

ANALYSIS

Genesis (1961)

Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

“The novella, *Genesis*, taken alone may well stand as the classic cowboy story. It has all the qualities I have attributed to Stegner’s nonfiction prose, and at the same time that it has the clean lines and artistic inevitability of a Greek play, it proceeds with so convincing a sense of reality that—as in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*—the concept of ‘rites of passage’ is verified in the flesh. When at the end the tenderfoot English boy has proved himself it has been through cold and hardship so palpable that they cannot be doubted, and it is by men whom we know and respect as men that he is accepted. He learns through the test of experience what it means to be ‘a man’ in terms that have validity in the circumstances, limited but real, of a cowboy rounding up cattle in the worst winter imaginable. In that respect, he is closely related to the larger movement of the book: the search of Stegner himself to find what he is and what the circumstances of his environment helped make of him.”

Robert Canzoneri
“Wallace Stegner: Trial by Existence”
Southern Review 9 (1973) 796-827

“*Genesis* was one of several stories intended for inclusion in *Wolf Willow*, a combined history, memoir, and fictional account of the Cypress Hills country of Saskatchewan that Stegner wrote during a fellowship year at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences in 1955, and completed and published in 1962. ‘I had some kind of half-assed notion that I wanted to do a study in village democracy,’ he remarked in a conversation with Richard Etulain. ‘One was Saskatchewan, where I had spent my boyhood. Another was Vermont, which had a village democracy for two hundred years at least...What it finally came down to was concentrated on the Saskatchewan...because that was obviously the one that interested me the most.’ Only two stories made it into the book, ‘Carrion Spring’ and *Genesis*, and many readers feel the latter is one of the best pieces of fiction Stegner ever wrote.”

Page Stegner, ed.
Marking the Sparrow’s Fall: Wallace Stegner’s American West
(Holt 1998) 279

“The form and length of the story were as vague as the theme, and of course I did not have the title until the theme had been discovered and worked out in actions which suggested not only the beginning of manhood but the beginnings of a new country. What I began with was a notion of writing a story about the winter of 1906, which put the open range cattle outfits out of business and opened the way for homesteaders. I was telling the story of a disaster. Tradition may have steered the story into becoming, as well, the story of a testing. Perhaps the plain logic of my material forced me in that direction. Perhaps memory played a part in it, since I was remembering places and events close to my own childhood, and the childhood of a somewhat frail child on a rough frontier is full of testings.

But the testing theme did not insist upon itself at once. When I began writing I had no tenderfoot hero—I had the exact reverse, for I started telling it from the point of view of Ray Henry, the foreman, who had already won his manhood and didn’t need to prove anything. All I began with were the specific events of the belated roundup, in which all the cattle outfits in that country fought to save their stock, and lost. I began with the story of a physical defeat; the theme of a spiritual gain as a consequence of the struggle came in later. An ordeal must be long enough to be nearly unbearable, not long enough to become either dispersed or tiresome. The typical ordeal story is a very long short story or a pretty short novel—in short, a nouvelle. Styron’s *The Long March* is such a story. Conrad wrote some of the great ones—*Youth*, *Typhoon*, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. And if I were to confess the full truth I would have to admit that all the time I was writing *Genesis* I felt a good deal like Conrad on a cowhorse.”

Wallace Stegner

"Its protagonist, Rusty Cullen, is a tenderfoot cowboy who is taken through a horrific experience during the Saskatchewan blizzard of 1907 and comes to realize that it is only through working with other men that he can survive in such a world. Throughout his work, fiction and nonfiction, Stegner praises cooperation and values a sense of community—the real basis, he was convinced, for the building of the West, or, indeed, for a peaceful and just society. When that sense of community breaks down, as it is seen to do in such stories as 'The View from the Balcony' or 'He Who Spits at the Sky,' the resulting atmosphere is ominous, threatening....

Genesis...is a particularly strong myth-buster, about as unromantic as a story about cowboys could be. First published in *Contact* in 1959 it was later included in Stegner's history-memoir called *Wolf Willow* (1962) and finally in *Collected Stories* (1990). *Genesis* is a fictionalized history, the story of the death and destruction on the cattle ranches in Stegner's part of Saskatchewan during the terrible winter of 1906-07. It is also a story of survival, the survival of a tenderfoot Englishman, Rusty Cullen, who with certain vague romantic expectations has joined up to become a ranchhand and who learns that in this time and place 'what would pass for heroics in a softer world was only chores.' In a futile effort to round up as many cattle as possible before they freeze, the drovers are caught in a blizzard so fierce that they barely manage to save themselves. They do so after great effort and much suffering, but only by group effort, by cooperation and sacrifice for others. No one of them could have made it alone. Rusty Cullen's thoughts at the end of his ordeal summarize Stegner's thoughts about the frontier as it really was experienced.

No walk-downs on main street or single-handed, galloping rescues on horseback here. To emphasize the cooperation needed for survival in the story, Stegner has the cowpokes tie themselves together with their lariats to help them navigate the zero visibility of the blizzard. Stumbling forward in line, with Spurlock behind him and Panguingue just ahead, Rusty finds that his 'own face was so stiff he felt he could not have spoken, even to curse, if he tried; he had lost all feeling in his lips and chin'."

Jackson J. Benson
Wallace Stegner: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne/Simon & Schuster/Prentice Hall 1998) xiii, 19-20

"The story is literally one of death and rebirth, Rusty's initiation into the Garden, and his coming to terms with his manhood and need for camaraderie. In this story nature is characterized as brutal and uncontrollable. The efforts of the characters to survive a blizzard during a cattle drive emphasize the primacy or preservation over conservation (or control) of nature in Stegner's philosophy. While the story is definitely a coming to manhood of Rusty Cullen, it is also a study of man against the character of primal nature. *Genesis*, as the title indicates, relies heavily on Biblical symbolism related to the creation of man and his sin in the Garden. In the early pages, nature is seen through Rusty's eyes as 'pre'-Creation...Man is definitely finite against infinite nature; to Rusty, the river through the ice 'seemed like some dark force from the ancient heart of the earth that could at any time rise around them silently and obliterate their little human noises and tract and restore the plain to its emptiness again.'

As the story progresses Stegner uses images of darkness to suggest the destructive end cycle of nature's cycle. As the men struggle through seemingly insurmountable obstacles in the ravaging winter of Saskatchewan, they are confronted with 'a chaos of dark and cold and the howl of a wind that sometimes all but lifted them from their feet,' a grim reminder of their finitude. As Rusty searches for his own salvation, reminders of the serpent in the Garden are the 'snake-tongue of the wind'... 'the wide look [of rope]...snaking in the air,' and time, which 'whipped and snaked past in unceasing movement.' In its force, nature bears for Rusty a reminder of his own lacking, 'a deserved punishment, a predicted retribution, the sort of feeling he used to have in childhood when something tempted him beyond all caution and all warnings.'

As a thaw brings the 'stink of final decay,' the men struggle forward against a 'heartless and inhuman [wind], older than earth and totally alien...savage...the cannibal spirit.' Only when Rusty has struggled not only for himself, but also for Spurlock, who almost dies of exposure, can he begin to experience rebirth,

characterized as the return of feeling to his frozen hands and feet: 'Life returned as pain; far down his legs Rusty felt a deep, passionate ache beginning at his feet.' Finding love and camaraderie for those he had disdained, his fellow cowboys, Rusty realizes his need for others; as he rests in a warm cabin with the other men, the 'ancient implacable wind...tore away balked and shrill.' Here man survives through courage and camaraderie, not through efforts to control nature. Nature, on the other hand, remains, in all of its primal power, intact."

Nancy Owen Nelson
Wallace Stegner: A Study of the Short Fiction (1998) 136-37

Michael Hollister (2015)