SUMMARIES

24 BOOKS BY WALLACE STEGNER

T. H. Watkins

[Adapted slightly] All books are presented in the order in which they were published. Most are still in print, in various editions; check with your local library or bookstore for their availability.

Remembering Laughter (1937)

This novel, Stegner's first, was winner of a Novelette Contest sponsored by the publisher [Little, Brown], though it first appeared in *Redbook* magazine as "a novelette complete in one issue." Described by James Hilton (author of *Good-Bye Mr. Chips*) as "A simply told and moving story," *Remembering Laughter* recreates a tale passed down through the family of Stegner's wife, Mary: A New England farmer falls in love with his wife's sister, who lives with the couple, largely because of their shared joy in laughter. They have an affair, and the sister bears his son. The two sisters and the husband quickly contrive a story to cover the appearance of the child (the mother, they let it be understood, had an affair with a farm-hand who is secretly paid to return to his homeland of Norway). The family lives out the lie grimly for the rest of the boy's childhood and young manhood. The only laughter in all those years is remembered laughter.

The Potter's House (1938)

This long story was published only in a "fine arts" edition of 490 copies and is extremely difficult to attain. The narrative presents the story of a deaf couple and their children and is told from the point of view of the father. It is presented in a kind of experimental form in which Stegner uses no auditory images whatever, only visual. It is an even more mournful tale than *Remembering Laughter*, made even more so when the mother, an alcoholic, ultimately leaves the potter to raise his children alone.

On a Darkling Plain (1940)

This novel was serialized in *Redbook* magazine as "Clash by Night." Both *Remembering Laughter* and *The Potter's House* were written from borrowed or imagined experience. *On a Darkling Plain* is Stegner's first attempt to make a novel directly out of his own experience. Set on the Saskatchewan High Plains where he spent his childhood years, the novel draws upon his memory for its descriptive images and evocation of place--the sweep of the landscape, the feel of the winter, the character of life the land dictated--much as he did later, though to better effect, in *Wolf Willow*. The novel tells the story of an embittered World War I veteran who is forced out of a self-imposed emotional isolation from his community by the great flu epidemic of 1918 and all the death it brings. (The epidemic, which Stegner witnessed, though escaped personally, also plays a part in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*.)

Fire and Ice (1941)

The setting for this strange, unStegnerian cautionary tale is an unnamed university, but probably is meant to suggest the University of Wisconsin, where Stegner taught for a time. Paul Condon, the protagonist, is an arrogant, unpleasant, highly irritating student, an active Communist who rails against the capitalist system and rich people in general and in the end acts out his frustration and anger by attempting to rape a rich sorority girl who has treated him with disdain. Stunned by the depths of his own anger, he then takes to the road to find himself. As a character as self-involved as he is almost entirely insensitive to others, Condon would be echoed again in both Sabrina Castro of *A Shooting Star* (though she is depicted with a great deal more sympathy by her maker) and Jim Peck, the altogether repellent bad boy of *All the Little Live Things* (see below).

Mormon Country (1942)

Mormon Country, a blend of folklore, personal experience, and history, was Stegner's first non-fiction book (excepting his 24-page booklet, *Clarence Dutton: An Appraisal*, based on his Ph.D thesis and published by the University of Utah Press in 1935 in a limited edition). The book was one in a series of regional histories being selected by Erskine Caldwell and issued by Duell, Sloan and Pierce under the "American Folkways" rubric. Other titles in the series included *Desert Country* by Edwin Corle and *Short Grass Country* by Stanley Vestal.

The book tells of the settlement of the Colorado Plateau by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons), from the occupation of the valley of the Great Salt Lake in 1847 and the "diaspora" of settlement in the 1850s that ultimately carried Mormons nearly to the sea at San Bernardino in California, to the era of statehood and resulting political, economic, and religious confrontation with the gentiles. Throughout, he examines the cultural values of the Mormons with a clear but generally sympathetic eye, sometimes seeming to lament, even while admitting the inevitability of it, the gradual dilution of the powerful communal ties that held the Saints together. He also anticipates the future, hinting at an age to come in which the character of the land and its beauty would become as important as whatever it might hold of exploitable resources: "Another age, with different values from the age in which the Mormon Country was first settled, is likely to find in that country much more than the Mormons found, certainly more than the Gentiles who went through it like a high wind. It is a good country to look at, and with the initial hardships out of the way a good country to live in."

The Big Rock Candy Mountain (1943)

This sprawling epic of a novel inspired novelist Sinclair Lewis in *The Saturday Review of Literature* to describe Stegner as one of the most promising young writers in America. While not entirely autobiographical (Stegner changed chronology and circumstance to fit his artistic purposes), it is solidly based on personal experience, tracing his family's movements as Bo Mason (the fictive equivalent of Stegner's father, George) drags his wife Elsa and his two sons, Bruce and Chet, all over the West, from North Dakota to Washington to Saskatchewan to Utah in search of opportunities that forever elude him. That search and the constant geographical mobility it required becomes one of the major themes of the book, demonstrating the transient character of people who have become seduced by the West's everlasting promise of "a big rock candy mountain" somewhere--and of the emotional and psychological havoc that kind of instability can produce in a family.

Unlike most of his novels, the point of view in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* shifts from character to character at various times in the book. But the individual who finally emerges as the dominant "voice" of the novel is Bruce, who clearly is Stegner himself and who serves as the means by which Stegner works his way through the other great theme of the novel: the relationship between fathers and sons, which in Stegner's case was bitter, sometimes violent, always unpredictable, and emotionally damaging to the son. Described by Howard Mumford Jones as a "vast, living, untidy book," *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*--not unlike the novels of Thomas Wolfe (though Stegner's is much better crafted and controlled than anything Wolfe ever wrote)--has a raw power that almost certainly comes straight out of Stegner's pain and love, and it contains some of the most beautifully written narrative passages in American literature.

One Nation (1945)

In March 1944, Stegner accepted an assignment from *Look* magazine to travel around the country and produce a series of articles examining prejudice in America. He spent time among blacks, Jews, Indians, Filipinos, Mexican-Americans, Japanese-Americans, Catholics, as well as among bigots who despised such people as not being truly "American." The portrait that emerged as Stegner sent along his stuff was so relentlessly honest, however, that it frightened the editors of *Look*. They finally decided it would be more politic to summarize Stegner's work into a single article, rather than let the story come out week after week in a steady drumroll exposing the cankers of racism and bigotry that still lay at the heart of democracy. Some of the unpublished material showed up in other magazines, however, including *The Atlantic*, and all of it was gathered together in *One Nation* and published in September 1945; ironically, Stegner had to

share the byline with "the editors of *Look*." The book won the Life-in-America Award and shared the Ainsfield-Wolf Award for the best book of the year on race relations, not least for statements like this: "None of us is so different from the classic Southerner, the unreconstructed Johnny Reb. The germs of prejudice are as common as those of tuberculosis.... So long as the average American permits himself the apparently harmless indulgence of cussing the Jews or damning the Catholics or feeling superior to the Negroes or taking out his hatred and fear of Japan on Americans of Japanese parentage, the hard and durable spore of all the worst kinds of bigotry is preserved, and can be watered and tended and fertilized by fanatics."

Second Growth (1947)

A montage of three linked stories set in the fictional village of Westwick, New Hampshire, *Second Growth* was based on what Stegner observed in Greensboro, Vermont, a little town that would be he and his wife's summer residence for most of their lives. The stories relate the progress of three main characters--a young man with a scandalous family background (not unlike Stegner's own) who manages to escape to college (not unlike Stegner); a repressed and unhappy young woman who is seduced by a lesbian friend, with terrible consequences; and a Jewish couple who is kept on the fringes of local society by the kind of prejudice that Stegner exposed in *One Nation*. While Stegner disguised most of the characters fairly well, the Jewish couple in particular was quite real and remained close to the Stegners for decades, and the novel inspired a great deal of gossip and resentment among many Greensboro folk. Stegner probably anticipated the response, for the book includes an elaborate "Note on Fictional Character" that declares, among other things, that "The making of fiction entails the creation of places and persons with all the seeming of reality, and these places and persons, no matter how a writer tries to invent them, must be made up piece-meal from sublimations of his own experience.... In that sense, and in that sense only, the people and village of this story are taken from life."

The Women on the Wall (1950)

This was Stegner's first of three collections (see below) of short stories, most of them written and published between 1938 and 1948 in such magazines as *Redbook*, *Atlantic*, *Scribner's*, *Collier's*, *Harper's*, and *Cosmopolitan*. Stegner is less well known today for his short stories, but in the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s he was well recognized as a master of the form. His work appeared regularly in *The Best American Short Stories* issued each year, as well as in the *O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories* collections (for which he would receive both first and second prizes during the course of his career). He finally gave up short fiction after the 1950s, both because the markets for his brand of story-telling were beginning to dry up and because, as he told interviewer Richard Etulain, "I think short stories are a young man's racket, most of the time--the way lyric poetry is.... You get longer and windier as you grow older, maybe because you have more to say, but maybe also because you have more time to say it in."

The Preacher and the Slave (1950)

This novel is based on the life of Joe Hill (Joseph Hillstrom), the legendary songwriter and union organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a radical and sometimes violent labor union that had its greatest impact among the unorganized masses of western laboring men--hard rock miners, migrant farm workers, waterfront workers, lumberjacks, and the like. Hill was the union's troubadour (one of many, actually, since songs were a major part of the labor movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) and became its martyr when he was tried and convicted of a robbery-murder charge and executed by the State of Utah in 1915.

Stegner, like many of his generation in the West, had grown up hearing about the "Wobblies" and their exploits, and the subject of the movement's most enduring hero proved irresistible. "I had a certain remote connection with Joe Hill," Stegner told Richard Etulain, "because I'd lived in Salt Lake, where he was jailed and executed. I used to take out the daughter of the warden of the State Pen when I was about a freshman in college...so that I knew the old State Pen on Twenty-First South pretty well. We used to go through the back end of it, through the pig farm that they maintained there, and hook rides on the…[Rio Grande Railroad] going up Parley's Canyon, to go up camping. So the place of Joe Hill's end was all familiar territory, and the more I read about Joe Hill, the more it seemed that I had some kind of natural

interest in him." The character of Hill as portrayed in the novel--a natural songster, sometimes violent, a womanizer, a drifter, a loner--has been compared on occasion to that of Stegner's father, and there are enough similarities to make the connection valid, I think.

The Writer in America (1952)

In 1951, the Rockefeller Foundation asked Stegner to spend some time in Asia as a kind of "cultural ambassador" (a role he would later play for the State Department as well). While in Japan, Stegner delivered a series of lectures on American literature at Keio University in Tokyo. These were edited slightly by Stegner, then published as *The Writer in America* in Japan and later, as noted above, in this country--in an edition almost as hard to get as *The Potter's House*. One of the Japanese writers whom Stegner came to admire greatly was novelist Yosunari Kawabata, some of whose work Stegner arranged to have published in *The Atlantic Monthly*. They maintained a regular correspondence until Kawabata's suicide in 1972. Another tidbit from the 1951 Asian trip: while in Cairo, young Page Stegner came down with a terrible case of typhoid, and that experience became the basis for Stegner's powerful short story, "The City of the Living" (see below).

Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West (1954)

Not only considered Stegner's greatest work of non-fiction, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* is one of the handful of histories utterly necessary to an understanding of the Western story--and of nineteenth century America, for that matter. It is, on one level, the definitive biography of Powell's career as a government man. And some career it was. The one-armed Major (he lost his right arm at the Battle of Shiloh during the Civil War) was head of the Geographical and Geological Survey of the Plateau Province, during which he and his men made the first Colorado River run through the Grand Canyon in 1869, an adventure Powell chronicled in one of the few government books in history to have become a best-seller: *Exploration of the Colorado River of the West and Its Tributaries*, published in 1875. The geological and anthropological studies that emerged from the Plateau Province survey were some of the most important ever done in the region. The Major wrote the legislation that established the U.S. Geological Survey and the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology in 1879. Powell had himself appointed head of the Bureau of Ethnology and held that position until his death in 1902; and, after the Geological Survey's first director, Clarence King, resigned in 1881, Powell took over that agency, too, heading it until his own resignation in the 1890s.

All of this is told with the clarity and narrative skill one would expect from Stegner, but it is in his discussion of Powell's revolutionary ideas about western land and land use that Stegner's biography becomes essential. Briefly stated, Powell would have turned traditional American land use on its head, pointing out that the central fact of the West beyond the Hundred Meridian was its aridity and that fact could not be ignored if western settlement was to proceed in a rational manner. He would have instituted a regional approach to settlement, one that would ensure equal access to all available water, and then only after lands and resources had been carefully mapped and classified as to their most productive use. This would have meant removing for a considerable period of time most of the unsettled and unexploited lands of the West from development under any of the existing land laws, of course, and when Powell published his ideas in his 1878 *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States*, its lessons were studiously ignored and Powell himself castigated regularly by the Western boomers and boosters who dominated the social and economic life of the region--in and out of Congress. When he first read *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, Secretary Bruce Babbitt has said, "it was as though someone had thrown a rock through the window. Stegner showed us the limitations of aridity and the need for human institutions to respond in a cooperative way. He provided me in that moment with a way of thinking about the American West, the importance of finding true partnership between human beings and the land."

This is Dinosaur: Echo Park Country and Its Magic Rivers (1955)

In 1950, the Department of the Interior announced that its Bureau of Reclamation was planning to build two dams in Dinosaur National Monument, a national park unit that spills across the Colorado-Utah border. Both dams would have flooded major portions of the monument in defiance of the *National Park Organic Act of 1916*, which declared that national parks and monuments were to be preserved "in such manner and

by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." The proposal electrified the nascent environmental movement, particularly the Wilderness Society under Howard Zahniser and the Sierra Club under David Brower. As a weapon against the idea, Brower conceived what might be called the first environmental "battle book" of the modern era, a collection of essays and photographs that would be placed on the desk of every senator and congressman in the Congress so that they could see for themselves what it was the Bureau of Reclamation proposed to destroy. Brower turned to Philip Hyde for the color and black-and-white photographs, to Alfred A. Knopf, an avid conservationist, to publish the book for nothing, and to Wallace Stegner to edit the thing, covering the history, geology, paleontology, natural history, recreational value, and scenic importance of the monument. Stegner wrote the introductory chapter and edited the rest, and authored all the descriptive captions as well. The book was produced at breakneck speed in 1955 and is largely credited with playing a major role in the congressional decision to kill the two dam proposals in 1956.

It was the beginning of Stegner's on-again, off-again personal commitment to conservation activism. His own chapter also hinted at things to come from the Stegnerian typewriter: "We live in the Antibiotic Age, and Antibiotic means literally 'against life.' We had better not be against life. That is the way to become as extinct as the dinosaurs.... [We] need as much wilderness as can still be saved. There isn't much left, and there is no more where the old open spaces come from.... The vital wilderness, the essential hoarded living-space, the open and the green and the quiet, might not survive the bulldozer."

The City of the Living and Other Stories (1956)

This is Stegner's second collection of short stories, most of which first appeared in *Harper's Magazine*. The collection includes two of his best known and most anthologized tales, "The Blue-Winged Teal" and "The Traveler," as well as a story long enough to be called a novella: "Field Guide to the Western Birds"--in which Joe Allston, the protagonist of both *All the Little Live Things* and *The Spectator Bird* (see below), makes his first appearance.

A Shooting Star (1961)

Inarguably the most difficult novel he ever wrote, *A Shooting Star* was revised many times in its first draft and completely rewritten in its second--and revised again. "I am stuck cold and dead in the novel I'm working on," he wrote his friend, writer Frank O'Connor, in 1956, "and have wasted three weeks, and I am tempted every day to take out in bricklaying the energy I should apply to the god damned typewriter...." He was never certain that he succeeded in saving the book from what he feared was a terminal case of soap opera, as he once told me. Sabrina Castro, the protagonist of this, Stegner's first attempt at a "California" novel, is spoiled, hopelessly self-involved, possibly addicted to both booze and pills, and lost in a sea of privilege, while her brother, Oliver, a real estate developer, seeks new ways to wreck the green hills of the Peninsula south of San Francisco and her grandmother wanders in and out of the corridors of the past. In the end, Sabrina achieves a kind of hard redemption which rescues the novel--as does Stegner's ever-sharp eye for narrative detail and character. The novel is particularly interesting, too, for the fact that Sabrina's opposition to her brother's development schemes parallels Stegner's own involvement at about the same time with the Committee for the Green Foothills, which attempted to save open space in the hills above Palo Alto from precisely the kinds of fictional wreckage brother Oliver had in mind.

Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier (1962)

Wolf Willow is set in the great sweep of high plains that lies in Saskatchewan just north of the Montana border. At its center--and at the center of Stegner's memory--is the village he chooses to call Whitemud in order not to make the citizens of Eastend, the actual town, too uncomfortable. The book expresses what may be Stegner's most profound sensitivity to the landscape to be found in any of his books (and that is saying a great deal). He somehow manages to evoke time and place coherently through three entirely different genres--history, memoir, and fiction--in a nearly seamless evocation. In each of these forms the poetry of landscape ornaments the whole long tapestry of the book, whether Stegner is telling of the region's history, recalling his family's typically painful experiences as homesteaders, or giving the terrible winter of 1906-07 the form of enduring fiction. (I cheerfully submit that "Genesis" and "Carrion Spring," the two stories that encompass that winter, are the two greatest stories ever written about the true nature of

ranching and cowboying in the West.) This was a place whose sights, sounds, and smells (especially the smell of the riverbank shrub called wolf willow) were imprinted so firmly on Stegner's young mind that he carried them into manhood as part of his spiritual and intellectual baggage. It was the place that gave him the love of the natural world that would illuminate so much of his life's work and move him to become one of the environmental movement's most eloquent and effective witnesses against the land's desecration.

The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail (1964)

Having found a home in Salt Lake City--the place to which his family moved when he was entering his teens and the place where be first achieved a degree of self esteem and self-identification as an individual--Stegner became eternally fascinated with the Mormons. Much of that fascination was reflected in Mormon Country (see above) and is revealed once again in *The Gathering of Zion*. The book is an admirably lucid and often moving narrative of the trek of the Mormon people from Nauvoo, Illinois, to the valley of the Great Salt Lake in 1847 under the leadership of the hardheaded and wonderfully determined Brigham Young. After the initial settlement of the valley in 1847, the story goes on to include the extraordinary tale of the "handcart pioneers" of the 1850s, those brave souls--many of them immigrants who had converted to Mormonism in their native lands--who literally walked from the jumping-off points on the Missouri River to the new land of Deseret on the western side of the Wasatch Range, pulling and pushing everything they owned across all the rocks and hard places. It is a straightforward and cohesive story, but not without some Stegnerian ambivalence concerning the Mormons themselves. Clearly, he admires their gumption, their sense of community, their dedication to organization in the face of a difficult task. "They were the most systematic, organized, disciplined, and successful pioneers in our history," Stegner writes in his introduction to the book. At the same time, he notes that they displayed the "normal amount of human cussedness, vengefulness, masochism, backbiting, violence, ignorance, selfishness, and gullibility" common to the species and that the theocracy the Mormons erected in the heart of the Rocky Mountain region fed on the paranoia that its persecution in the 1830s and 1840s had produced, creating a society whose rigidity made it prone to intolerance and even cruelty.

All the Little Live Things (1967)

When someone tells me that they have never read anything by Stegner, I usually tell them to start with this novel about Joe Allston, the retired literary agent ruminating through his golden years in a California hilltop house not unlike the home which Stegner and his wife made in the hills above Palo Alto and lived in for forty-five years. Allston is such an attractively intelligent, wry, and observant character that I find him irresistible as a narrator. At the same time, there is considerable emotional depth here, too, for Allston has been left on shaky psychological grounds after the death of their only child, a son whom he cannot believe he ever fully understood and must have failed in some essential way. Into this emotional mix comes a young couple who have just moved into the neighborhood and whom Allston and his wife befriend. The wife, they soon learn, is dying of breast cancer--the disease that killed Stegner's mother and one which had killed four close women friends of the Stegners in a single year in the 1960s--"one after another," he remembered, "all relatively young women in their forties."

The story of Marian, the dying woman, and her paradoxically powerful commitment to life--"all the little live things"--a constant counterpoint to Allston's recurrent pessimism, provides a powerful frame on which to hang the narrative. More complications for Allston arise when Jim Peck, as bad a boy as the pixilated Sixties could produce, takes up residence in a patch of tangled chaparral owned by the Allstons and his rudeness, selfishness, half-baked hippy philosophies, pot-smoking, unabashed sexuality, and random acts of stupidity prove a constant source of irritation to Joe's old-world sensibilities. (Peck sort of "walked into it by accident and became a rather half-witted principle of Evil," Stegner remembered.) The book is literate, witty, at times gracious and at times harsh, but always honest, and Stegner wraps up the whole chronicle in a denouement that can leave a reader on his knees in tears. Allston and his wife Ruth were re-created in *The Spectator Bird* (see below), another tale with terrific emotional power, and he remains for me one of the most durable and appealing characters in fiction.

The Sound of Mountain Water (1969)

This first collection of Stegner's non-fiction articles and essays is notable for a number of things, including several essays on the character, quality, and history of writings about the West--especially "History, Myth, and the Western Writer," a work that first appeared in *The American West*, a magazine of which he was Editor in Chief for about a year. Even more significant, however, is that *The Sound of Mountain Water* offers a kind of journey of awareness, as Stegner shows us how his environmentalist perspective developed between "The Rediscovery of America: 1946," which includes a celebration of Hoover Dam, and "Glen Canyon Submersus," a mid-Sixties lament for the glory that had disappeared beneath Lake Powell. Here are found some of his earliest and best conservation writings, among them the famous "Coda: Wilderness Letter," in which Stegner produced perhaps the most familiar and best-loved "wilderness" passage since Henry David Thoreau's "In Wildness is the preservation of the World"--"We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope."

Discovery: The Search for Arabian Oil (1971)

Probably the oddest of all of Stegner's books, *Discovery* is the story of how the Arabian-American Oil Company discovered and developed the great oil fields of Saudi Arabia before and after World War II. It was a job done for hire, with no royalties and no notice from the world outside the corporate community of Aramco. Nothing disgraceful about having done such a history, of course (having done one myself, I am not inclined to be critical in any event), and it is a perfectly competent and professional piece of work, but it was not a title that Stegner would have been likely to pull from the shelf to show his grandchildren. It took years to be published, as well. Stegner and his wife Mary spent several weeks in Saudi Arabia in the fall of 1955. She was confined to the American compound, but Stegner was trucked and flown here and there all over the country, gathering information and interviewing the company's oldtimers. The book was completed within a few months of their return to Stanford, but company officials sat on the material for nearly fifteen years before finally deciding to publish it.

Angle of Repose (1971)

Long considered by most critics as Stegner's fiction "masterwork," *Angle of Repose* is a book quite as ambitious in its own way as *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. Like the 1943 novel, *Angle of Repose* seeks to characterize a major part of the western experience by showing it through the eyes, actions, and feelings of individual human beings. And, like the relationship between Bo and Elsa Mason in the earlier novel, one of the book's basic themes is the emotional and psychological tug-of-war between a man who seeks his future in a long western wandering after the main chance and a woman who yearns for stability, gentleness, and permanence of place. "It's perfectly clear," Stegner remarked after the book's publication, "that if every writer is born to write one story, that's my story." But there is a lot more going on in *Angle of Respose*. Stegner is also trying to discover what it is that holds a marriage together, how disparate and even contradictory individuals can eventually find an "angle of repose" that enables a relationship to endure even when it is has been torn nearly asunder--and, above all, he is trying to find those connections that bind us to the past and help to make us what we are.

A lot to do, and to accomplish it, Stegner creates a narrator/protagonist named Lyman Ward, a historian who is attempting to write a book based on the letters and other writings of his grandmother, Susan Ward, a writer and painter from the artistic warrens of the east who had been persuaded to marry a roving mining engineer, Oliver Ward. The story of that marriage, as it moves from place to place from Colorado to Mexico to Idaho to Grass Valley, California, is at the core of the novel and is itself an epic that plunges its characters into beautifully drawn landscapes riven by the kinds of upheavals that one rarely--perhaps never--expects to find in western fiction. This is not the West as romance, but the West as reality, from the raw exploitation of industrial hard rock mining to the burgeoning, if fruitless, hopes of irrigation development, and for what it gives us of that reality alone, the book is a triumph. But as revelatory drama, the complex strands of the relationship between Susan and Oliver Ward transcend their own time by becoming inextricably tangled with the often tortured complications of their grandson's life. One-legged and half-paralyzed, Lyman Ward is confined to a wheelchair and even as he tells the story of his grandparents's long

hegira, he struggles to find in the intimate details of his family's past some way to come to terms with his physical and emotional travail, his estrangement from his son, his uncertainties about his own marriage. Finally, he seeks some kind of reconciliation with an age (the late Sixties and early Seventies) whose violence, intellectual laziness, and callow rejection of history and civility offends every bone in his crippled body.

In large part, *Angle of Repose* is based on the real-life letters and life of Mary Hallock Foote, an artist and writer who was the basis for Susan Ward. On his dedication page, Stegner thanks the Foote family for the "loan" of their ancestors, but a misunderstanding between Stegner and the family over precisely how he intended to use the Mary Hallock Foote letters (for which he had received the family's permission) led to considerable discord after the book was published--including charges of 'plagiarism' from a couple of critics. The charge cut him deeply, even though it was baseless (his use of the letters comprises less than 10 percent of the book), taking some of the savor out of the fact that *Angle of Repose* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1972.

The Uneasy Chair: A Biography of Bernard DeVoto (1974)

Bernard DeVoto, who probably met Stegner for the first time at the 1938 Bread Loaf Writers Conference in Vermont, became Stegner's historical and environmental guru, a constant source of inspiration, criticism, goading, outrageous humor, and friendship in a relationship that thrived until DeVoto's death in 1955. That death affected Stegner very strongly. "Wouldn't it be luvverly," he wrote to DeVoto's widow in a statement that Jackson Benson, Stegner's own biographer, says was uncharacteristically passionate, "if we could have Benny...back, if only for an hour's reunion that would break our hearts when it ended? Sometimes I feel like smashing my fist against some stone wall." It was not until the late 1960s, as he was finishing *Angle of Repose*, that he began to think about doing this biography--and not without some trepidation. It was a job, he told interviewer James Hepworth, "complicated by the fact that I had known Benny DeVoto very well. It's always more difficult to write about someone you know well." Stegner got around the problem by concentrating on DeVoto's career, though not ignoring the often anguished personal problems of the man and his sometimes quirky, sometimes abrasive, but always brilliant mind. And it was a career to be remembered:

Born and reared in Ogden, Utah (a town and state with which DeVoto would have a love-hate relationship for the rest of his life), he ended up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he spent most of his adult life, writing with lunatic speed on a plethora of subjects. He became editor of the Mark Twain Papers, and in that position edited several collections of Twain's work, published and unpublished, as well as writing several studies of his own--most notably, *Mark Twain's America*. He wrote literary criticism, targeting for special contempt those modernist critics and writers of the Twenties who denigrated Twain and other nineteenth century greats. He wrote the "Easy Chair" column for *Harper's Magazine* for nearly twenty years, taking on everything from the excesses of Sinclair Lewis to attempted raids on the public domain, from intellectual history to the intellectual poverty of McCarthyism. He wrote a few, not very good "serious" novels and a number of not very good "spy" novels under the penname of "John August." But his most enduring literary accomplishment probably was his great historical trilogy: *Course of Empire, Beyond the Wide Missouri,* and *Year of Decision: 1846*, three works that traced the history of the West from the first European entries of the sixteenth century to the end of the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848, which finally made this a continental nation. Stegner gave due diligence to DeVoto's conservation work, too, particularly DeVoto's successful fight to keep western politicians from taking the 191 million acres of the National Forest System out of federal control and giving them to the states to be disposed of as swiftly as possible, and his essential role in helping to defeat dams in Dinosaur National Monument in the 1950s--though DeVoto died too soon to enjoy the victory (see *This is Dinosaur*, above).

The Spectator Bird (1976)

Nearly ten years after the publication of *All the Little Live Things*, this novel, which won the National Book Award, brings the story of Joe Allston and his wife to the beginning of old age. They are both nearly 70 (though Stegner himself was about five years short of the mark when he finished the book) and suffering from all the usual crotchets and infirmities that tend to afflict most of us at this stage in life. But Joe is now reflecting more on his past than he was in the earlier book and, as with Lyman Ward in *Angle of Repose*,

the medium that puts him in this meditative frame of mind is a literary one--in his case, a diary Joe kept during a visit to Denmark many years before and which he starts reading to his wife. Unlike most of his novels, *The Spectator Bird* is strong on plot, which concerns the mysterious background of a countess with which they share a pension in Copenhagen; there may (or may not) have been incest somewhere along the way, and there definitely were some strange goings-on during the Nazi occupation in World War II, during which the countess's husband served as a quisling. Portions of the novel, then, have an almost gothic character, and Stegner has some fun with this, particularly when he is able to work into the narrative a visit with the great gothic novelist, Isak Dineson (Karen Blixen), author of *Out of Africa*, among many other books and stories (Stegner and his wife, Mary, actually did have such a meeting with the writer).

But for all its dark and somewhat melodramatic underpinnings, *The Spectator Bird* is about age, and loyalty, and the durability of a relationship that can withstand even the temptation offered by a beautiful Danish countess. There is almost a love affair started here, and the scene in which Joe and the countess stumble to the brink then step back just in time, is one of those epiphanous moments that Stegner was better at than just about anyone. It is a melancholy book, but at the same time a testament to the lasting character of a love properly honored.

Recapitulation (1979)

"Memory," Stegner once said to his interviewer, Richard Etulain, "can be an artist as well as a historian. You draw on it, but you don't draw on it literally." This mixing of memory and imagination through artistry is reflected most precisely in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Recapitulation*, its sequel. The protagonist, Bruce Mason, has returned to Salt Lake City to bury an aunt, his only remaining relative, after many years in the diplomatic service (the setting is contemporary). The visit brings back memories of his adolescence in the city, the place of his first romantic love, the place of his first sexual experience, the place where he discovered himself as an individual human being. Conradian flashbacks provide the spine of the narrative, filling in a lot of the blanks that had been left in the earlier novel. More important, in the act of trying to re-acquaint himself with the young man he had once been, seeking to find in his younger self some clue that will help him find meaning in his present life, Bruce is finally able to exorcise much of what had been left unresolved in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, particularly with regard to his relationship with his father, whose presence here as a memory is just as powerful as it was as a physical reality in in the earlier novel. The novel, Stegner's biographer, Jackson Benson, suggests, is "a meditation on the nature of memory, the processes of remembering, how and why we do so, and what it does to us."

T. H. Watkins
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College of Letters & Science
Montana State University
montana.edu