

305 QUOTATIONS



Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

INTRODUCTION

Wallace Stegner is the major Realist of the 20th century, a leading historian of the American West, the one great conservationist in American literature, and the successor to Thoreau as an iconic nature writer. Compared to his contemporaries, Stegner published the most books (35), was the most versatile (12 novels, 58 short stories, 5 histories, 2 biographies, 242 articles, 164 contributions to books and books edited), mentored the most successful fiction writers (Ken Kesey, Larry McMurtry, Robert Stone, Thomas McGuane, Scott Momaday, Louis Gaines, Wendell Berry, Speer Morgan, Harriet Doerr, William Kittredge, Al Young, Tillie Olson), and had the most influence on legislation.

Stories by Stegner were included in the “Best Short Stories” of the year volumes 7 times. He won the O. Henry Award for the best short story of the year 3 times; won the Pulitzer Prize for what is considered his best novel, *Angle of Repose* (1971); won the National Book Award (1977) for *The Spectator Bird*; and was nominated for a Nobel Prize. Yet *The New York Times* refused to review his prize-winning books and tried to destroy his career. Nearly 40 years after they snubbed him and 16 years after his death, Stegner had risen to such prominence by 2009 the *Times* finally admitted to its snobbery toward him. Wallace Stegner fought against the decadent Postmodernism flushed into the culture by the *Times* and is Politically Incorrect: Gentile, white, male, heterosexual, traditional, moral, happily married, Realistic, expressed admiration for Mormons, believes in God, and is from the West. *All the Little Live Things* (1967), his critique of the 1960s counterculture and reply to *Walden*--and his *Collected Stories* (1990) are the best introduction to Stegner’s fiction; *Marking the Sparrow’s Fall* (1998), edited by his son Page Stegner, collects some of his best essays and his novella *Genesis*.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, humor, education, college, psychology, literature, Thoreau, America, American, Native Americans, Nature, wilderness, the West, myth, conservation, environmentalism, religion, teaching, writing, *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, *All the Little Live Things*, *Angle of Repose*, aesthetics, short story, Realism, Impressionism, metaphors, 1960s counterculture, history, Postmodernism, Postmodernist aesthetics, English Departments, literary theory, publishing, recent novels by others, sex, politics, race, women, wife Mary, character, wisdom, death, last words:

YOUTH

You waste your youth.

I played a lot of cards, for one thing. I was a frivolous youth.

The town dump was our poetry and our history.

I was nearly twelve before I saw either a bathtub or a water closet.

There is nothing between you and the North Pole but a two-wire fence.

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.

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 first memories are of Seattle, sitting on the back step of a tenement and telling the kid next door, "I'm half Indian and half Jew, but don't tell anybody."

Then we went to Saskatchewan to make a million dollars out of wheat along that short grass frontier that should never have been plowed.

Before we got the shack built, we lived in a tent, which the night wind constantly threatened to blow away, flapping the canvas and straining the ropes and pulling the pegs from the gravel.

So we made a dust bowl and burned out along with everybody else, and then we wound up in Montana, and from Montana drifted down to Salt Lake. By that time my father was chasing mining claims.

I grew up doubting the big-bonanza-just-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. Instead of expecting to make a big strike somewhere...I would have liked to see a little more just plain stick-to-it-iveness at times. The longest journey begins with a single step... I could see my father always refusing to make the first step. He always wanted the step to be a hundred-yard broad jump. Broad jumping is not the way you travel. It leads to a succession of falls.

If you start pretty much at the bottom, at some Neanderthal homestead in Saskatchewan, you have to try to come up the whole way in one lifetime, to something like the peak of your civilization, whatever that may be. It's demoralizing.

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.

Expose a child to a particular environment at his susceptible time and he will perceive in the shapes of that environment until he dies.

HUMOR

[When he was a young hotdog vendor on the shores of 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.

[As a wild man from the stereotyped West] I have always done my honest best to live up to what tradition says I should be. I have always tried to look like Gary Cooper and talk like the Virginian. I have endeavored to be morally upright, courteous to women; with an innate sense of right and wrong but without the polish that Yale College or European travel might have put upon me. I have consented to be forgiven

my frontier gaucheries, and I did not hold it against the waiter in the Parker House bar when he removed my feet from the upholstery.

EDUCATION

Education tried, inadequately and hopelessly, against all odds, to make a European of me.

I knew nothing, literally nothing. I had a million books to read to catch up with my country and my generation and my classmates.

I do believe in a strong continuity, and I resent like anything that in California nobody is ever taught history in the public schools. They don't have history; they have social studies. Students don't get any history at least until high school and perhaps not until college. By that time they've maybe lost the chance to learn from it. Many of them give me the impression they think the world began yesterday. Sociologists do that to me too. They seem to have no historical sense. They see society as a blueprint that can be changed tomorrow. I don't think it can. Reformers have the same problem.

I'm a scientific illiterate. I try to understand, but it's hopeless. I would hate, on the other hand, to go through life without learning to understand something about the double helix.

The folk mind is often wiser than the intellectuals.

COLLEGE

I worked my way through college being a clerk in a rug-and-linoleum store forty hours a week. There was nothing in that work that taught me anything.

I'm a writer by the sheerest accident. Nobody in my family had ever gone to college, and at college they said, "You've got to major in something," and so I said, "Fine. Economics," and I took one course in economics and that cured that. Then my freshman English teacher, who was Vardis Fisher, thought I had some kind of gift, so he let me in an advanced class, which gave me the notion that I could put words together...in some fashion. Then he went away, and I got another teacher who taught short story. I wrote some undergraduate short stories, won a prize at one of the local newspapers....

When I graduated from college finally, the head of the Psychology Department said, "Do you want to go on to graduate school?" I said, "Sure, where? How? In what?" He said, "I'll give you a fellowship in psychology." So I said, "Fine," and took it. When I went over to the English Department, the head of the English Department said, "You're out of your mind. You're not a psychologist. You're an English major! If you go to graduate school, you ought to go in English." I said, "But the man offered me a fellowship." "All right," he said, "We'll see if we can get you something." He got me a fellowship at the University of Iowa, so I dutifully trotted off to the University of Iowa to get an M.A. in English."

It seems to me nobody above the stage of a cretin could have been so completely unaware, so totally naïve, so unsophisticated, wide-eyed, going any way he was pushed.

I was silly putty.

PSYCHOLOGY

Freud's theory of the personality doesn't always strike me as plausible. I'm half inclined to agree with Nabokov on the subject of Freud: a great witch doctor.

LITERATURE

I remember reading almost all of Conrad.

All the time I was writing *Genesis* I felt a good deal like Conrad on a cowhorse.

It began with James Branch Cabell and Hemingway and went on to Joyce and the rest of them.

Faulkner could speak out of any mouth and still be absolutely right.

You move back and forth in time. *The Sound and the Fury* is the classic example. Absolutely defensible and absolutely brilliant.

The writers who reinforce my beliefs strongly—which is one way of responding to books—are Conrad and Chekhov and Turgenev. Lately, I've been catching up on Solzhenitsyn.

It is all very well to have Melvilles and Hawthornes, and even Emersons and Thoreaus, and certainly it is more than salutary to have Mark Twains, but...the sickly legend of Pocahontas or the dismal Providences of Increase Mather, this is a hard fate.

Emerson, like Natty Bumppo, saw God in every manifestation of nature, but he was hardly a forerunner of environmental thinking...and though he professed a liking for the wild, it was for the wild of the Hudson River School paintings, in which wilderness is a backdrop for a foreground of homely husbandry.

The lament for our wastefulness and greed runs like a leitmotif through our literature from very early times. James Fenimore Cooper, our first significant novelist, voiced it before our frontier had moved beyond the Great Lakes. Read the scene in *The Pioneers* (1823) in which the townspeople of an upstate New York settlement, in their frenzy to reap God's plenty, fire into flocks of passenger pigeons with artillery. Read the passage in *The Prairie* (1827) in which Cooper asks passionately what the axe-men will do when they have cut their way from sea to sea.

THOREAU

In Thoreau there is virtually every idea that later became gospel to the environmental movement, but it is there only as idea, not as action or call to action—unless withdrawal is action.... One senses that he was feeling his way toward an identification with nature not too far from that of the Indians.

Thoreau anticipated the...urban-open-space idea by suggesting that every community should have its patch of woods where people could refresh themselves. His notion of nature as having healing powers has now the force of revealed truth. And the form of Thoreau's essays—rumination hung upon the framework of an outdoor excursion—has influenced virtually every nature writer since, from Burroughs and Muir to Wendell Berry, Edward Abbey and Barry Lopez.

With the Thoreau who observed and participated in nature, the Thoreau who loved wilderness, and the Thoreau who trusted physical labor so long as it was not a compulsion, and who mistrusted material ambition, I am completely in accord. It is Thoreau the moralizing enemy of the tradition to which he owes all his own authority who puts me off. Especially in the first chapter, "Economy" [*Walden*], he reveals himself to be a Wordsworthian romantic, and a self-absorbed one at that, with an underdeveloped social sense, a limited patience with his fellow men, and an independence that frequently amounts to pig-headedness. Like any zealot, he is intemperate.

The land on which he built his cabin was not his; he squatted on it in a most American way.

AMERICA

Because Europe has always dreamed westward, America, once realized, touches men's minds like fulfilled prophecy.... Beyond question, before it is half known, it will breed utopias and noble savages, fantasies of Perfection, New Jerusalems.... It is not unrelated to the Hereafter.

Crevecoeur's notion is touched by the Rousseauvian idea of the naturally good human being given new opportunity. And new opportunity—Crevecoeur never got around to saying this—is often abused. People take advantage of it to extend beyond their normal appetites.

The untutored decency and mongrel smartness of Huckleberry Finn, as well as the dignity that the slave Jim salvaged out of an oppressed life, could only have been imagined in America. The innocent philistinism of Howells' Silas Lapham could have been imagined by a European observer, but the ethical worth that nearly ennobles Lapham in his financial crisis is—realistic or not—pure American. Henry James' American, significantly named Christopher Newman, has a magnanimity that matches his naivete.

In spite of the fact that historically our most significant article of export has been the principle of liberty, in spite of the fact that the persecuted and poor of the earth still look to the United States as their haven and their hope...many of us have never quite got it straight what it was we started out to be, and some of us have forgotten.

We have watched some of our greatest cities erupt in mindless violence. We have built ourselves a vast industrial trap in which, far from being the self-reliant individuals we once were, and still are in fantasy, we are absolutely helpless when the power fails.

We remain a nation of real estate operators, trading increasingly small portions of the increasingly overburdened continent back and forth at increasingly inflated prices.

We should remember that this is the oldest and stablest republic in the world.

Give us time. Half a millennium is not enough.

Vermont is a good place to play Thoreau.

AMERICAN

An American...is a civilized man who has renewed himself in the wild.

NATIVE AMERICANS

Prejudice against the first Americans still persists and there are plenty of people quite willing to go back to the exploitation and robbery that we practiced for two hundred and fifty years.

Often guilty of primitive assaults on the land, principally the setting of wildfires to run game or improve the grass, Native Americans did feel a reverence for the earth and its creatures. Their descendants feel it still; the earth is at the heart of their religion.

For a moment my head was full of the thought of those Indians who had made noble speeches to Congress and commissioners, speeches in which they spoke of such reverence for the Earth Mother that they would not plow her breast.

Indian attitudes toward the earth seem to me healthier than white attitudes, by and large.

Chief Luther Standing Bear of the Oglala Sioux put it this way: "Only to the white man was nature a wilderness and only to him was the land 'infested' with 'wild' animals and 'savage' people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery."

Up to now [1967] my sympathies have been with the noble and ill-used redskin.... But the clash of cultures between Tom Weld and me has taught me that the white newcomer sometimes has a case. When I think about this Mohican I signed a treaty with, I feel as if somebody has wrapped a blood-pressure band around my neck and is pumping it up. [*All the Little Live Things*]

NATURE

Right beside Mother Earth, in the same bed, lies Father Earthquake.

Evil lay underground in Paradise before life ever appeared. It was part of the mud life was made with. It awoke the moment life awoke, like a shadow that leaps up rods long when a man stands up at sunrise.

Evil is everywhere and in all of us. Yet I am steadily tempted to poke around the garden looking for the snake. Sooner or later I shall find myself going (coming?) down my hole after myself.

WILDERNESS

Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed, so that never again can we have the chance to see ourselves single, separate, vertical, and individual in the world, part of the environment of trees and rocks and soil, brother to the other animals, part of the natural world and competent to belong in it.

Without any remaining wilderness we are committed wholly, without chance for even momentary reflection and rest, to a headlong drive into our technological termite-life.

THE WEST

This is the native home of hope.

There is no such thing as the West. There are only Wests.

I don't really want the West to change from the way it was when I liked it.

My favorite places in the West are, I suppose, relatively small university towns.

It wouldn't hurt at all if this little city [Missoula, Montana] had a university in it to keep it in touch with its cultural origins and conscious of its changing cultural present. It would do no harm if an occasional Leslie Fiedler came through to stir up its provincialism. It wouldn't hurt if some native-born writer, some Doig or Hugo or Maclean or Kittredge was around to serve.

We've given our heart to the foolish Old West myth so wholly, so much so that we think of *that* as our history, which it isn't.

My Antonia is maybe the best novel about how people grew up in the frontier West and who absorbed its character. It is likewise, of course, because Willa Cather was an artist that *My Antonia* is more cunningly made than a lot of western novels. It really is a beautifully made book.

Creating a usable past in the West is confusing, because the history that passes for history isn't history at all, but myth, the Diamond Dick kind of stuff, which, as dime novel, and, later, as movie and as television serial and as pulp story, is absolutely foolproof, apparently. It will go on forever. But it confuses history. If you want to build a usable past, you almost have to cut that off... I'm trying to write about a West that I think is real, not mythical.

The mythic western is pure hokum. It applies to very small numbers of people over very short periods of time and not at all to nine-tenths of the people who lived there. It is personification of Individualism and Self-Reliance that produce those myths. I guess I like things that are closer to the actual facts of experience. In a way, I'm opposed to myth, if you come right down to it.

The frontiersman was being built by the popular imagination into an idealized archetypal figure, divorced from Europe, divorced from history, homegrown, a demigod in buckskin. His real-life prototype was Daniel Boone. His larger-than-life fictional version was James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo...who appeared in the novel *The Pioneers* in 1823 and whose story continued on...into the 1840s.

Any variety of the frontiersman is more attractive to modern Americans than is the responsible, pedestrian, hard-working pioneer farmer breaking his back in a furrow to achieve ownership of his claim and give his children a start in the world.

The romantic figure of the frontiersman was doomed to pass with the wilderness that made him. He was essentially over by the 1840s, though in parts of the West he lingered on as an anachronism.

Maybe it isn't absolutely a myth—it's only a myth as it applies to delusions of grandeur, dreams of glory.

The whole history of mankind is social, not individual.

MYTH

What a mass audience expects from popular literature is a reflection of the images and symbols that are the outer emblems of its collective mythology, rather than a painful analysis or probing of the depths beneath the surface. Popular mythology serves as a gloss for the painful or troubling aspects of a people's history, providing an illusory solution of real difficulties.

CONSERVATION

I don't believe in setting bulldozers loose in the earth.

There will be logging and ranching, but on a smaller and more careful scale.

[Humans] are too damned ingenious a race. It's a weed species with great ingenuity.

I guess by and large I'm half an enemy of the civilization I belong to, and that's an awkward way to be.

I am not a good soldier in the environmental armies because I don't seem to work well in bodies with other people. Here's an irony. I'm against individualism gone rampant, but I don't actually seem to be a very good team player.

I must admit sometimes I rear back in the breaching a little when others are urging me along. I become recalcitrant. Even when I agree wholeheartedly with the people who are urging me along, I don't like to be pushed. So some of the work of conservation, which is by necessity touched with zealotry, I resist. I'm not fooling when I tell Tom I'm not really a good team player.

Insofar as the West is an agricultural economy, it is definitely a doomed one, unviable over an extended period of time. The dams will silt up and the fields will go saline. Agriculture will have to move back to Iowa or somewhere it belongs.

I am perfectly aware of the human disruption and hardship that would be brought about if irrigation agriculture were suddenly brought to a halt. My God, that would depopulate the West, or three-quarters of it, but it would also have very serious consequences for large parts of the earth, so I think getting out of what we have gotten ourselves into is a very serious and complicated problem.

Aldo Leopold's American Land Ethic is, in some ways, for example, prefigured in Stoic philosophy. Marcus Aurelius: "What's bad for the beehive can't be good for the bee." It's certainly there in a lot of St. Francis, there in Zen, in American Indian religions: that attitude toward the earth that is respectful and reverent, that goes with the flow of the earth instead of contrary to it. [Taoism]

ENVIRONMENTALISM

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.

RELIGION

I'm not particularly religious and I don't follow the left-hand path. But I do believe in asking more questions than you can answer.

I grew up completely in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and I never had any particular exposure to Zen or any of the other traditions.

I don't necessarily believe all I read in the Bible either, and the Bible has been the basis of at least two major religions, so you can't discount it.

I would just rather get a little more American Indian than Judeo-Christian in my attitudes toward the earth, and a little more Zen and St. Francislike in my attitude toward other animals.

There's no reason on earth why a great religion shouldn't be a part of the consciousness of any world citizen.

I think we can confidently expect God to provide what we need.

TEACHING

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.

The teaching of writing is a very Socratic kind of teaching, and you should stay out of the people's way rather than get in it.

[1960s] 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, and the kids were so hassled in so many directions. The intolerable ones came with answers and not questions, and the others came with just confusions. Between them there was no way you could feel you were not wasting your time in the classroom.

WRITING

All art is suffering.

Hard writing makes easy reading.

I fully believe in form as discovery.

By the time I've got a first draft, I've written everything fifteen times and read it thirty-five, just trying to learn from my own words where I'm going.

When I was in my prime, so to speak, I would generally get anywhere from three to five or six pages a day, stuff that might have to be rewritten tomorrow, but which would essentially stay.

Every morning you have to read over what you did yesterday, and if it doesn't persuade you, it has to be redone. Sometimes it takes me three hours in the morning to get over the feeling that I've been wasting my time for the past week and that everything I've written up to that point is drivel. Until I can convince myself that I am speaking in the plausible, believable voice of the person I have invented, I can't go on.

I suppose the book that has sold the most around the world and has been translated into more languages is one I shrink at a little, and that's *A Shooting Star*.... I think most people consider *Angle of Repose* the best book. *Spectator Bird* also got an award...

It's like a beaver's teeth—he has to chew or else his jaws lock shut. A talent is a kind of imprisonment. You're stuck in it, you have to keep using it, or else you get ruined by it; done in by it.... You keep doing it because that's really what you're made to do.

A writer is an organism that will go on writing even after its heart has been cut out.

The Big Rock Candy Mountain (1943)

There was the wandering husband and the nesting woman... It's perfectly clear that if every writer is born to write one story, that's my story.... I obviously had [Frederick Jackson] Turner in my mind when I was writing *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, and the ending of the frontier and what it does psychologically to whole bodies of people.

The dominant figure in your life probably is your father, if you have one, and if he happens himself to be mixed-up, irritable, and frustrated, and to feel himself many times a failure—those things do bounce off the child's head and leave knots. Surely, I was exorcising my father, and in a sense making some kind of recompense to my mother, who led a very rough life with him.

I never conceived Bo Mason as being either pathetic or funny. He is a strong, dominant kind of man, and in a way a dangerous one...but still deluded, socially deluded, the product of frontiers which now all of a sudden have closed. He was made to be a frontiersman... He would have done very well as a mountain man. Been just as careless, just as reckless, just as wild, just as greedy. Whatever else, the American way was made for him.

Somewhere Elsa Mason says in the book that Chet was too soft, that he wasn't as hard as his old man. Whereas Bruce, in spite of the sickliness, is just as mean and ornery as his old man is.

All the Little Live Things (1967)

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.... I knew from the beginning that it was too glum a subject, simply a downer, unless I could do something with the surface to make it look lighter than it was.

That's when I invented Joe Allston. A wisecracking narrator can make a story seem a little less grim... I borrowed for Joe's portrait the character of my agent, who was always threatening to write up what he had done for ten percent. He made a properly acerbic commentator on the suburban scene... I just project something in myself a little further out to get an image of what *can* happen... He goes further than I would.

I disagree that *All the Little Live Things* is a putting down of hippies, because the hippie is the least important thing in that book, to me.... That was my feeling about hippies in general at that point. I've changed to some extent since, but the ones that I knew then were dumb bystanders who didn't have any notion of what went on but thought they did. So I made him a dumb bystander just standing out there with his mouth open, helpless, at the same time when he was the cause of some of the worst part of the last scene.

Angle of Repose (1971)

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 Catherish kind of theme.

It was like *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* without my realizing it. It was the boomer husband and the nesting wife, although with variations in it and on a much higher social level.... *Angle of Repose*...is, technically, many, many cuts above *Big Rock Candy Mountain*.... 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.

The physical misfortunes I borrowed from the plight of my old professor, Norman Foerster. The marital problem I took from the experience of a friend of mine, whose wife—with whom he was madly, crazily in love, and by whom he had six or seven children—left him suddenly, simply ran off with some doctor, who almost immediately got himself killed in an automobile accident up at Lake Tahoe. So she was left, having abandoned her husband and having lost her lover. She tried to come back to him—she tried to crawl back to him—and he wouldn't have her; he kicked her out.

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 is a novel, not a biography. It has nothing to do with the actual life of Mary Hallock Foote except that I borrowed a lot of her experiences.... The Mary Hallock Foote stuff had the same function as raw material.... Susan Ward is quite atypical. There weren't many women like that.... In her writing she was not unlike Helen Hunt Jackson and a lot of other women who came west, gifted and intelligent women.

I was much more sympathetic to the kind of pioneering that the older Wards did. If the novel is in any sense judgmental it judges the New West as inferior to the Old, as being a deterioration... [like Cather]

The [*New York Times*] did not treat the novel; it attempted to destroy it.... If you're a literary scholar and go by the *Times Book Review* you will have a very odd canon of American literature.

AESTHETICS

Truth is to be handled gingerly.

All art is synecdoche, according to Frost.

There ought to be a poet submerged in every novelist.

Dialect seems to me a mistake, another way of limiting yourself.

I don't think fiction should really have proselytizing as its purpose.

I have come to think point of view the most important basic problem in the writing of fiction.

I had a theory that strong emotions should be approached obliquely and not talked about. [like Hemingway]

The supernatural probably doesn't have any place in either history or fiction. 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 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. [This is a Modernist characteristic.]

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.

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.

A book should build like music. That's really all it is. 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. [This is especially well exemplified in *All the Little Live Things*.]

I certainly don't intend any kind of Faerie Queen kind of allegory....I don't think of myself as an allegorist at all, and I shudder when you suggest I am.... 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.

Some of those allusions I intended, some of them may have been unconscious—because one has read James a lot. But some of them may be pure accident, too.... About the ones that are unconscious: I'm sure writers make a lot of those if they have the same kind of memory I do in which words stick.

I never thought of that pun on Lyman's name until you suggested it to me, so if it was unconscious on my part, it was *totally* unconscious. I think you've been misled in your youth. Such things seem to me a form of gamesmanship and pedantry I really don't want to play.

THE SHORT STORY

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.

At its best, the miracle that we call the short story can present us with a segment of life....so arranged that it *acts* its own meaning as it moves.... At its best, as in Chekhov, the light it casts on one man or woman in one brief fragment of experience can seem to illuminate the world.

REALISM

To some extent, Hemingway's intention—to say how it was.

In fiction we should have no agenda except to try to be truthful.

People's experiences are very different. But their feelings are alike.

I would...define the novel as Stendhal did, as a mirror in the roadway.

Fiction ought to be concerned with the perception of truth, the attempt to get at the concerns of the human heart.

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.

I do believe the real world exists [in contrast to some Postmodernists like Barth], and 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.

[19th-century] 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....

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.

I write about ordinarily decent people, and it seems to me that these very decent people have as much business in a book as Candys or Portnoys. I couldn't write black humor if I wanted to, and I don't really believe in the absurd and the grotesque—unless, as in Faulkner, they're attached to something else, to a very strong, enduring traditionalism.

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.

If I succeed, I get the tone of voice and the quality of mind that will persuade a reader to see and hear a real and credible human being, not a mouthpiece or a construct. If fiction is going to be successful, Henry James has said, it depends helplessly upon that sense of reality.

When Willa Cather said a novel is what happens today in this room, it's a passion within four walls, she was saying essentially what I'm saying.

Before you can convince the reader, you have to convince yourself that, in effect, you have invaded and become the person you're speaking through.

When you read a book, you're bound to get a glimpse of people that's closer than a lot of the glimpses you get in real life.

IMPRESSIONISM

Her voice absorbs you like quicksand.

My memory hunts by scent, like a beagle.

A red beach umbrella bloomed like a poppy.

Her eyes flared as hot as the spit of her torch.

The days dripped away like honey off a spoon.

A bulldozer asleep in it like a hog in a wallow.

He gave off an odor like a neglected gym locker.

There was tension between us like a stretched wire.

We were circling like wrestlers looking for a hold.

As volubly unintelligible as an Italian traffic argument.

I was in a constant tremble like an overfilled glass.

Ruth's mental telepathy was penetrating me like lasers.

Her eyes were brown and moist like her cocker's.

He...puckered his lips into the semblance of a turkey's behind.

Lips surrounded by beard look like another sort of bodily opening.

Julie's bursts of screaming [were] as mindless as a steam whistle.

Mornings, sleeping bags lay like khaki cocoons around the tent.

On a walk, we flew up into that gusty envelope like climbing kites.

Quick as little crabs among seaweed and moss, his eyes went over me.

His last remark...came with a sudden spasm of disgust like spitting sideways.

There is something about all beards that is like the gesture of thumbing the nose.

Annie's confidential whisper...would have rustled palm fronds at forty rods.

Annie came down in laughter like somebody falling through a skylight.

Blackbirds...roughened the sky a moment the way a school of fish can roughen the sea.

Every thought that crossed her mind showed in her face like cloud shadows crossing a meadow.

If she had had a cigar she would have looked like a transvestite Winston Churchill in a fright wig.

Her vividness troubled the air as the blur of the returning humming bird troubled the corner by the orange tree.

The emotional antagonisms...lay in us like surly dogs at the end of a chain, ready to leap up and growl at a step.

With that many eyeballs focused on him he might have felt as if he were being caressed by the suction cups of an octopus.

All the idiocies of the later twentieth century had collected in his skull like DDT in the livers of birds and fishes.

The hill that once swelled into view across the ravine like an opulent woman lazily turning was mutilated and ruined.

She watched me with the impish expression of a child waiting for the firecracker to go off under auntie's chair.

The alcohol-heightened shouting talk roared outward from the paved triangle like the barking of a thousand sea lions.

My mind was racing among alternatives like a man in a fire who grabs up things and drops them to grab up others.

The gelding braced itself like a sitting dog on one flopping hoof and one peg of bloody white bone.

He...took his hands off the handlebars to make gestures as if he were releasing birds into the air.

He left me feeling as if I had just shaken off something slimy that had crawled on my skin.

[These similes and the following metaphors are all selected from *All the Little Live Things*, 248 pages]:

METAPHORS

His pickpocket eyes were shrewd.

He looked thirty-six directions at once.

My heart is as mushy as a papaya.

We were a rotating lighthouse of smiles.

The cobweb of her kiss clung to my cheek.

[Evil is] squatting like a toad on my own heart.

My mind was a night sky full of crisscrossing beams.

I have put an enemy in my mouth to steal away my brains.

He was a kind of gas that would expand to fill any amount of space.

I was uneasily aware that in putting him down I was pinning myself.

I am a tea bag left too long in the cup, and my steepings grow darker and bitterer.

I could count on my heart wavering down through me like a flat stone dropped in a water barrel.

It was her spirit that smiled, it bubbled out of her like the bright water bubbling from the fountain. [The fountain is an icon of the spirit in Hawthorne.]

She stood between John and Ruth like a spark leaping a gap. If you had painted her at that moment, you would have had to paint her with a halo.

Think how often beauty and delicacy and grace are choked out by weeds. Think how endless and dubious is the progress from weed to flower.

Once I met Peck on the country road, buzzing along on his Honda, a messenger from nirvana with the wind like a fire hose in his beard.

1960s COUNTERCULTURE

Papa was rigid, therefore all discipline must go.

The free individual is an untutored animal.

The play ethic is not as good an ethic as the work ethic.

Youth is barbarian, you can't let it run you or it will run you down.

The taming of Caliban. See the rude jungle beast behave like a well-brought-up middle-class boy.

The irresponsibility of his search for freedom forced me to be more conservative than I wanted to be.

[The] rebel in uniform, nonconformist who runs in packs and sings in close harmony with his age group.

The twentieth century corrupted him, the America that he despised corrupted him, industrial civilization corrupted him with the very vices he thought he scorned in it. It encouraged him to hunt out the shoddy, the physical, the self-indulgent, the shrill, and the vulgar, and to call these things freedom.

The generation gap, and especially the antihistorical pose of the young, at least the young of the 1960s. They didn't give a damn what happened up to two minutes ago and would have been totally unable to understand a Victorian lady....so imprisoned in the present that they had no notion of how various humanity and human customs can be.

A lot of the young radicals of the sixties struck me as being hare-brained. They *didn't* have any sense of history, and so they had no notion that anybody had had those ideas before them. Their idea of communes, for example. The whole history of the United States is full of them—full of their failures too. More than that, I knew quite a few of these young radicals, and it didn't seem to me that if the world were to be remade they were the people I would want remaking it.

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.

I suspect that what makes hedonists so angry when they think about overachievers is that the overachievers, without drugs or orgies, have more fun.

One of the dangers of grown-up little children is that they have a child's judgment and an adult's capacity to do harm.

All I respected was their emotions. Their minds I didn't respect; their minds weren't working.

I was self-employed in a holy war against the thousand pests that infest Eden.

HISTORY

History is a pontoon bridge. Every man walks and works at its building end, and has come as far as he has over the pontoons laid by others he may never have heard of.

History is not a science but a branch of literature, an artifact made by artificers and sometimes by artists. Like fiction, it has only persons, places, and events to work with, and like fiction, it may present them either in summary or in dramatic scene.

To take that real past and make some continuity between it and the real present is, I suppose, an ambition of mine.

POSTMODERNISM

There is no plan or continuity or permanence.

Our migratoriness has robbed us of the gods who make places holy.

A literary generation that appears to specialize in despair, hostility, hypersexuality, and disgust.

I believe that one of our most damaging American traits is our contempt for all history, including our own.

Not having experienced the potency of the dream of starting from scratch, he sees imperfections as failures, not as stages of a long slow effort.

Cut loose from the past and we become nothing. It doesn't make any difference if there are flaws in the marble or not; that's the marble history must be carved from.

I believe this is a corrupt age because it accepts everything as equal to everything else, and because it values indulgence more than restraint.

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.

Our literature, as perhaps you are aware, is sick, embittered, losing its mind, losing its faith. Our novelists are the declared enemies of their society.

The literature that seems important...is being written mainly by members of minority groups either wronged by his sort of middle-class world or angrily at odds with it, contemptuous of its limitations.

Any civilization that achieves anything has losers—one of the reasons it achieves is that it has clear ways of telling its losers from its heroes. We have given up heroes—they go in for achievement. So we have more and more surviving losers, whom we imitate because we can't be ruthless enough to put them down.

There is nothing so desperately demoralizing to a New World optimist as the sight of the New World floundering toward total reunion with Europe's cynicism, belligerence, and despair.

I don't think you can douse the family as contemporary fiction has doused it, dousing the kind of glue that holds society together.

I'm the sort of half-wit who won't take his own side in an argument for fear of sounding illiberal.

Expectations so far exceed our deserving that any real excellence is a threat.

I cannot sympathize with the self-pitiers, for I have been there.

There is no way to step off the treadmill. It is all treadmill.

The quest itself is a quest without a grail.

POSTMODERNIST AESTHETICS

I don't think that's a way of getting anywhere: to pretend that there's anything new to be said. [like Barth] What's important is a larger understanding of what has always been said.

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. It doesn't seem to me worth doing. [In reference to Pynchon, Barth and other elite Academic Expressionists]

Some of the experimental novels seem to me self-conscious to a degree. Again, there are people I like very much, like Jack Barth, who writes books that I can't quite like.... He's a nimble talent, gifted with words, but what he chooses to do, to invert and invert and to make out of the techniques of fiction his subject matter, to get lost in the fun house and to sort of go round and round before distorting mirrors, seems to me tricky and sort of amusing, often quite hilarious, but ultimately not worthy of the highest praise.... I think that gets you into capering and doing jigs and mugging and whooping rather than paying attention to the work at hand.

I would deny that technical innovation or experimentation amounts to originality.... To be original I would think you have to see so deeply into characters that you say something that makes a reader really pause, that isn't necessarily what he would have thought himself, at that point. And ultimately, you have to make him go your way, too.

In fact, I don't think originality as it's usually used is particularly useful. It's not a criterion that means much, because it usually seizes upon some innovation that often turns out to be frivolous or essentially unimportant, and which disappears. An awful lot of mutations, which is what these things are, turn out to be monsters.

Irony—that curse, that evasion, that armor, that way of staying safe while seeming wise.

I didn't retire from Stanford. I quit. I'd had a bellyful.

ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS

It used to be literary history, and now it is literary criticism in the English departments. Both of them seem to me moderately pernicious.

English departments seem to take things apart, and they breed book-haters. I know an awful lot of graduate students who read books in order to despise them, in order to be able to put them down.

A lot of people in English departments should never be trusted to run a program. Their training is all in the other direction, all analytical, all critical.

They read what they want to see, rather than what's there.

LITERARY THEORY

The moment you begin to conceptualize you have lost touch with reality, and...literary theory is all about conceptualizing and literature ought to be about reality, somehow.

PUBLISHING

The more you stab your wife or throw big tantrums or big parties the more your literary reputation seems to grow.

Wright Morris and I talk about which one of us is the more neglected. We compete for the role. Neither of us wants it.

It is perfectly plain that publishers know the West Coast exists. I think they are less certain about the interior parts of the country.

He makes the *New Yorker* mistake of mistaking New York for the United States.

The establishment has a tendency to be more parochial really than the regions.

As long as you think New York is the headquarters, you're going to look upon everything else as second-rate.

You seem to have it in mind that I generally write about the West, which is true enough. But I would hate to be imprisoned in it.

Sooner or later somebody will have to do for the West what Faulkner did for the South before the West will ever be accepted as a place where you can write books.

Check the writings of the Fugitive group that wrote the script for the South, especially such a book as *I'll Take My Stand* [in order to see] writers making a hate object out of New York, as the early American nationalists made one out of England and Canadians tend to make one out of the United States.

RECENT NOVELS BY OTHERS

Kerouac's *On the Road* is a kind of inevitable—it seems to me—western novel. It also happens to match the spirit of the times, and you get that peripatetic saint, if indeed he is a saint.

I don't see very many novels that I want to read in the current marketplace. [1982] I want to read Saul Bellow's. I understand it's dull, but he's never unintelligent. He may be a little short on movement. Johnny Cheever has a new one, a little one. I don't know what else I would feel I have to read. Maybe Tom McGuane, who used to be a student here.

There is something ultimately self-pitying in a lot of the inward novels, the novels of the examination of your soul and its own private hell, which has been a pattern of the last twenty-five years, that puts me off.

When I disparaged some contemporary writing, it was people like Burroughs I was thinking of, the black comics and so on, who, out of understandable disgust with a good many manifestations of contemporary life, produce disgusting books.

I think now books are unfortunately pretty well riddled with what used to have a shock value, which means it has to have a higher voltage to shock now.... It's kind of a disease: attempting to be clever, sexy, or violent. It's a way of showing off.

Miller, Albee, Kerouac, Sartre, Genet, the Marquis de Sade, Ginsberg, Burroughs—a poison garland from the Grove [Press].

SEX

If I were a modern [Postmodernist] writing about a modern young woman I would have to do her wedding night in grisly detail. The custom of the country and the times would demand a description, preferably 'comic,' of foreplay, lubrication, penetration, and climax, and in deference to the accepted opinions about Victorian love, I would have to abort the climax and end the wedding night in tears and desolate comfortings. But I don't know. I have a good deal of confidence in both Susan Burling and the man she married. I imagine they worked it out without the need of any scientific lubricity and with less need to make their privacies public.

POLITICS

I fear any dictator, even an environmental one, and even when the dictator is myself.

The Young Communist League, particularly, of which I attended three or four meetings...struck me as being quite insane.

The closer I got to the East Coast, 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 [Bernard] DeVoto and [Robert] Frost, both of whom had a deep contempt for this, as they would have put it, un-American kind of politics.

The rebels and revolutionaries are only eddies, they keep the stream from getting stagnant but they get swept down and absorbed.

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.

Civilizations grow and change and decline—they aren't remade.

I will not break my neck trying to get it all done overnight.

RACE

It becomes increasingly clear that racial and religious tensions are the gravest threat to the future that we face.

The reason behind the frequent indifference of the police to the rights of minorities is the collective will of the society which hires them.

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: most of us under the x-ray would show the [signs] of old infections.

[Prejudices] can even infect minority groups—set one group against another, breed a narrow group spirit that can be fatal to any hope of ultimate harmony.

It is as dangerous for a Negro to think of the generalized ‘white man’ as it is for a white man to create and then abuse an abstract ‘Negro.’

WOMEN

It terrified her to think that the whole riddled mountain crawled with men like that one.

I think Elsa in *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, who has a good many qualities in common with my mother, is a strong character, stronger than her husband.... In *Angle of Repose* I would guess that it’s about a standoff. Susan is more talented in many ways than Oliver.

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 know novels about men written by women that are perfectly strong and true. I don’t want to dismiss the sexes or dismantle them. I just don’t want to choose between them.

So many New England men went first to the gold rush, then to the Civil War, and never came back. A lot of women were left alone in New England towns. I don’t know whether you know the stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman and people like that. Stories like “New England Nun,” about the old-maid-ism in New England, about women left behind by men who went elsewhere—to sea—went wherever they went. It’s a common New England story from mid-nineteenth century up to well past the Civil War. These women had their own culture and cultivation, but the men who remained or came in were likely to be people of another culture—or of a lower social class. There was simply, for many superior women, no adequate supply of men. Necessity bred a certain amount of self-sufficiency among New England women; I’ve known a lot of them. Charity I made into quite an extreme case... [*Crossing to Safety*]

I had been reading a lot of Mormon women’s journals of the handcart companies and the early wagon trains, and also some of the journals of women... whose husbands sometime during that period took another wife, or two, or three—women who put up with that, who put up with the constant birth and death of children.... Women who put up with that kind of hardship had something, a good deal on the ball.

There are some women in my fiction, like the discombobulated woman in *A Shooting Star*, who are not strong characters. I’ve known a lot of women particularly in the more distant past, not within the last twenty-five years, but back a ways: attractive, well-educated, with nothing to do. Simply brought up and well-educated to a dead end. Society wives. That kind often end up alcoholics or something else self-destructive. They can’t be called strong characters.

Their circle was still deep in the sort of talk that women get into—about clothes, children, P.T.A., local politics, conservation, world affairs, art, music, books, that sort of thing—and they looked at me with some amusement and waved me away.

I don’t know whether you know Tillie Olson or not. She’s only written five short stories in her life, but she’s made those five stories carry her farther than a whole string of camels.

WIFE MARY

With the right wife, and I had her, deprivation became a game.

She has had no role in my life except to keep me sane, fed, housed, amused, and protected from unwanted telephone calls; also to restrain me fairly frequently from making a horse's ass of myself in public, to force me to attend to books and ideas from which she knows I will learn something; also to mend my wounds when I am misused by the world, to implant ideas in my head and stir the soil around them, to keep me from falling into a comfortable torpor, to agitate my sleeping hours with problems that I would not otherwise attend to; also to remind me constantly (not by precept but by example) how fortunate I have been to live for fifty-three years with a woman that bright, alert, charming, and supportive.

CHARACTER

My guts, like Victorian marriage, are private.

Chekhov said he worked all his life to get the slave out of himself. I guess I feel my obligation is to get the selfishness and greed, which often translates as the Americanism, out of myself. I want to be a citizen of the culture, of the best the culture stands for, not of a nation or a party or an economic system.

We are likely to blame the system, the military-industrial complex, the multiversity, or something else for what is weak or wrong in ourselves. The aim of our lives, so far as I can see, is conduct, not behavior; and conduct is not a galvanic twitch in response to stimuli, but activity guided by a code of personal ethics and an obligation of personal integrity. There are some things too dishonest or self-indulgent or socially harmful for a good man to do.

The only thing that makes civilization go forward is the responsibility of individuals, whether gifted or otherwise, small or large. 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.

Some kind of responsibility in a social way—to family, to community, to nation, to whatever else—is absolutely essential.

WISDOM

Most things break, including hearts.

Wisdom...is knowing what you have to accept.

The lessons of life amount not to wisdom, but to scar tissue and callus.

Culture is a pyramid to which each of us brings a stone.

DEATH

I would like to think that one life is enough, and that when I see it coming to an end I can meet the darkness with resignation and perhaps acceptance. I have been lucky. I came from nowhere, and had no reason to expect as much from this one life as I have got. I owe God a death, and the earth a pound or so of chemicals. Now let's see if I can remember that when the time comes.

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. [He was killed by a car that broadsided him at an intersection.]

It's easier to die than to move... At least for the Other Side you don't need trunks.

LAST WORDS

[To doctors] Do what you have to do.

