

REVIEW

Crossing to Safety (1987)

Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

“As I approach 70 [Doris Grumbach], I am uncomfortably aware that my generation regards very young writers with suspicion verging on indefensible dislike. We distrust the rapidity of their rise and the size of their monetary success. When blurb writers exult that those in their 20’s have written an awesome or amazing or unique first novel, and then followed it, of necessity, with a collection of unmatched or brilliant short stories, we old skeptics shudder. Too fast, too early, empty of real substance, we assure one another. They cannot sustain it. Recklessly they are drawing on their capital.

So I feel great generational pleasure in celebrating the new novel by 78-year-old Wallace Stegner, who published his first novel, *Remembering Laughter*, 50 years ago. In the following years he published 13 works of fiction and 10 books of nonfiction. At the same time, the Iowa-born writer taught at a number of places, settling down in 1945 at Stanford University, where he remained for the rest of his academic life. He was a noted teacher of writing whose selfless devotion to his students was rewarded when Stanford named its prestigious writing fellowships for him. In the process of moving through this lifetime of achievement, Mr. Stegner won the Pulitzer Prize for his 1971 novel, *Angle of Repose*, and the 1977 National Book Award for *The Spectator Bird*.

Clearly Mr. Stegner has not gone unnoticed. But neither is he a household name, as he deserves to be. What I am extolling here is the appearance of a superb book at the other end of a consistently accomplished career, heartening proof that the novelist has continued to grow, is still maturing in his late maturity, has added to his accomplishments a sympathy for his contemporaries’ condition: the miseries of old age, the resentment of physical decay and, most of all, the pleasures of enduring marital love.

Crossing to Safety moves back and forward in the middle of the 20th century, from 1937 to 1972, when the narrator, Larry Morgan, and his polio-crippled wife, Sally, return after many years to the Lang family compound in Vermont to attend a farewell picnic. Charity Lang and her husband, Sid, have been friends of the Morgans since both men were instructors in English in Madison, Wis.

The couples could not have been more different. The Morgans were young, struggling and happy. “In a way, it is beautiful to be young and hard up.... Deprivation becomes a game,” says Larry. They are from the West; the Langs are Eastern and Harvard, Sid is Jewish, both are determinedly ambitious, and their families are wealthy. The Langs are attracted to the Morgans by Larry’s literary talent: during his temporary appointment at the university he has already begun to publish short stories.

The novel’s fulcrum is Charity, a strong woman whose sense of how things should be done extends to everyone around her. Her husband is weakened by her strength, her friends rebel against her need to control. Larry says of her, “And with Charity it was organization, order, action, assistance to the uncertain, and direction to the wavering.” When she knows she is dying of cancer, she decides to control and direct the conditions of her death. It is to this occasion that the Morgans are recalled, and her preparations for her own dying give rise to Larry’s introspection:

“What ever happened to the passion we all had to improve ourselves, live up to our potential, leave a mark on the world?... We all hoped, in whatever way our capacities permitted, to define and illustrate the worthy life. With me it was always to be done in words.... Leave a mark on the world. Instead, the world has left marks on us. We got older. Life chastened us so that now we lie waiting to die.... And all of us, I suppose, could at least be grateful that our lives have not turned out harmful or destructive.”

There is some question about Charity's life, for her determination is not so easily dismissed as harmless. The bittersweet tone of Larry's reminiscences is echoed in his thoughts about Charity's family, the Ellises: "How do you make a book that anyone will read out of lives as quiet as these? Where are the things that novelists seize upon and readers expect? Where is the high life, the conspicuous waste, the violence, the kinky sex, the death wish?... Where are speed, noise, ugliness, everything that makes us who we are and makes us recognize ourselves in fiction?"

Mr. Stegner's success with this story lies precisely in the absence of all these currently popular subject matters and the presence of quiet re-examination of what, close to the end, seems to have made a life not only worth living but happy and almost fulfilled. Larry realizes that "Sid Lang best understands that my marriage is as surely built on addiction and dependence as his is." Sid needed Charity's domination even as it debilitated him. Larry is tied by the inexorable chains of love to Sally, whose polio is doomed to return at the end of her life. He doubts if he can survive her, just as the reader is left to wonder, until the last lines of the book, if Sid will survive Charity.

Mr. Stegner is a wise man as well as a skilled writer. His narrator, very close to him in biographical detail as well as quality of mind, recognizes the truth that the affliction of a loved one (Sally) can be "a rueful blessing. It has made her more than she was; it has let her give me more than she would ever have been able to give me healthy; it has taught me at least the alphabet of gratitude."

John Webster (in "Westward Hoe") said that "old lovers are soundest." Mr. Stegner has built a convincing narrative around this truth, has made survival a grace rather than a grim necessity, and enduring, tried love the test and proof of a good life. Nothing in these lives is lost or wasted, suffering becomes an enriching benediction, and life itself a luminous experience. "The book is about a kind of hunger for order in the world that I think afflicts Westerners more than Easterners," Wallace Stegner said in a telephone interview from his home in California. He was speaking about his new novel, *Crossing to Safety*. "There's a way between absolute liberty, which equals chaos, and absolute order, which equals petrification. I was trying to find a way that could be traveled, and doing so I put a lot of my own life in there--I did win a novel prize and my wife did promptly have a baby with serious results--but it wasn't any clear channel." He was, he said, a "long time getting rid of" the book, at one point celebrating its completion with a trip to Bora-Bora, only to return, look at the manuscript and decide it wasn't really finished. "I think working on a novel is an exercise in the reassurance of belief in what you are doing. I go out to the study at 8 o'clock and by 10:30 I'm reviving the faith in what I am doing and from 11 to 12 I may get something written."

Mr. Stegner said he finds himself rereading the work of his former students Wendell Berry, Robert Stone, Larry McMurtry and Ernest Gaines—"old writing fellows who have become effective writers. I had a sense as they were coming through my class that I was seeing American literature before it was in print."

Doris Grumbach
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