Saskatchewan's most tangible tribute to Stegner's importance is the project, begun before his death, of preserving his boyhood home."

Dick Harrison
"Frontiers and Borders: Wallace Stegner in Canada"
Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer (1996) 181, 183-86, 188, 190-91, 196, 198

"He intended a moral vision; his public speech, his civic style were suited to exploration of the conscience, not of the unconscious, or conduct we can choose….Certainly Stegner wanted to use a public language in his fiction, and indeed the stylistic continuity of his fiction, essays, and history suggests that he thought a single speech appropriate to all three….Stegner must have grown through the fortuitous circumstance of a character so stable and responsible, yet expressive, coming from the 'boomer' West of his father…to the East at just the right time to be part of a movement, meeting A. B. Guthrie, Jr., Bernard DeVoto, and others at Cambridge and Breadloaf in 1944, beginning with them to rewrite the West from a western point of view. He was the right writer dropped into a cause….

A number of Stegner's stories form a cluster, almost a sequence though not composed in any order, growing out of the material of a young boy stuck on a remote farm with his ma and a very strong Pa. The material is obviously autobiographical, set on the homestead south of Eastend and Whitemud in Saskatchewan, near the Montana border. Readers of *Wolf Willow* and *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* will recognize situations and characters, while every reader will sense that in detail and urgency, a few of these stories are among Stegner's best. In three of these stories, the big, poor patriarch is brutal, sometimes crushingly so: 'The Volunteer,' 'Chip Off the Old Block,' and the weakest in this vein, 'In the Twilight.' However, in the companion to 'In the Twilight,' 'The Butcher Bird,' the same father is justified, and in three other stories the father's brutality is arguable, mitigated, or accepted: 'Bugle Song,' 'Two Rivers,' and 'Goin' to Town.'

In all seven stories the same sensitive boy, and Ma and Pa, work out their relations to each other, to brute force, childhood, the farm, and the town. The conclusions vary; the repeated concern is the relationship between the western and the civic….It is the familiar scene of all seven tales—the baked hard mud yard of the remote prairie homestead—and their one voice, the child (either in first person or third person limited), maybe eight to twelve years old, too young for a man, just old enough to anger Pa….The air is 'fresh' as 'cinnamon,' and the boy this morning is standing prairie tall, 'feeling his own verticality in all that spread of horizontal land….He was immense.' As Stegner said in *Wolf Willow*, a man there is a 'challenging upright thing, as sudden as an exclamation mark'….

We then talked of Eastern disrespect for western issues, and he made the interesting observation that such disrespect is 'not by any means as common among publishers as among critics, the New York critics, the people who make public opinion'—that is, the westerner could be printed back there, but not read. Or to put it another way: To read Stegner well, the East would have to revise its histories. Before Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* in 1950, which Stegner credited with beginning western revisonism, Stegner's stories were critiquing the western ideal of rugged individualism.

Some of those stories were crude, but those attacking Pa, most notably and complexly 'The Butcher Bird,' were exploring the limits of a western 'can do' male measured against various possibilities of beauty: a gramophone, some trees, Ma, the boys' school projects, polite speech. That the exemplar of the civil—the effete English neighbor of 'The Butcher Bird'—is hard to take, measures the tension of Stegner trying to break out of the myth that the western and the civic are opposites….Both [Hamlin] Garland and Stegner were trying to invent farm Realism, argue against cowboy and agrarian Romance, and yet invent western civic. Just how would a civic farmer dress? West and East were hard to bring to common ground….

In his presentation of Pa, Stegner, who described himself as a sickly child drawn to books and Ma, anticipated our contemporary critiques of cowboys, violence, the isolated rogue male—all held up to various alternatives of the civic…He had helped bring to pass a world in which the mythic West could include women, children, and towns."

William Bevis
"Stegner: The Civic Style"
Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer (1996) 256-57, 259-60, 264-65, 267

"Stegner stood out among other writers of his time in the degree to which his life and his work were of one piece. In life he was unpretentious, observant, and always, even in old age, learning. Much of his writing he devoted to the job of getting behind the myths, behind pretentiousness and deception, to find the truth. He as the ultimate Realist….

For him life was a test of character….Wallace Stegner believed in all those things we used to believe in—enduring love, friendship, generosity, kindness, fairness, duty, and sacrifice. These were the things he wrote about in an age when they have so often been debased, discounted, or ignored—or even mocked as old-fashioned or irrelevant. He was one of a kind, a voice in the wilderness, a writer that we can treasure if we value the same things he valued….

Like Mark Twain he was a disillusioned romantic who found some merriment in human foibles, but in his heart he was constantly disappointed by human behavior—its intolerance, its self-centeredness, its self-

deceptions, its rapacious misuse of the land. Like Twain as he grew older he became increasingly pessimistic about humanity and its future—or as he put it, 'I walk behind the times muttering about the way things are going.' As a result he once admitted he probably would have been better suited to have lived and written in the nineteenth century along with Twain and Henry James….

Not only did he share aspects of Mark Twain's temperament but his career and his writing had much in common with the master, Henry James….Both writers got better as they got older, James attaining the pinnacle of his powers with his late novels, Stegner reaching toward greatness with his last four: *All the Little Live Things, Angle of Repose, Spectator Bird,* and *Crossing to Safety*. Both writers wrote novels with very little plot; they tended to build dramatic situations that are realized internally rather than depending on dramatic actions. Their fictions were less, in Stegner's words, 'a complication resolved than what Henry James was to call "a situation revealed".' Both writers emphasized nuance of thought and emotion. Both were masters, too, of the indeterminate ending—the kind of ending that haunts you and makes you think back on everything that led up to it….

Both writers were very concerned with point of view in their fiction. It became a priority for Stegner only slowly, after considerable thought and some trial and error…He began with a strictly limited, Jamesian point of view—that variation of the third person we call 'center of consciousness.' He admired the way that James, over the course of his career, limited his point of view more and more, so that as 'he forced his story through smaller and smaller outlets…it acquired a special concentration and force.' But Stegner discovered there were subtleties in point of view 'that Henry James himself didn't know about. You don't have to be as rigid as he, and yet point of view is just as important, maybe even more important than he thought it was.' Stegner achieved his own greatness by turning away from that model to the first-person narrative, something that James had never used….

Interpenetrating the past and the present, which he does frequently in these final novels, was important to him as a writer who was also a historian, someone who became a historian because he felt so ignorant about his own past. He admired Faulkner for the richness of his associations from the past and mourned the poverty of these associations in most western novels….No one has been better able than Stegner, even at the beginning of his career, to create an atmosphere, a mood, or to suggest a condition of the soul by providing a suggestive landscape….

Most of his work…is autobiographical. At times he would admit this but emphasize that a writer's life is the only material he has to draw on….However mightily he tried to persuade his audience that although he contributed much to his first-person narrators he was not identical to them, the reader's identification of author with speaker was almost inevitable…The point for us is to recognize how closely his life and work were joined: it isn't a matter of the narrator's identity, it's a question of his values and beliefs….What were the aspects of Wallace Stegner that produced the fiction which dramatized his beliefs and whose qualities his readers admire? First, certain unique experiences while growing up; second, an enormous talent; third, an incredible self-discipline; and fourth, a lifelong thirst for learning that resulted in an unusual breadth of knowledge. Alone among the major writers of his time, Stegner's life spanned the years from the horse and buggy to the information age, giving him an unusually long perspective….

Stegner's writing talent was far greater than generally appreciated. Early on he learned to love literature and the sound of words. He had a remarkable gift for remembering poetry and verse, and that gift in turn led to the development of a discriminating ear for the rhythms of prose. Those who knew him well have testified that metaphor was a habit of mind which came out even in ordinary conversation….What we have here is…what he was: his childhood experience and sense of place, his metaphorical imagination, and his sensitivity to language….

Having interviewed hundreds of people…for biographies of Steinbeck and Stegner, and having worked with academics for several decades, I can testify with some authority as to Stegner's intellect. He was simply, by far, the brightest man I've ever known. And although my description here has emphasized his strict moral standards and stern self-discipline, I should mention that like most bright people, he had a wonderfully witty and playful sense of humor. What complemented his intelligence and made it even more impressive was an incredible memory, a vast storehouse of general knowledge….He always thought that he

was behind, that his colleagues knew much more than he did and that he would have to work like hell to get caught up. And he did—worked like hell and got caught up.

There is no doubt that his superb intellectual equipment was in large part responsible for the depth and range of his accomplishments. He had ground and polished a lens, applying the grit of experience and self-discipline to the raw materials of talent and intelligence to produce images, a body of work, of more consistent quality and greater breadth, perhaps, than any other writer of his time. In addition to receiving awards for his novels, histories, and short stories, he was presented later in his career with a half-dozen lifetime achievement awards. In his case, to a large extent, the man was his work—a lifetime spent in honesty, realism, and dedication to the truth. He was a good deal more like the stereotypical western hero than he ever would have admitted. He was one tough customer. And notice, I smile when I say that."

Jackson J. Benson
"Writing as the Expression of Belief"
Wallace Stegner and the Continental Vision
ed. Curt Meine
(Island Press 1997) 21-29

"Stegner's wound is a gnawing guilt created by his failure to protect his mother in life and in art….The characters Stegner most admires, or those with whom he most closely identifies, are commonly aspiring 'protectors' who finally fail in a host of ways to protect those they love….The theme of protection informs Stegner's political analysis, too, as we see John Wesley Powell's heroic but ultimately failed attempts to protect the West from the politicians, the conservationists' inability to preserve the wilderness…. Protection is at the center of Stegner's narrative choices. His narrators are often torn between a desire to expose the truth and a need to protect the characters they create….While the hairtrigger father may have been the cause for the insecurity, the mother was not able to offer the child security either. In fact, few characters in Stegner's fiction can offer anyone protection or security—'safe places'—just oases of momentary sanctuary….

Given [Mary Hallock] Foote's almost obsessive focus on the protection of children, it is intriguing that Stegner's crucial departure from the historical data of her life [in *Angle of Repose*] turns on a moment when a mother fails to protect her daughter—a plot change that tells us much about Stegner's own interests…. Stegner's decision to climax Susan's life with such a 'failure of protection' reverberates with his own concerns….The protective impulse, once again on multiple levels, is at the heart of *Crossing to Safety*…. There is no sanctuary in Eden. Unable to protect his wife from polio, Larry Morgan spends the rest of his life trying to achieve a balance between caring for her, yet another wounded creature, and respecting her need for independence. (One thinks here, too, of Joe Allston's desire to protect Marion in *All the Little Live Things*.)….

Much of his writing about western literature and history can be read as an effort to protect the West against the mythologizers. His books on the Mormons are historically honest, sometimes critical, but written partly to defend them against stereotyping as either Saints or Zealots….Balancing pragmatism with idealism, he knows that protection will inevitably fail, that wounds will be inflicted, but our spiritual health, he says, lies in the idea of preservation…. Writing from the protective impulse, Stegner offers a momentary stay against modernist [Postmodernist] despair."

Melody Graulich
Wallace Stegner and the Continental Vision (1997) 43-44, 47-48, 52, 54, 57-59

"I can't think of another writer who has distinguished himself or herself in so many fields of prose: the novel, the short story, the essay, memoir, history, biography, literary journalism. Only poetry, it seems, eluded Stegner's pen. He liked verse, though, and when I was around him he frequently quoted lines and considerable passages from Milton, Wordsworth, or Robert Frost, some of which he had carried in memory all the way from his early schooling in the 1910s and 1920s….For Stegner, the lyric moment may be intense but is never in itself aesthetically sufficient. In his nonfiction you will find lyrical passages of exquisite grace, but you will not find personal rhapsody without a context of geography and history….

By and large, acts of individual heroism did not interest him so much as acts of individuals working and neighboring and loving together. That was the wholeness he wished for his mother, who had the character and skills to be a sticker, a community builder, but was married to a man who was not….The wholest writers are those with a complex sense of responsibility to nature, history, community, culture—to those values that transcend their private epiphanies and miseries…Three and a half years after his death, practically every major book Wallace Stegner wrote is not in print in one edition or another."

John Daniel
"Wallace Stegner's Hunger for Wholeness"
Wallace Stegner and the Continental Vision (1997) 31, 33, 37, 41-42

"Wallace Stegner, one of the masters of the American short story during the first half of the twentieth century, had a storybook life. Whereas the stories he composed are usually quiet on the surface with a strong undertow, his life was overtly dramatic, occasionally even melodramatic. It was a life of accomplishment right out of Horatio Alger, except that unlike Alger's hero Ragged Dick, Wallace didn't seek riches so much as he sought knowledge and achievement. Unlike many storybook heroes he was not an orphan but he did live for a time in an orphanage; he did not spend his childhood in a robber's den but he did grow up with a father who was an outlaw.

In 1945 Wallace Stegner founded the creative writing program at Stanford University and was its director for the next 25 years. During that time he had many practitioners of the short story as guest professors or lecturers for his program….Throughout his life he was a seeker—he strove mightily to find out about his background, his place, and his relation to his parents, and wondered about the pattern of his life as it evolved. And to a large extent that search was conducted in the writing of fiction—one might say that his fiction was both an exploration and explanation of his life….When, after a long and productive life, he died in 1993 as a result of an automobile accident, he had received just about every honor a writer can receive, except the Nobel Prize for literature….

Nearly all of Wallace Stegner's fictions, short story or novel, might be considered…autobiographical, and to understand them fully, one should have some knowledge of the special circumstances under which he grew up. As a child on the last homestead frontier, in Saskatchewan, early in this century, he became attached to the West, particularly to the Western landscape, and became curious about a history that he was never given in school. As the child of a man who was always looking for his chance to make it big in the West, who ultimately became a bootlegger and outlaw and who moved his family from place to place constantly, Stegner found himself badly needing a sense of place—to be from somewhere, to belong to somewhere. And to know everything possible about that place—its history and its features. He was fond of quoting the writer-poet Wendell Berry, who has said, 'If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are.'

From this background, one can isolate two primary themes that run through Stegner's short stories. One is 'place' as expressed in his attention to the environment. No writer has more sensitively described the natural environment as not only a background to the action in the fiction, but often, as in 'The Berry Patch' or 'Goin' to Town,' as a way of indicating who the characters are, what they have on their minds, and what their conflicts may be. The second connected theme is that of identity. We are all practiced shape-shifters who change our roles as we change our circumstances. Who we are, Stegner shows us, depends a good deal on where are. We may ourselves wonder who we really are or where we belong, as does Mr. Hart in 'Balance His, Swing Yours.' Or, like Joe Allston in 'A Field Guide to the Western Birds' or Robert Chapman in 'The City of the Living,' we may come to regret who we have been. Just as often, as in 'Beyond the Glass Mountain' of 'The Woman on the Wall,' we may wonder who other people really are—or we may find that they are not who they seemed to be.

The other themes featured in the stories are usually connected in one way or another to these two, place and identity. For example, belonging or having one's identity confirmed in a particular time and place, as in 'The Saw Gang,' has its counterpart, or course, in not belonging, which leads to themes of loneliness or being the outsider, as in the poignant story of childhood exclusion, 'In the Twilight,' or in the story about the adult traveler who it seems will forever be alienated from his environment, 'Something Spurioius from the Mindanao Deep."

Who we are, our roles in our culture, has a great deal to do with the past of our culture, as well as our own past individually, so that many of the stories play with time, often merging the past and present, as in 'Maiden in a Tower' or 'The Traveler,' where the central characters in a sudden confrontation in memory meet themselves at a younger age. In the former story, as Kimball Harris drives into Salt Lake City, the scene of his college days, he feels like he is driving into a mirage or mural and 'began to feel like the newsreel diver whom the reversed projector sucks feet first out of his splash.'

Who we are in respect to our culture and natural environment also has good deal to do with our gender, male or female. Wallace Stegner spent a career refuting the myths of the West, many of which defined roles by gender. Bruce, the protagonist of several of Stegner's 'growing up' stories, struggles to find himself in an environment dominated by a macho, frontier code, the code of the West, which Stegner describes as the myth that attributes the settling of the West to 'the lone horseman.' It is this rugged individualism, so damaging to our society, that is the target of his implicit criticism in 'The Chink' and one of only two cowboy stories he ever wrote, 'Genesis.' Its protagonist, Rusty Cullen, is a tenderfoot cowboy who is taken through a horrific experience during the Saskatchewan blizzard of 1907 and comes to realize that it is only through working with other men that he can survive in such a world. Throughout his work, fiction and nonfiction, Stegner praises cooperation and values a sense of community—the real basis, he was convinced, for the building of the West or, indeed, for a peaceful and just society. When that sense of community breaks down, as it is seen to do in such stories as 'The View from the Balcony' or 'He Who Spits at the Sky,' the resulting atmosphere is ominous, threatening.

On a broad sale, it was frequently the women of the West who opposed the code of rugged individualism and brought the West civilization and community. In Stegner's own life, he had his father on the one side and his mother on the other, and the conflict they represented to him—individualism versus community, sensitivity versus insensitivity, compassion versus indifference—became a common strand of themes in his work as well. We see it in nearly all the stories of childhood, but particularly in a story such as 'Butcher Bird,' wherein the father callously shoots a harmless sparrow in order to demonstrate his independent masculinity and, in a petty act of retaliation, to upset the boy and his mother.

The themes and subjects of the stories, while linked together in the was just described, are amazingly varied, as are his settings. They range from the plains West at the turn of the century to the California West of post-World War II, but also the Midwest of the prewar and postwar periods, Vermont, Florida, Salt Lake City, Santa Barbara, and Los Angeles, as well as several foreign locations, including the Philippines, Mexico, France, and Egypt. On this basis it would be hard to categorize Stegner as a 'regionalist,' which is the term some critics have used in order to try to diminish him.

It would be just as hard to categorize Stegner's stories by form or technique, since he wrote many different kinds, approaching them from various angles, and achieved varied effects with them. One should note that he was in several ways a student of the short story, not only having taught the form to student writers, but having written extensively, more perhaps than any other major writer of the century, about teaching the writing of stories, about his own struggles in writing them, about the problems of the form, and, as a critic, about short stories written by other writers.

An important influence on his writing came from the fact that he was also a teacher of American literature with a Ph.D. from a major university, but was, at the same time, extremely well-read in nearly every period of literature. The course he taught most often was the survey of the Realistic-Naturalistic period, which ran from after the Civil War to 1920, and he came to admire such writers as Mark Twain, Stephen Crane (whose 'Open Boat' I will compare to Stegner's 'The Traveler'), and, in particular, Henry James. This admiration would seem partly responsible for leading him to become a Realist in his own work, bucking the trend toward such modes as magic realism or metafiction….Influencing him too, besides the Realists, were the writers of his own time who had rejected the notion of the formula or well-made story, writers such as James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and Katherine Mansfield, who 'in place of winnings and losings…all dealt in nuances, illuminations, epiphanies.' ('The Law')

Although Wallace Stegner's writings display an almost unbelievable range, from novel to biography to history to essay, his contribution to the short story played no small part in his enormous achievement. Many of his stories, such as 'The Traveler,' 'The Women on the Wall,' 'The Blue-Winged Teal,' and 'The City of the Living,' not only won awards, but became classics in their own time. In large part his success came not only from knowledge of the form and its possibilities, from talent and writing skill, but from the fact that he wrote out of belief and conviction, from a fire in his belly, from a passion for telling the truth in a clear, direct, believable way. When we read Stegner, we feel that here is a writer who cares deeply about what he is saying—he is not playing games or showing off. His art was, as he has said about the writers he admired, 'a real probe of troubling human confusions'."

Jackson J. Benson
Wallace Stegner: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne/Simon & Schuster Macmillan/Prentice Hall 1998) xi-xv

"What I uncovered, as I thumbed my way through his colossal output (an oeuvre that spanned some fifty-five years), was a considerable body of material that had never appeared in any book, in some cases articles and essays that only a devoted scavenger of magazine and journal publications might reasonably know or possess. Even I was unaware of their existence….Most are as relevant to issues that still confront the American West as any of his better-known works, and all of them are written with the same stylistic grace and intellectual rigor that earned him, over the years, his enormous readership….Both his themes and his personal convictions were often repeated and continuously expanded, whether his medium was fiction, nonfiction, address, lecture, interview, or just 'a conversation with'….

'The Twilight of Self-Reliance'…his biographer, Jack Benson, calls 'the most complete exposition of Stegner's political-social beliefs' that he ever wrote….*The Sound of Mountain Water*….has had greater exposure than practically anything he ever wrote, but I could not bear to leave it out. Without it the modern conservation movement would still be trying to mine quotable nuggets from Henry David Thoreau and Aldo Leopold, and it is certainly one of the greatest statements of an environmental ethic ever written…. Not only is 'Genesis' the best story he ever wrote, in my opinion, but it is a narrative of rugged individualism subsumed by and sublimated to the need for cooperative enterprise, and this, as any reader of Stegner's work quickly understands, is what the demythologized West was *absolutely* all about."

Page Stegner, ed. (son)
Marking the Sparrow's Fall: Wallace Stegner's American West
(Holt 1998) xvi-viii

Michael Hollister (2015)