



INTRODUCTION

Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

Wallace Stegner is the major Realist in American literature of the 20th century, as distinct from the great Modernists from whom he adopted techniques—Frost, Cather, Hemingway, Faulkner. (1) As a writer and as a teacher he did the most to sustain the fiction mainstream of Realism originating in the 19th century with Henry James, William Dean Howells, and Edith Wharton; (2) his number of masterpieces and the large body of his work surpass Steinbeck, his nearest rival as a Realist; (3) his Realism informs his scholarly non-fiction as well—5 histories and 2 biographies; (4) he is the successor to Thoreau as the premier American nature writer, a Realist rather than a Romantic; (5) his blend of memoir and fiction *Wolf Willow* (1962) is credited with originating a literary tradition in Canada; (6) three of his short stories won the O. Henry Award for best story of the year; (7) seven of his short stories were included in the “Best Short Stories” of the year volumes; (8) his short novel *All the Little Live Things* (1967) is the best literary rebuttal to the 1960s counterculture and the successor to *Walden*; (9) his most ambitious and highly regarded novel *Angle of Repose* (1972) won the Pulitzer Prize and is now being credited by feminists with initiating a tradition in feminist scholarship; (10) his Jamesian novel *The Spectator Bird* (1977) won the National Book Award; (11) his last novel *Crossing to Safety* (1987) is one of the best novels published since 1980; and (12) he was nominated for a Nobel Prize.

The New York Times tried to destroy Stegner. They refused to review his prizewinning novels, shunted a brief notice of *Wolf Willow* to its back pages, and printed a review of his last novel *Crossing to Safety* (1987) on page 14. “They read what they want to see, rather than what’s there,” Stegner replied. He had become so prominent by 2009 that *The Times* finally admitted to its snobbery toward him in a short article. “Being photogenic is not the first consideration. Being a member of the right club can be, though, and sometimes this club is called Feminist, sometimes Jewish, sometimes Black.... Politics is frequently a consideration.” (Joseph Epstein, *Plausible Prejudices*, 1985) Stegner did not belong to any of the right clubs. He is Politically Incorrect: gentile, white, male, heterosexual, traditional, moral, happily married, believes in God, and is from the West. In his comprehensive two-volume study of *American Fictions 1940-2000*, for example, Frederick R. Karl of NYU completely omits Stegner. Liberal academic critics such as Karl scorn Realism and exalt fantasies by Postmodernists. Absurdly, because he is from the West and wrote

about it, New York critics dismissed Stegner as a “regionalist.” Yet Stegner’s writing is far less confined to a single region than Faulkner’s. The “region” that urban fantasists such as Barth and Barthelme write about is limited to their own heads, whereas Stegner set his fiction in real places as diverse as Saskatchewan, North Dakota, Washington, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Wisconsin, California, Florida, Vermont, Mexico, the Philippines, Denmark, France, and Egypt.

BIOGRAPHY

Wallace Stegner descended from people who lived at the head of the Hardanger fjord in Norway. In 1909, the year the Modernist movement began in Europe, he was born in Iowa to George and Hilda Stegner, who moved further west to the cold plains of Saskatchewan. “There is nothing between you and the North Pole but a two-wire fence,” he recalls. His domineering father tried to make a fortune raising wheat, but soon went bust. “My father’s erratic and sometimes unlawful activities had taught me to keep my mouth shut, and given me, along with some private shame, a wariness older than my years.... My mother was a very strong woman, and I got an example of the kind of patience and endurance that even an unlucky woman can display.” The only major American writers as poor as Stegner as a child were Porter and Dreiser, who went barefoot to school because he had no shoes.

His father George was a failed rancher, outlaw, bootlegger, gambler, and chaser of mining claims. He believed in the Big Rock Candy Mountain, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, the immediate fulfillment of the American Dream. Stegner said, “I grew up doubting the big-bonanza-over-the-next-rise notion, because for years I watched my family chase it. I got pretty jaundiced on that subject. A little realism would have helped my family a good deal.” The Realism of Stegner originated in reaction against the Romanticism of his father, while his high regard for women originated in admiration of his mother. He was a shy, quiet, sickly child, but he grew into a strong athletic boy. The family moved to Seattle, then to Montana, and then to Salt Lake City, where he attended high school and sold hotdogs at an amusement park beside the Great Salt Lake: “Now and again, on a picnic hill, when the incense of hamburgers and hot dogs grows thick and stupefying, I am moved to rise on my hind legs with a spatula in one hand and a bun in the other and give voice to an atavistic howl, a nasal, high, drawn-out ululation like that of a muezzin from a minaret or a coyote from a river cliff.”

EDUCATION

Growing up, young Wally felt deprived of indoor plumbing and education. “I knew nothing, literally nothing. I had a million books to read to catch up with my country and my generation and my classmates.” All his life this feeling of being left behind made him relentlessly hardworking, driven and prolific. He enrolled in the University of Utah in 1925. “I worked my way through college being a clerk in a rug-and-linoleum store forty hours a week.... Nobody in my family had gone to college.” His freshman English teacher, the fiction writer Vardis Fisher, recognized and encouraged his talent. He took a course in the short story from another teacher, began writing stories and won a prize from a newspaper. He was awarded a fellowship and went on to graduate school at the University of Iowa.

MARRIAGE

Wallace met Mary Page at the University of Iowa. Born and raised in Iowa, she was a graduate student at the university working in the library. They were introduced and she remembered that she had read his graduate student’s thesis of three short stories. He was tall, she was short, but their values matched closely and they fell in love for the rest of their lives and got married in 1934 six months after meeting. He said, “My wife was the best thing that had happened to me since I first knew my mother. She was a musician, a reader, an eager and curious searcher of the world. She gave me new eyes to see the West with, for she really saw what I took for granted.”

INFLUENCES

The main influence on Stegner after his parents and Mary, was Nature--his scripture of Reality in this life. “I seem to have been born with an overweening sense of place, an almost pathological sensitivity to the colors, smells, light, and land and lifeforms of the segments of earth on which I’ve lived.” His main

literary influences were international, not regionalist: “I remember reading almost all of Conrad”; “It began with James Branch Cabell and Hemingway and went on to Joyce and the rest of them”; “The writers who reinforce my beliefs strongly—which is one way of responding to books—are Conrad and Chekhov and Turgenev.” Overall, of the 58 short stories Stegner was to write, the subtle shorter ones tend to resemble Chekhov, the longer ones with more developed psychological and moral complexity sometimes resemble Henry James in content and Edith Wharton in style.

As his sense of himself as a westerner developed, he identified himself with the tradition of agrarian pastoralism and writing about the myth of the Garden of the West, which begins with Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) and extends through Thomas Jefferson, James Fenimore Cooper, Mark Twain, Frank Norris, Willa Cather, Caroline Gordon, and John Steinbeck. Stegner had a particular admiration for Cather and *My Antonia*. Agrarian pastoralism affirms family and community and Stegner spent his career emphasizing those values in portraying the history of the West against the popular myth of the lone cowboy hero and the tradition of individualism. Communal values also inspired his work as a major conservationist.

TEACHING

Stegner began teaching at the University of Iowa, where he received his M.A. in 1932 and his Ph.D. in 1935. He got fired from his first teaching job at Augustana College for declining to sign a religious pledge, then went on to teach at the University of Utah, the University of Wisconsin, and Harvard, where he taught for 6 years and became close friends of Robert Frost and the historian Bernard DeVoto. “The teaching of writing is a very Socratic kind of teaching,” he said, “and you should stay out of the people’s way rather than get into it.” For two years at Stanford, he shared an office with writer Nancy Packer, who described him as “about the most responsible person I had ever met, someone who didn’t shirk his duty in any way... He was utterly open and accessible to students.... He’d never turn them away.” For most of his career he also taught regularly in the summers at the distinguished Bread Loaf School of English in Vermont, where he socialized with his friend Robert Frost.

FIRST NOVELS

In 1937 his career got launched with the publication of the novella *Remembering Laughter*, which won an award and was published in *Redbook*. An apprentice work influenced by Naturalism but ending with hope, it is the story of an Iowa farmer and his prim wife, whose marriage is destroyed when he has an affair with his wife’s sister, leading to pregnancy, alienation, and death. *The Potter’s House* (1938) is modest Realism about a deaf-mute potter and his problems with his family in California. *On a Darkling Plain* (1940) tells the story of a Canadian soldier injured by gas in the trenches of World War I who retreats into isolation by homesteading in frontier Saskatchewan, but then is drawn back into community by joining with his neighbors to fight the deadly influenza epidemic of 1918.

RADICALS

In response to the Great Depression of the 1930s, Mary Stegner was a socialist. She volunteered for various co-ops, such as farmers have had in the past, and both she and Wallace hoped that cooperatives would improve economic justice. Neither of them believed in revolution, as he would make clear in his biographical novel about Joe Hill in 1950. “The closer I got to the East Coast,” Stegner said later, “the more I ran into these people who were hysterically running around being Trotskyites or Stalinists. They seemed to me to be hysterical, and I got that feeling corroborated in spades by DeVoto and Frost, both of whom had a deep contempt for this, as they would have put it, un-American kind of politics.” While teaching at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, beginning in the depth of the Great Depression in 1937, he was exposed to the radicalism that eventually drove him into retirement: “The Young Communist League, particularly, of which I attended three or four meetings...struck me as being quite insane.” In response, while teaching at Harvard, he published *Fire and Ice* (1941), also the title of a poem by Frost, a novel about a young Communist at the University of Wisconsin in Madison who finally realizes that his radicalism is motivated by a desire for personal revenge.

The Big Rock Candy Mountain (1943)

This is an autobiographical novel about his family based on his boyhood experiences: “I used the places where we had lived.” It is mainly the biography of his father, played by the domineering American dreamer Bo Mason—gambler, bootlegger, real estate entrepreneur—a failure in business and in his family life. An outdated frontiersman, Bo represents the excesses of masculine individualism and the myth of the lone hero settling the West. His wife Elsa is modeled on Stegner’s mother—suffering, patient, enduring, loyal, and courageous. She stays with Bo through all his failures to make easy money, through a series of moves across western America and Canada, raising two boys. One son is ruined by his father while the other, Bruce, hates him and survives through intelligence, will, and stamina. Bruce is like young Stegner in such details as trapping gophers on the prairie. The novel is written in mostly plain realistic prose with some emotive passages that critics called imitation Thomas Wolfe, agreeing that Stegner had not yet achieved a confident distinctive style. Nevertheless, the novel is an authentic depiction of life in the contemporary West and is full of vitality, exciting episodes, local color, vivid imagery, and several perfectly written parts that were separately published as short stories. *Big Rock* lacks the unity of form, ironies, and organic tendency to allegory that characterize his best later fiction, though Bo and Elsa do achieve a mythic resonance as representative types.

One Nation (1945)

Prompted by an offer from *Look* magazine, during World War II Stegner traveled all around the country doing research on prejudice in America and published 12 articles on the subject from 1944 to 1946: He investigated violence against Jews in Boston, prejudice against Jews and Catholics in the Midwest and New York, and effects of Jim Crow laws in North Carolina. He interviewed Hispanics in New Mexico and visited Indian pueblos, Filipinos in pickers’ camps in California, two Japanese relocation centers in the desert near the Nevada border, and Chinatowns in San Francisco and Los Angeles. In his articles he advocated that minority groups should strive to maintain their heritage while assimilating and expressed optimism about the improvement of democracy. “Give us time,” he said. “Half a millennium is not enough.” His articles were published as a book, *One Nation*, which won the Life-in-America Award and the *Saturday Review* Award for the year’s best book on race relations. “It becomes increasingly clear,” he said later, “that racial and religious tensions are the gravest threat to the future that we face.” As though from empathy in the course of his research on the suffering of minorities, Stegner developed a serious heart infection. He was an advocate for civil rights decades before radical students in the 1960s accused him of representing the racist Establishment.

STANFORD

John Steinbeck earned a D in English at Stanford, never graduated and went on to write from the general perspective of the working class that could not afford Stanford. In 1945 Stegner was hired by Stanford at the age of 36 as a full professor. “Stanford offered me a job with a jump to a full professorship, and I came like a nine-inch trout on a copper trolling line.” There he taught American literature and founded the best creative writing program in the United States at that time, mentoring successful fiction writers for the next quarter century including Ken Kesey, Larry McMurry, Robert Stone, Thomas McGuane, Scott Momaday, Ernest J. Gaines, Wendell Berry, Max Apple, Speer Morgan, Harriet Doerr, William Kittredge, Al Young, and Tillie Olson, as well as many other writers less well known.

The most prominent writer to pass through Stegner’s program was the rebel hipster Ken Kesey, who enrolled in 1958, then went on to become an icon of the 1960s counterculture, satirized by Stegner in *All the Little Live Things* (1967) and by Tom Wolfe in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968). In seminars Kesey acted as if no one but himself was talented enough to understand his writing. He reacted to Stegner as a symbol of the Establishment because he wore a necktie and would not take LSD. Kesey was an anti-intellectual who had read Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) three times and little else. He took pride in being a natural man, an ordinary working guy—a “jock.” He thought reading other writers would interfere with his self-expression and that he had nothing much to learn from anybody. He played the role of the lone outlaw hero—Kesey the Kid shooting it out with the bourgeois sheriff of Deadwood—that Stegner spent his whole career debunking: “The whole history of mankind is social, not individual.” After he finished his Wilson Fellowship year Kesey applied two years in a row for a Stegner Fellowship and was rejected both times. In *All the Little Live Things* the arrogant rebel Jim Peck is a composite, but clearly modeled in

particular on Kesey. Of Peck, the narrator says, “The irresponsibility of his search for freedom forced me to be more conservative than I wanted to be.”

Stegner taught at Stanford for 25 years, until in 1971 he grew disgusted with radical students: “Writing students were still a pleasure to teach; I enjoyed them and learned from them. But the undergraduate teaching that had to go on was so disrupted... The intolerable ones came with answers and not questions, and the others came with just confusions... I didn’t retire from Stanford, I quit. I’d had a bellyful.” After he quit, the English Department hired the experimental East Coast fiction writer Gilbert Sorrentino, in accord with the displacement of Realism by academic Expressionism among the literary elite. Stanford continued to decline as a university and had so little appreciation of what Stegner had accomplished and all he had done for the school that rather than turn his house just above the campus into a memorial for seminars and workshops, it sold it and the new owners demolished the place with bulldozers.

While at Stanford from 1962-66 I taught fiction writing for Stegner and was a graduate assistant for several of his large American literature classes of about 150 students in sloping lecture halls. Kesey had moved his Merry Prankster entourage up into the woods at La Honda by then. Stegner was a celebrity with a fatherly warmth, kindness and humanity that made him popular with students, except for the radicals. Typically he wore camel tan sports jackets or safari type shirts, light colored clothing, ensembles that evoked traditional western values without fringed buckskin. His abundant light hair swept back added to his dignity and charismatic glow. There seemed to be no darkness in him. His face lined by weather and laughter, speaking in the idiom of common people and using homely metaphors, he leaned forward over the podium as though across a fence passing along information to a neighbor. Though his glasses and necktie gave him a professorial air, he gestured with hands toughened by hard labor, one finger reduced to a stub by a farming accident—by the Machine in the Garden.

All the Little Live Things (1967)

Many know about Thoreau’s *Walden*, but almost nobody knows that Stegner’s *All the Little Live Things* is its successor. This novel is (1) a major classic of Nature writing; (2) a debate over the fundamental issues of Environmentalism; (3) the best literary counter to the 1960s counterculture; (4) an expression of Realist and Modernist aesthetics opposed to Postmodernist fantasy; (5) a poignant love tragedy comparable to Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*; (6) psychologically complex in the tradition of Henry James; (7) agrarian pastoralism expressing the myth of the Garden of the West in the tradition of Crèvecoeur, Jefferson, Cooper, Thoreau and Cather; (8) a spiritual allegory of redemption with a Christ-evoking figure. Joe Allston is a retired literary agent who retreats with his wife Ruth from New York City to the pastoral hills of California, looking for sanctuary in a private Eden. But he must fight against snakes and gophers and other pests, mainly Jim Peck, a hairy hippie on a motorcycle he allows to set up camp on his land, yielding to the mercy of Ruth. The more ominous Machine in the Garden is the bulldozer of his neighbor Tom Weld, who starts preparing his land for development.

Joe is one of the most complex characters in American fiction, as throughout the novel he struggles with moral issues, questions his own judgment, and is guided by Ruth. When new neighbors move in nearby, a young couple, Joe falls in love with the wife, Marian, like a daughter he never had. Joe is a postmodern Naturalist who has lost his faith in God and he fences philosophically with Marian, who is Taoist and Emersonian in her vision of Nature. He is horrified when he learns that the poor girl is dying of cancer and is pregnant. Her performance en route to the grave, as Hemingway would say, is so moving to Joe she opens his heart and saves his soul. The novel dramatizes a faith that Stegner made explicit in a different context: “I think we can confidently expect God to provide what we need.” A number of plot lines converge in a powerful climax. In explaining the origin of the story, Stegner said, “I was feeling grim...because in one year four of our friends died of cancer, one after another, all relatively young women in their forties.... A wisecracking narrator can make a story seem a little less grim... I borrowed for Joe’s portrait the character of my agent... I just project something in myself a little further out to get an image of what *can* happen... He goes further than I would.”

CONSERVATION

Stegner carried on and expanded the theme of Thoreau that “In wilderness is the salvation of the world.” Both saw wilderness as vital to the human soul and the source of transcendent experience. Stegner went so far as to define the American male as “a civilized man who has renewed himself in the wild.” However, Thoreau is a Romantic who idealized Nature, whereas Stegner is a Realist who said, “Right beside Mother Earth, in the same bed, lies Father Earthquake.” Most of Stegner’s influence as a conservationist was exerted through his essays in *This Is Dinosaur: Echo Park Country and Its Magic Rivers* (editor, 1956), *Wolf Willow* (1962), *The Sound of Mountain Water* (1969), *American Places* (with son Page and Eliot Porter, 1981), *The American West as Living Space* (1987), *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs; Living and Writing in the West* (1992), and *Marking the Sparrow’s Fall: Wallace Stegner’s American West* (edited by Page, 1998).

His many activities as a conservationist included serving on the board of the powerful Sierra Club from 1964 to 1968, a turbulent period during the Vietnam War and student protests. In controversies that divided the Club, Stegner sided with his friend the photographer Ansel Adams in opposing the Club radicals, who were uncompromising preservationists against all development. The younger radicals were part of the 1960s countercultural revolution against established authority. The Club director David Brower became a Captain Ahab of the far Left. Stegner lamented, “He has been bitten by the worm of power.... I fear any dictator, even an environmental one, and even when the dictator is myself.” He helped to force Brower to resign, saying later, “Those were the years when you saw bumper stickers up in the Sierra, you know, ‘Fuck the Sierra Club’.” Eventually, however, the radicals took over the Club. After the death of Stegner, they elected an eco-terrorist to their board of directors, the notorious Tom Watson, who had invented tree spiking, declared that earthworms are far more valuable than people and said of the attack on 9/11, “There is nothing wrong with being a terrorist, as long as you win.”

ENVIRONMENTALISM

Stegner differentiated between conservationists like himself and “preservationists,” the two competing philosophies within the Environmentalist movement that swept the country during the 1960s-70s: “There is among environmentalists a sentimental fringe, people who respond...with a blind preservationism in all circumstances. But you can’t do that. You manifestly can’t go that far, though it would be nice, visually and in other ways; people do have to live too. Some kind of compromise has to be made.” During the 1980s the “blind” took over the entire Environmentalist movement, bulldozing all opposition. They *did* go that far—and very much farther. Whereas Stegner advocated cooperation and compromise in a democratic process, respecting the needs of local people, the blind preservationists used propaganda and laws such as The Endangered Species Act—intended to *stop evolution!*--to impose their will on the majority through the courts, resulting in government policies that have put thousands of people out of work and are killing thousands of birds annually and burning up the national forests.

The blind preservationists also fueled the eco-terrorism of the late 20th century epitomized in Edward Abbey, who had been one of Stegner’s writing fellows in 1957-58. Academic environmentalists have failed to differentiate the teacher from the student, referring to Stegner, for example, as “the ancestor or predecessor of the next generation of people like Edward Abbey.” (Jackson J. Benson, *Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work*, 1998: 263) On the contrary, Stegner opposed violent radicalism, as in his biographical novel about Joe Hill in 1950. As he said later, “If revolutionaries would learn that they can’t remodel society by day after tomorrow—haven’t the wisdom to and shouldn’t be permitted to—I’d have more respect for them.” Stegner ran a professional writing program in which an applicant was considered “based on his work...regardless of whether he is a Martian or Communist or whatever.” It was a matter of integrity for him to “stay out of people’s way rather than get in it.”

Abbey the terrorist drank coffee from a Sierra Club mug. One of his fan websites declares, “The radical environmental movement resulted from the 1975 publication of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*.” The book inspired arson attacks and destruction of property all over the West that cost taxpayers millions of dollars. One edition of the novel is hyped in an introduction by actor Robert Redford. It got rave reviews from the liberal press, as in *The National Observer*: “It’ll make you want to go out and blow up a dam!” *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is a terrorist manual for environmentalists detailing how to blow things up, prophesying the destruction of an evil America symbolized in the plot by blowing up Glen Canyon Dam, which would

drown hundreds of people. In contrast, Stegner participated in the compromise that assented to Glen Canyon Dam in exchange for saving what is now the Dinosaur National Monument.

That his hero tosses his empty beer cans out the window of his vehicle littering the landscape is only a minor example of Abbey's self-indulgence. Throughout his novel he takes Atheist shots at Christians and Mormons; he groups Jesus with famous criminals; he repeatedly expresses a sneering contempt for other races, especially Mexicans and Indians; he believes women should have the same rights they had in the Pleistocene; and he merges sex with violence in pornographic scenes that degrade Senator Bella Abzug (called Bonnie Abzug) from New York as the embodiment of uppity feminism. In Thoreau there are many spiritual insights, in Abbey there are many erections. Abbey was a misogynist guru inspiring violent young males through the environmental movement to dominate women and regress to barbarism. He continues to be taught in universities by the blind preservationists.

Angle of Repose (1971)

Lyman Ward is a retired historian in California whose wife ran off with his doctor, leaving him confined to a wheelchair dying from disease with a partially amputated leg—a metaphor of his culture: “We have been cut off, the past has been ended and the family has broken up and the present is adrift in its wheelchair.” He says he has been “dismasted,” an allusion to Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, who never attains his goal in pursuing the Truth symbolized by the whale. Trying to attain an angle of repose, Lyman begins drafting a history of his grandparents, Oliver and Susan Burling Ward, pioneers who built his house in Grass Valley. He searches for the truth about them in their letters and papers and feeds the contents onto tapes, discovering a parallel between their marriage and his own. Past and present interpenetrate. Susan Ward was a genteel Victorian lady from New England who married a mining engineer, went West with him and became a popular story writer and illustrator, based on the career of the real Mary Hallock Foote. Disappointed by the business failures of her husband, she may have had an affair. She felt responsible for the suicide of her possible lover, the drowning of her daughter, and the lost trust of her husband and her son. The moral issue in both marriages is whether the husband will reconcile with an unfaithful wife. Lyman is the ward of traditional values who associates his wife's infidelity with the 1960s counterculture, embodied in his hippie secretary Shelley. The reductive politicizing of education is represented by Lyman's son Rodman, a sociologist who wants him to quit his work and go into a sanatorium. “Rodman, like most sociologists and most of his generation, was born without the sense of history.”

Stegner: “A novel which involves some pretty refined *eastern* characters who are going to have some of the refinement ground out of them.... It's a Willa Cather kind of theme.... It was the boomer husband and the nesting wife, although with variations in it and on a much higher social level.... I couldn't have been a Victorian gentlewoman without taking a lot of material out of the letters of Mary Hallock Foote... What really interests me is how two such unlike particles clung together, and under what strains, rolling downhill into their future until they reached the angle of repose where I knew them.... It occurred to me that maybe past and present could be linked together in the way that I had obviously been working toward for a long time.... Yes, it is the most ambitious book I have done, and maybe technically the most expert.”

Critics: “No one since John Steinbeck in his *Grapes of Wrath* produced a more remarkable work of fiction about the West; in several respects *Angle of Repose* represents the high point of the western novel since World War II.... The American West...is the product of two angles of repose—East and West, frontier and the Berkeley generation.” (Richard W. Etulain) “With a combination of impressionism and realism, and contrasting perspectives, this passage [Susan Ward standing over a mine] recalls the best of *Germinal* [Zola] or *Hard Times* [Dickens].” (Barnett Singer) Critics have also compared *Angle of Repose* to *Pale Fire* by Nabokov and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by Fowles. “What makes Stegner's method unique is that it combines with apparent ease a number of conventional modes which might not be expected to mix well.... While Fowles's readers are almost invariably aware of his pyrotechnics, Stegner's readers... willingly suspend their disbelief.” (Audrey C. Peterson)

“I was also fascinated by Stegner's mastery of technique in *Angle of Repose*, particularly his ability to employ, through the controlling intelligence of a first-person narrator, virtually every point of view known to exist, including stream of consciousness, first-person participant, first-person observer, second person,

third-person omniscient, and third-person limited. For me, *Angle of Repose* was a breakthrough novel in terms of point of view, in its own way as important as Joyce's *Ulysses*, although I could see that it was principally from Faulkner and James, not Joyce, that Stegner had learned to do what he was doing. So far as I could tell, not even John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, or John Fowles had exploited meta-fictional techniques as masterfully as Stegner had. He was really...playing the fashionable techniques...against themselves by sticking to the 'old fashioned' virtues of realism." (James R. Hepworth)

WOMEN

Henry James had an exceptional appreciation of women for a male writer, but he never married. The only major American male writer who compares to Stegner in his appreciation of women and the happiness of his marriage is Hawthorne. According to the feminist critic Melody Graulich, "In *Angle of Repose* he is an insightful and pioneering feminist critic. In the years following 1971 dozens of feminist scholars would follow his lead: They would rediscover 'minor' women writers, argue for their significance, explore their artistic dilemmas, and define marriage as a crucial theme of late-nineteenth-century women's literature." (*Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer*, ed. Charles E. Rankin, 1996) Stegner transcended gender, having said once, "Women sometimes ask me, 'How do you know so much about women?' I don't know anything about women. I'm writing about people... I don't want to dismiss the sexes or dismantle them. I just don't want to choose between them." Overall, he saw the 1960s sexual revolution going on around him as harmful: "I have been disturbed for the last twenty years by what the sexual revolution has done to marriage and family life. It has been a disaster for children, and it may even be—in the guise of freedom—a disaster for individuals, married individuals."

Mary Stegner proved to be an ideal wife to a writer for almost 60 years, comparable in her talents and influence to Sophia Hawthorne. She was a fellow intellectual and artist who played violin with several groups including the Stanford Orchestra. She also played the piano and served with Stegner as a West Coast editor for Houghton Mifflin, often doing most of the editing. Her marital relationship was comparable to that between Ruth and her husband Joe in *All the Little Live Things* (1967), particularly in serving as a moral guide and in restraining the excesses of her husband. Joe and Ruth are also the main characters in *The Spectator Bird* (1977). Likewise in *Crossing to Safety* (1987), the wife Sally and the husband Larry resemble the Stegners. Sally has polio and Larry cares for her with sensitive loyalty. Mary Stegner suffered through frequent illnesses during her marriage and had 8 operations.

Stegner's father George deserted his mother during her final illness. It was Wallace who had cared for his dying mother and throughout his marriage he cared for Mary with the same devotion, while in public casting himself as the great beneficiary, saying that she "has planted and tended ideas in my head, has guarded my health and my working hours, has made me go back and improve the manuscripts I brought her looking for praise, and who remains the principal reason why I go on putting words on paper and taking an interest in a world that I am often inclined to disavow in disgust."

The Spectator Bird (1977)

Now almost 70 years old, Joe confesses to his wife Ruth that he once fell in love with an impoverished countess they befriended years before while they were visiting Denmark. They were "innocents abroad" and the novel revives the "international theme" of Henry James, contrasting Americans with Europeans. Described by one critic as a sophisticated literary version of "gothic romance," the story has been compared to James's *The Turn of the Screw*. The Stegners visited Denmark in 1954 and Wallace had been incubating this novel ever since, perhaps most of all in order to prove that he was not merely a "regionalist." Joe kept a journal and Ruth persuades him to read it aloud to her so they might deal with past events that have been a hidden barrier in their marriage. The device of the journal brings past into present as the letters do in *Angle of Repose*, creating effects through the manipulation or "syncopation" of time.

Crossing to Safety (1987)

"I didn't write *Crossing to Safety* as a novel [but] as a memoir. I was just trying to get some friends of ours down where I could understand them. It turned out to be a novel because I invented a whole lot more

than I intended. I was going to do that one right straight from life, but I can't do that. I'm not to be trusted with life; I keep inventing it.... But it was, really, in a way that no book of mine ever has been, an attempt to tell the absolute, unvarnished truth about other people and myself." Pure Realism. Reversing the westward movement, he takes a western couple to New England, "creating an allegory of East versus West and much that was typical of each. It is a bit like the contrast in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* between Gatsby and the Buchanans, East Egg and West Egg." (Benson, *Stegner*, 402) The book is another rebuttal to the New York critics who called him a "regionalist." The two couples, the Morgans (West) and the Langs (East), become close friends. Traditional gender roles are reversed as Sid Lang is a poet (heart) and Charity Lang is totally rational (head). This is the most poetic of Stegner's 12 novels, admired in particular for psychological insight, magnificent descriptions, beautiful prose, wisdom, and affirmation of humane values—family, friendship, generosity, empathy, and love.

REALISM

Stegner explains, "It began deep in the romanticism of the beginning of the nineteenth century; it ended, or was seriously modified, in the naturalism and symbolism of the beginning of the twentieth [Modernism].... The characteristic rebellion of realism, first against the aristocratic, romantic, and sentimental, and later against narrow and limiting Victorian conventions of art and morals, is present in James much more than in Howells.... Even in Howells, realism was an approximation.... Despite Howells' contention that novels should deal with the commonplace and not the catastrophic, 'three plots turn on train wrecks, three on fires; two characters are removed by brain fever, a number by sudden sickness; two commit suicide with poison; one hero is shot, another knocked down by a horsecar, and two others killed by locomotives.' His own theories bound him tighter than he was content to be bound.... Realism set limitations upon the ways in which observed details might be *arranged*. It set a high value upon scientific detachment and objectivity; it prohibited a writer from warping his materials to the service of a thesis or a sentiment.... Realist implied a preference for the ordinary events, the observable characters, the real places, as against the heroic, the bizarre, the exotic, the spectacular.... If fiction is going to be successful, Henry James has said, it depends helplessly on that sense of reality....

I write about ordinarily decent people... If I succeed, I get the tone and the quality of mind that will persuade a reader to see and hear a real and credible human being.... It's obvious they're based on real people.... I wouldn't be capable of making anyone up except as a cartoon. But a character in depth, meant to be in the round, is going to be taken from people I've known, sometimes from two or three combined, but clearly from real people. Obviously, what feeds my imagination is observed reality.... I don't see any reason to avoid reality. In fact, I see a lot of reasons to make maximum use of it.... I do believe...that literature is the imitation of life, and I like to keep my categories recognizable.... I wanted [my] fictions to be recognizable and true to the ordinary perception...and I thought I could best achieve that aim with a method that was direct and undistorted....

Fiction ought to be concerned with the perception of truth, the attempt to get at the concerns of the human heart.... People's experiences are very different. But their feelings are alike.... The whole business of writing is an attempt to arrive at truth insofar as you can see it, so far as your capacity to unearth it permits.... In fiction we should have no agenda except to try to be truthful.... I would...define the novel as Stendhal did, as a mirror in the roadway.... To some extent, Hemingway's intention—to say how it was."

AESTHETICS

"Truth is to be handled gingerly.... I had a theory that strong emotions should be approached obliquely and not talked about [as in Hemingway].... There ought to be a poet submerged in every novelist.... All art is synecdoche, according to Frost.... I don't think fiction should really have proselytizing as its purpose.... You have to deal with the supernatural as a motivation and a belief, but...I think you'd be wise to suppress your belief.... I have come to think point of view the most important basic problem in the writing of fiction.... I think more circularly than linearly. I don't think there are beginnings and destinations so much as circles which end by closing the circle and starting over again [Modernist]....

A book should build like music.... It's compression, and it's space, intensity and opening up, quick passages and slow, loud and soft. You gain by contrast and the anticipation it creates. You gain through a deliberate artistic delay in the slow passages because nobody reading can avoid expecting that sooner or later something's going to happen. You build a very low voltage suspense.... The qualities of character, the machinery of suspense and climax, of mounting action and falling action: I don't think we've seen anything new in that way.... There may be a number of kinds of short stories, but all demand an intense concision and economy, and all must somehow achieve a satisfying sense of finality.... The work of art is not a gem, as some schools of criticism would insist, but truly a lens. We look through it for the purified and honestly offered spirit of the artist."

Realism in the late 19th century—most obviously in the fiction and criticism of Howells--was informed by aesthetic values of Neoclassicism traditional since ancient Greece and Rome—such as order, intellect, logic, accuracy, clarity, social utility, restraint, and good taste. Stegner is Neoclassical as a scholar, professor, historian, and biographer, lamenting, "The principles of restraint, proportion, and a wide representation of all kinds of life—the principles I have tried to live and write by—have all been overtaken and overwhelmed." In fiction he is fundamentally a Realist because his intention is above all to convey the truth accurately and clearly. Out of Realism grew Naturalism and Impressionism, both of which informed Modernism in the early 20th century. Stegner's fiction is rich in Naturalist themes and Impressionist similes and effects. He is as prolific in creating metaphors as Fitzgerald in *Gatsby*.

The great aesthetic achievement of Wallace Stegner is maintaining the unity and momentum of a clear Realistic story line while also using Modernist techniques such as multiple points of view, non-linear narrative, circularity, and the interpenetration of past and present. Modernists give Art a higher priority than the "ordinary perception" of the reader, as Faulkner does frequently and Hemingway rarely--as in *In Our Time* (1925). Stegner gives the "ordinary perception" of the reader a higher priority than Art, making his complex fiction accessible to the general public--the antithesis of Postmodernist aesthetics, which seem to be all technique: "I don't really aspire to write a novel which can be read backwards as well as forward, which turns chronology on its head and has no continuity and no narrative, which, in effect, tries to create a novel by throwing all the pieces in the bag and shaking the bag."

Stegner also had an aversion to preconceived symbolism. "The self-conscious Hawthornian kind of allegory is something that has never appealed to me. It seems to me meaning ought to arise spontaneously, just as things cast a shadow in the sun." His images emerge inductively from concrete experience in the natural and social worlds rather than from concepts—as in Thoreau as opposed to Emerson. His organic creative process is in the literary tradition of Romanticism, complementing his Neoclassicism. As in Henry James, his main characters are often such representative human types they tend to enact social allegories. Arranged in archetypal patterns enhanced by allusions and parallels to myths, his images and names and actions tend to form a Realistic allegory of symbols—the most complex and resonant form of fiction. "I fully believe in form as discovery," he said.

TOO MANY AWARDS TO COUNT

During the last years of his life he traveled with Mary, gave speeches, and accepted awards. "The only thing that makes civilization go forward," he said, "is the responsibility of individuals... All of us have the obligation somehow to have some kind of concern for the species, for the culture, for the larger thing outside of ourselves." His health declined but he maintained a busy schedule by ignoring pain. After he published *Crossing to Safety* in 1987, for example, he returned from two weeks in Morocco tired and ill. Yet he went ahead and gave a reading and book-signing at the famous Politics and Prose bookstore in Washington, D.C., where the crowd packed the space and loudspeakers were set up outside on the street so the overflow audience could hear him.

By 1989 a disintegrating hip had become so painful he had to limp to walk. Eventually he had the hip replaced and during recovery he refused to use a cane. He worked hard to learn how to walk without limping, but then pain in his back got so severe he could no longer do any work. He also contracted a very painful blood disease, polynalgia, and had to take cortisone that bloated his face. Yet he kept fulfilling his

commitments. In 1992, at the inauguration of a chair in history named after him at Montana State University, he got fifteen minutes into a speech before collapsing onstage with intestinal flu.

DEATH

In March 1993 the Stegners traveled to Santa Fe, New Mexico to accept an award from a booksellers association. They spent an evening with friends and were returning to where they were staying. Wallace was driving a rental car in an unfamiliar city. He climbed a hill to an intersection with the main highway and stopped. He was not able to see a car approaching along the highway from the left until he had already pulled out from the stop sign. The speeding car hit them broadside--crushing the door panel into Stegner! Cars pulled over and stopped along the highway.

According to biographer Jackson J. Benson, Mary was unhurt but Wallace was in shock and bleeding profusely. A nurse appeared and gave her cape to Mary to cover Wallace. It took an unusually long time for an ambulance to arrive. He may have had a premonition of his death, or else this passage from *All the Little Live Things* (1967) is at least a remarkable coincidence: "I brooded about that, trying to imagine how it would feel to conduct your life as if you were driving soberly, carefully, well within the speed limit and in accordance with all the traffic laws, toward an intersection already in sight, where you knew a crazy drunk out of control was going to hit you head on. It is no good to say we all conduct our lives that way: most of us can't see the intersection, and so can pretend it isn't there."

Mary rode along in the ambulance while medics cut off his clothes and worked to reduce his bleeding. All his ribs on the left side were broken, his collarbone was broken, and one lung had collapsed. His first words to Mary in the hospital the morning after the accident were, "How could I have done this to you?" As soon as he was moved out of the Intensive Care Unit, he got up out of bed and started walking around. However, by the third day afterward he had contracted pneumonia, then he had a heart attack and a possible stroke. His last words were to his doctors: "Do what you have to do." According to his wishes, his ashes were spread near his summer cottage in Vermont.

Michael Hollister (2014)

"TOO REALISTIC"

"Since in Stegner's work neither style, method, nor form is exotic, doctrinaire, distorted, violent, or romantic, and since none of his fiction depends upon myth, symbol, current psychology, or neo-theology, what is there to write about, teach about, or talk about? These characteristics...have tended to leave him invisible to cults and coteries."

Robert Canzoneri

"Wallace Stegner: Trial by Existence"

The Southern Review IX New Series (October 1973) 796

"Many critics, I think, are lukewarm toward Stegner for reasons not easily dealt with in a review of conventional length: stylistic matters. They find his prose correct but not inspired. He seems to them too much in the realistic stream of American fiction, controlled and rational. True, Stegner cannot be called an innovative stylist like Faulkner or Nabokov (though I find his prose, on the whole, every bit as fresh and vivid as that of Bellow, Malamud, Updike, or Barth)."

Kerry Ahearn

"*The Big Rock Candy Mountain and Angle of Repose*: Trial and Culmination"

Western American Literature (Spring 1975) 11-27

"OUR GREATEST NON-CELEBRITY AUTHOR"

"He had several things in common with Steinbeck: they were Westerners, they were known for their integrity, they had a strong sense of place and a concern for the environment, and they had both either been looked down upon or ignored by the Eastern intellectual press. Like Steinbeck, Stegner was a world-class author who had been largely overlooked by the academic critics.

Until his death in the spring of 1993, Wallace Stegner had been for several decades one of a half-dozen of America's most accomplished writers. He won nearly every major award given to a writer except the Nobel Prize. His books have, on occasion, sold several hundred thousand copies, and they continue to sell—nearly all of his books [35] are in print. He has been the kind of novelist who has absolutely devoted fans, who has been the favorite author of thousands of readers, and who, at the same time, has been generally recognized by reviewers and those in the book trade as a 'serious' writer who has made a significant contribution to American letters. During the last decade of his life, in any bookstore in the country where he went for a signing, there were long lines waiting for him; when he gave a talk or a reading, he could pack an auditorium with people anxious to see and hear him....

Stegner was famous, but he never became a national media celebrity. While he surpassed many of his contemporaries in the breadth of his work and in depth of vision, he has never achieved the superstar status accorded to the likes of Norman Mailer, John Updike, or Eudora Welty. He has been, perhaps, the greatest of our non-celebrity authors—a status that has been a matter of regret to both him and his admirers.... It was painful for him when his Pulitzer Prize- and National Book Award-winning books weren't reviewed by *The New York Times Book Review*, and although he was a man of generous spirit, it may well have hurt him that some of his students, such as Ken Kesey and Larry McMurtry, became better known than he while, arguably, they accomplished less in the breadth and quality of their work....

None of Stegner's novels has ever been turned into a motion picture.... Nor did he ever appear on the cover of *Time* or *Newsweek*, an occasion that alone seems to explain the promotion of the relatively obscure (except to readers of *The New Yorker*) John Cheever to national prominence.... On one occasion when Stegner's *Wolf Willow* was shunted in a brief notice to the back pages of *The New York Times Book Review*, the lengthy front-page review was not devoted to an original work, but a compilation of the letters of Oscar Wilde. More recently, *The New York Times Book Review* printed its review of *Crossing to Safety*, Stegner's last novel, on page fourteen. Would a book of this quality (Doris Grumbach's review praised it inordinately) by any other recipient of the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award have been accorded such treatment? Can one imagine Mailer, even with a bad novel, thrust into the back pages?"

Jackson J. Benson
Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work
(Viking 1996) ix, 1-2

